



Cappella

Spring 2010

SPRING:2010

CAESURA

a literary journal

Editor CARL C. HAYNES
Assistant Editor NELIDA L. TOLENTINO
Design & Layout Editor MATTHEW BRYAN BECK
Faculty Advisor TYEHIMBA JESS
Printer ROYAL PRESS, STATEN ISLAND

EDITORIAL BOARD

*David Anderson Monette Anderson Aniff Baker Brian A. Gonzalez
Alison Langleiben Mabesh Mohan Elizabeth Murphy Jessica Ng*

Our Office is located at:
THE COLLEGE of STATEN ISLAND
2800 VICTORY BLVD. STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK 10314
ROOM 230 CAMPUS CENTER (1C)

Caesura is published by the students of The College of Staten Island. *Caesura* welcomes poetry, fiction, plays and creative writing. All works contained within this publication are the intellectual property of the creators and are protected. No materials within this publication may be reprinted in whole or in part, in any form, without the permission of the editors. Opinions expressed herein are those of the writers, and are not necessarily shared by *Caesura* staff or the College of Staten Island. *Caesura* is not a publication of the College of Staten Island or The City University of New York, and are not responsible for the contents of *Caesura*.

Caesura is a literary magazine forum for students. We welcome poetry, fiction, plays, and creative non-fiction that relate to the craft of writing. Submissions should be sent to: caesuramagazine@gmail.com. Applicants will be informed of our decision within two weeks of submission.

We consider *Caesura* an environmentally-concerned undertaking:
reducing strain on our forests. This issue is printed on 100% recycled paper.

© 2009-2010 *Caesura Magazine*

caesura / cae·su·ra [sa-zhoor-a, sa-zhoorae] *noun, plural*

1. Prosody. A break, esp. a sense pause, usually near the middle of a verse, and marked in scansion by double vertical line, as in:
2. A division made by the ending of word within a foot, or sometimes at the end of a foot, esp. in certain recognized places near the middle of a verse.

To pause is to consider. For both writer and reader, pauses are more than breaks in speech; both writer and reader consider the words preceding the caesura and prepare to relate them to the words that follow.

Poetry

- TEUTA AVDIU *those things that touch* 42
- DAREN BASTEDO *A.D.* 5
Daren Bastedo Speaks of Vagina 6
- MATTHEW BRYAN BECK *Shrunken Skulls* 63
- AMANDA CANDRILLI *Pleasure Palace* 23
- ROBERT De LORENZO *Revealed* 37
- MARIA Di LORENZO *English Holly* 27
A Poem Never Promised 28
- CHELSEA GENDVIL *Ink-Veined Language* 43
Tendril 44
- CHRISTOPHER RIORDAN JONES *An event horizon stares at me...* 62
- LAURA FABRIZIO *Illegal Picket Fence* 45
Frida's Photosynthesis 46
- JEANETTE LANE *For Feudal Politics and
Your Love of History* 61
- ALISON LANGLEIBEN *Letter in a Totaled Caravan* 19
Nervous Murmurs 20
- LORI LOVAGLIO *Avignon* 24
- MEGAN MORIARTY *UMBRELLAS* 88
- STEPHANIE SORIANO *Partnership* 81
A love Poem 82
Talking 83
- NELIDA L. TOLENTINO *Mi Barrio* 84
A Glass Room 85

Fiction

- MATTHEW BRYAN BECK *The Courage of Chigger McGraw* 39
White Narcissus 89
- ELIZABETH MURPHY *It's like Drowning Puppies* 66
- SAL TARANTOLA *AVENUE ENNUI* 31

Nonfiction

- KRISTINA MONTESANO *Glamour Me* 25

Drama

- ALISON LANGLEIBEN *The Red Door* 71
- JOSEPH McKEEVER *Bring Back the Commune* 9
- DEREK PINTO *The Curious Case of Cereal Killers* 47

Photography

- CARL C. HAYNES *Untitled 1* 8
Untitled 2 22
Untitled 3 38
Untitled 4 64-65
Untitled 5 70
Untitled 6 86-87
Untitled 7 98

DAREN BASTEDO

A.D.

Under dirt, side by side like war casualties, our souls exit through our mouths like winter breath, to a city far from earth's epidermis. We are newborns again, this time together from the start and I know you, like 5th grade math, I know it's you.

We ride chariots through the fire pits, weaving between the blood colored flames as they bob in and out of lava like dolphins.

We head to the Pitchfork Casino, Carbon Monoxide floods the air. And we walk to the slots. I insert 2 fingernails, pull the arm, and watch 5 green eyes appear in a row. Jackpot. It spits out 2 spider rings and 2 snap bracelets. I give you 1 of each, we're in love.

He gives me His 30 lashes. His red wrists make the whip crack like the voice of a pubescent boy. I don't cry. I zoom in on your eyes, and my wavering reflection in the tears below your pupil. You take me home.

We are in a terrible accident in Demon Valley. You lose your right leg, my face left disfigured. I hold you underneath the sky, as the smoke settles in front of us like an endless fog. You kiss my scars, and I rub your stub.

Then you leave me for the 2nd time, but I join soon thereafter. I sleep 2 hours a night, dreaming up your new city. I wake with your prosthetic in my clutch, two snap bracelets around the ankle.

Daren Bastedo Speaks of Vagina

After numerous ponderings, my brain has brought
to my attention that the word vagina will no

longer suffice. Since my lips and your lips decided
to go steady, my lips self-seal in my attempts to

utter the word. It's not beautiful enough. I have
thoughts of a new one. It will be a long, elegant

explosion when spoken. And when written, it will
appear as a DNA strand of vowels, each letter

interlocked, a chain-link fence, its very own chastity
belt. The word will consist of exactly 1,573

oddly organized O's, A's, E's, and U's for each
time I've kissed yours. It may only be soft

spoken, a wondrous whisper in your wanting
ear, resonating through its canal, an automatic

endorphin release. It dawns on me now, however,
that even this word won't work. It shall be a

word that cannot exist in our minds, too epic
for paper lines, unspoken in impossible rhyme.

The gift between your thighs is and will always
be named...

“Poetry is the hardest kind of literature.”

Iris Murdoch



JOSEPH Mc KEEVER
Bring Back the Commune

Cast of Characters

Sean - (mid-twenties) Dry and laconic
Liam - (mid-twenties) Excitable and cocky
Dirty Ulysses S. Grant Lynch - (sixties) Nostalgic and raspy
Kelly - (mid-twenties)
Blaine - (late twenties)
Staff Sergeant Lynch
Young Ulysses
Sadie

Scene opens with two men sitting on each side of the outside of an elevator. Sean, on the left, has dark hair and brown eyes, and is tall and thin. He holds an envelope with a key taped on the outside. Liam has shaggy blond hair and is short and mousey. He has a post-it filled copy of Confucius's Analects lying next to the right of him. In between them are two six-packs of Sam Adam's Boston Lager. To the right of Liam lies Ulysses. He has no left hand, and is dirty and homeless with a shaggy beard and is currently passed out drunk. A small section of the stage is blocked off and dark.

LIAM

Pick your poison, blonde or brunette across the street.

SEAN

(Sips beer) Brunette.

LIAM

I lied. *(Pauses)* I'm going to take the brunette.

SEAN

You distinctly said pick your poison.

LIAM

I was playing the percentages. There was a fifty percent chance you were going to pick the blonde and I would have come out fucking noble.

SEAN

But I picked the brunette so you came out like an asshole.

LIAM

Wow! *(Pauses)* You know what you can take the brunette. You earned it.

SEAN

You just noticed the beak on her didn't you?

LIAM

Nah, I am just more of a blonde guy. *(Pauses)* Alright I did, but I spotted them so I get fucking preference.

SEAN

You are an idiot.

LIAM

(Laughs) *(Tone changes to serious)* Listen; let's get the fuck out of here. We can finish the beer at my place. My wife is in bed. *(Pauses)* To be honest you are going to look quite, well, pathetic.

SEAN

Don't care. I need her to understand how I feel.

LIAM

Jesus fucking Christ! You missed the boat. This fucking ship has sailed my man. Just wave goodbye, 'Goodbye'. What you think your little note is going to win her heart and she is going shower you with fairy-tale blowjobs for the rest of life? *(Pauses while noticing key)* Please tell me that is not a symbolic key to your heart?

SEAN

It's her spare to her apartment.

LIAM

Thank God. *(Pauses, now calmer)* You had five years to close the deal man. That bitch has walked all over you. Sure she has eyes as green as umm... fucking Kermit's ass. And yea she got hair as shiny as umm... fuck, let's call it fall foliage.

SEAN

(Confused) How do you describe people?

LIAM

Alright so I might be a little off tonight. The point is she is out with another man,
and he's fucking cool as shit.

ULYSSES

How's the rack?

LIAM

What was that old man?

ULYSSES

The tits, give me a bra size.

SEAN

Not relevant buddy. And come on man, Blaine isn't that cool. I personally think
his music is terrible. His demo is titled 'Alien Love on Saturn'.

LIAM

He single handily created a music movement. He combined the excitement of
space travel with the sweet sound of acoustic guitar. He is the pioneer of fucking
sci-folk. There is fucking four bars devoted exclusively to this fantastic music. And
he is a Romeo and a half. He took cooking lessons and has his dates exclusively in
his apartment. That is pretty much fucking half way to bang city.

SEAN

Calm down man. I know Kelly and she wouldn't be impressed by his music.

*Light turns on over dark quarter of stage. There are two chairs. On the right is Blaine.
He is tall, dark and handsome, holding an acoustic guitar. On the left is the strikingly
beautiful Kelly.*

BLAINE

(Singing) The force of acceleration makes it impossible to invade.
But even a black hole couldn't condense my light year far love for you babe.

KELLY

That was beautiful.

Light turns off

SEAN

Trust me she isn't that easy to please.

ULYSSES

Let me give you a little bit of life advice son. My father was a career military man. The most disciplined man you could have ever met. I was twenty-four in 1967 and he wanted me to go into the army and fight in Vietnam. See I was more of a dove at the time, and decided that I was going to move to San Francisco and be part of the peace movement. So we parted ways amiably and I was off to live my life. We always respected each other.

Light turns on again. Now standing is a stern looking man with a buzz cut named Staff Sergeant Lynch.

STAFF SERGEANT LYNCH

(Shouting) Get the fuck out of my house you long haired pussy. You have effectively soiled the name Ulysses S. Grant.

Light turns off

LIAM

That's great buddy, why don't you grab a beer and go sit over there? *(Hands Ulysses a beer)* Come on Seany boy let's get the fuck out of here. We will go to bar and talk to a few broads. Get your dick a little wet and you will be fine in morning. Alright?

ULYSSES

I'm in.

SEAN

Bring me to Harry Hope's.

LIAM

If that is a literature joke I am going to kick you right on the kneecap.

SEAN

No, trust me Liam I have to see her. I always thought she was going to be the one I married. I was always too passive though. Let me tell you, I could stare straight into her eyes and just feel something different. I have to tell her before this Blaine thing becomes a habit. A bad fucking spaceman habit.

LIAM

Buddy I can almost guarantee you she doesn't feel that 'difference'. At the most she uses you as her back-up scenario. And why the fuck you want to get married for? I am fucking married and instead sharing a bed with my wife I am sitting in some shitty lobby with you and the handless, homeless hippie over there.

ULYSSES

You got another beer?

LIAM

(Shakes his head in pity and then turns back to Sean) The only affective way I could describe marriage to you, is it's kind of like sticking your hand in a fucking toaster every day of your life. If there wasn't the loophole of divorce, I probably would have gone with dropping your sack in a blender.

SEAN

(Cringes) You're a real romantic, Liam.

ULYSSES

Let me tell a story that might help you a little. In the summer of 68 I moved into this beautiful commune just outside of San Diego. There probably were thirty of us, plus many more coming and going, in a very tiny ranch. But there were three beautiful women to every man.

LIAM

See Seany this is how a man lives. Now you have my attention. Continue.

ULYSSES

We all were assigned different roles based on each person's strengths. We only ate what we grew off the land. We only smoked what we grew off the land. There was all of a sudden no more war, no more politics, and no more societal restraints. We lived completely out of touch with the rest of the country. The only exception was we kept up with the music. We would send one person into town to listen to the music at the town's library and he would write down the lyrics and chords, and we would play it ourselves. We didn't want electricity. We once had the Grateful Dead stop in for dinner. Crosby, Stills, and Nash came by for a few nights once.

LIAM

Bring back the fucking commune!

ULYSSES

Yes! Anyway one night I ended up blowing David Crosby.

Sean and Liam let out simultaneous grunts.

SEAN

That's not fun.

LIAM

(Pauses) You couldn't give a Jerry Garcia on fucking acid story.

ULYSSES

It was an open time about love and experimenting with the different, boys. I also made passionate love with a couple of women each night. It wasn't about being straight or gay; it was about having the freedom to choose. Life is about being free, boys. Don't you guys understand?

SEAN

(Pauses) Yea we understand. I don't get why you had to tell us that seeing it had no relevance, but it's not a big deal.

ULYSSES

Besides whom do you think they wrote '*Suite: Judy Blue Eyes*' for?

LIAM

Not you.

SEAN

It was definitely the singer Judy Collins.

ULYSSES

Well that isn't documented.

SEAN

(Pauses then turns to Liam) What's up with the Analects?

LIAM

(Defensive) I am a fucking intellectual. You got an issue with that?

SEAN

You named your dog after Forrest Gump.

ULYSSES

Great movie, I love Tom Hanks.

LIAM

(Concedes) Alright you got me detective. It's my new scheme to pick up some tail. The way I fucking see it, the path to quick pussy lies not through the heart, but the brain. You have to stimulate them with knowledge.

SEAN

Maybe we should call up your wife and get a female perspective.

LIAM

Fuck that.

SEAN

(Laughs) You have to be the biggest dick. *(Notices Post-It's)* Did you actually attempt to read it?

LIAM

Nah. I was dropping a Lincoln log and I randomly highlighted some nonsense. By just sitting on a park bench pretending to read this shit I have already pulled a couple of quickies.

SEAN

What are you going to do when your wife gets chlamydia?

LIAM

Deny. Deny. Deny.

ULYSSES

Back in 1976 I finally made it back home to see my family. My father was the first one there to greet me, and he said "Son, you are a man now" and gave me a warm, firm handshake

Light turns on. Standing on a small porch is Staff Sergeant Lynch. On the first step is a younger Ulysses.

YOUNG ULYSSES

Father, I am home.

STAFF SERGEANT LYNCH

Get the fuck off my porch you commie pussy. *(Pulls out a shotgun and loads)*

Light turns off.

LIAM

Right! Listen, Seany boy, it's time to get the fuck out of here. That guy is playing "Tommy" straight through on his acoustic over at O' Leary's. I know how much you love The Who.

SEAN

(Checks his watch) She should be coming in any minute.
Light turns on and Kelly and Blain are in a bed having intercourse. They are both making panting noises.

BLAINE

(Panting) Call me Captain Space Blaster! Call me Captain Space Blaster!

KELLY

(Shouts) Captain Space Blaster!

Light turns off.

LIAM

Sean, look at me, she isn't coming home.

SEAN

That's ridiculous. She's not like that. She is a self-respecting girl.

Light turns on to Blaine and Kelly lying in bed.

BLAINE

(Catching breathe) Give me five minutes then we are going to Uranus.

Light turns off.

LIAM

Fine, fuck it. I am getting the fuck out of here. And Sean I highly suggest you leave also because she isn't going to be here until the morning and you know it dickville. It's just not in the cards buddy. *(Smiles)* But don't worry; there is another bossy broad just waiting for you. Maybe this one will actually let you fuck her.

Liam stands up and exits. Sean holds up and examines the letter.

ULYSSES

Why don't you pucker up and put some lipstick on it kid.

SEAN

(Laughs) Not today old man. Let me tell you something, I once brought this beautiful woman to Paris and walked with her under the Eiffel Tower at night time. I looked straight into her eyes and grabbed her hand, and started to tell her how much she meant to me. *(Pauses)* And she started to laugh. The next night she went out with some frog Pierre she met at the Louvre. But I still thought the world of her.

ULYSSES

Let me tell you a story about love kid. Back in the late 80's I would travel up to the Bronx to tittie-fuck this Vietnamese hooker. She had the most beautifully innocent eyes you could have ever seen. One day I decided I was going to rescue this lovely Asian lady so I paid the pimp double for a home visit. That night I took off with her. *(Pauses)*

SEAN

What happened?

ULYSSES

O, well it turned out she was only sixteen. And I ended up serving three years in prison. Midway through my sentence I received word my father had died. You know I never respected anyone quite like I did him. (Slowly) I disobeyed him and didn't go to Vietnam because I was scared to die.

SEAN

That's a tough break.

ULYSSES

Yes it was. (*Pauses and collects himself*) The point is that you could put the sexiest picture of Marylyn Monroe over my ass, but underneath it is still an ass. Don't let beauty deceive you kid. Now pass me a beer.

SEAN

(*Passes the beer*) What's your name buddy?

ULYSSES

I share a name with the greatest general in the Civil War.

SEAN

Alright, Robert I am going to help you out. Take this key and go up to apartment 303. (*Hands him the key off the envelope*) Make yourself something to eat and then get a good night's sleep on a nice mattress. My masseuse will be coming over in the morning so be in a towel. Make sure you tell her that it's alright with Sean.

ULYSSES

(*Shocked*) Thank you, kid.

SEAN

How did you lose your hand?

ULYSSES

I don't remember.

Elevator doors open and Ulysses enters.

Doors shut. Sean is now sitting by himself.

SEAN

Fuck it. (*Rips the envelope*)

Sean opens another beer while a tall and skinny woman with light brown hairs exits the elevator.

SADIE

Are you familiar with Confucius?

SEAN

(Turns to realize that Liam left his book) Umm, yea I guess. *(Pauses)* My name is Sean. *(Holds out hand)*

SADIE

(Accepts hand) Sadie. I was a philosophy major. So what's your go to analects?

SEAN

Well my favorite is... *(Opens randomly to one of Liam's highlighted analects)* Umm, Book VII, number five, "How I have gone downhill! It has been such a long time since I dreamt of the Duke of Chou." *(Cringes)*

SADIE

(Pauses) Oh, well that sounds pretty deep.

SEAN

(Surprised and slowly) Yea, it is. *(Pauses)* Hey you want to go grab a drink somewhere?

SADIE

Well I was going to meet my girlfriends... but okay. Sure why not.

SEAN

Perfect, here grab a beer for the road. *(Hands her a beer and gets to his feet)*

SADIE

Thanks. On the way you can explain the 'Duke of Chou'.

SEAN

Yea, sure, I'll try. So where do you want go Sadie?

SADIE

Actually, I hear there is a great sci-folk bar nearby.

SCENE

ALISON LANGLEIBEN

Letter in a Totaled Caravan

Denial is a sweet city, my city.
There is no time for gargoyle gothic.
I will not burn your letters but
tape them together and build a bedroom.
Sprawl on Dear. Kiss me here.
I imagine the words making love.

I can almost taste your touch
in each windowsill pie.
The neighbors will gossip
about the way our wrists kiss.
Our shadows will whisper secrets.
Once in the dark. Again. Again.

I plant chess tables in the park
As you judge what I've done.
Notice the guitar bazaar,
the leather bound library,
eyes between fantasy shelves.
My theatrical, your strip.

Loud speakers spout Shakespeare
into the streets. Come home Romeo.
Singing lessons will be mandatory.
Houses built on wheels so we can roll
into the woods, love in secret.

This isn't a bribe. Take me.
Your hand for a city.
Forget the lost nights, the cold.
As you open the letter, watch
the way my words make love.

Nervous Murmurs

When I was one my lips turned blue
after running a block,
so they sliced me open
to see what made this little chick tick.

They sowed back my heart,
squeezed back my heart,
beat back my heart,
left fist marks I still can't rub out.

After that my lips were red
as a prostitutes on a good night.
I still have claw marks on my back,
Rape lines in the creases of my thigh.

I can still see where they
stuck the tubes in me.
I resembled the abused teddy,
the fallen vase, the weak.

Now you can barely see
where they touched me.
Each year I visit them.
They tell me

You have tricky windows.
Your heart murmurs nervously.
Really? What does it say?
I mean, Am I okay?

You're as fine as a rainbow in June,
you're God's fucking gift to the Moon
but...and here it comes,
the truth of most little white cuts.

There is still something wrong with you.
Yeah. I know.

“Happiness is the absence of the striving for happiness.”

Zhuangzi



AMANDA CANDRILLI

Pleasure Palace

My life became a distant dream,
Beside the cool sinuous stream
In the woods, stirring to entice
Me. The light glistened as if ice
Capped peaks had erupted to gleam

Into my iris; a straight beam
Tangling my brain, undid my scream,
From plunging in, an unknown vice,
My life became.

Perhaps madness gorged my esteem
For all my mind's mundane regime;
Now my body must pay the price.
Idly being couldn't suffice,
The roused desire, it would seem
My life became.

LORI LOVAGLIO

Avignon

The light of the room falls
around them like soft white

horses sifting into a canyon.
Unsure why he's there, leaning

against the wall, a bright flower
swollen and obvious to the bees

that hover. But bees prick and
in these stained glass lips, he

sees no stinger. Swallowing
time, washing it down with

fungi from a Catalonian field,
where a woman in a yellow dress

perspires hallucinations. The wall
is fur under his palms. The humidity

of the dim room crowds at his neck,
a million Venus flytraps, just waiting

to slowly close down. A lady pulls
back the curtain. The churning of

cerulean hurricanes are heard inside
her eyes. Fingers fold and lace

between singing skins. He licks the
wetness off her spine, her legs like

pythons pull him in. Her tiny wrists
smell of the rain that bathes Barcelona.

KRISTINA MONTESANO

Glamour Me

Our cheap foam-plastic flip-flops touch Hollywood Boulevard, reflective flecks glittering in the blinding SoCal sun, gently tapping Samuel L. Jackson and Elvis Presley, carefully, respectfully, stopping with adoration on Brad Pitt.

A 40-something woman (thickly padded bra, huge drawn-on, crooked lips, botched nose job) marches up to us, smiles, asks me for a picture. (In New York, tourists ask me if I wouldn't mind taking photographs of them. I always oblige, eager to break Big Apple stigma.)

"Uh," I say. "Okay, sure. Yeah. Where's your camera?"

"What?" A beat. "No. Don't you want a picture with me?"

I realize I must look like an idiot tourist: jeans, Batman shirt, Hogwarts tote bag.

"No," I shrugged. "Why would I?"

"Because. I'm Angelina Jolie?"

I turn to my friend Christine, eyebrows darting. She shrugs, rolls her eyes, purses her lips: same look I give Times Square tourists flocking to see a guy in his underwear strumming a guitar.

"No, uh, thanks."

Our flip-flops continued down Hollywood. Every few steps, another pretender begs for a picture. I contemplate posing with knock-off Captain Jack Sparrow. Hmm, no. It's too hot, too humid, too sticky. In Manhattan, people sell fake designer handbags. In Hollywood, they sell themselves. A timid form of prostitution. I picture them writing "whore" on their tax forms.

Times Square is ecstasy, lost in gems of light, swirling rubies, emeralds, sapphire, topaz. Hollywood is a crack den, dilapidated, leech-infested. Wildfire clings to the air. Ashes parachute around us, mating with coulds of smog and body odor, sweat, piss, salty metallic of crystal meth, the exhaust fumes from rows of Hummers and limousines a welcome change.

As I look around at the strung-out dope fiends, the dust and dirt, the wadded bubblegum on poor *Ozzy Osbourne*, I yearn for home. I glance at my exposed feet. *Fuck. I should've worn sneakers.* A man, dressed like *Harvey Dent*, one side of his head shaved one half of his face smeared with cakey, brown Halloween makeup, points at my chest and shouts.

"Hey! Cool shirt!"

His hair, whatever he had of it, was a shock of straw sticking up in a dozen different directions.

"Oh," I nod. "Yeah. Great movie."

"Hey, where are you from?"

He looks demented; the hairless half of his body clad in a charred faux-suit, the other side, intact, whole, crisp.

"New York," I replied. "Like, city. Not state."

“Oh cool, yeah, New York. I love New York.”

“Yeah. Well—”

“Hey, do you want a picture?”

I cringed. No, I do not want a picture with Harvey Dent. Christine tugs at my tote in a futile attempt to yank me away from the zombie fake celebrities closing in. Harvey took a step closer, and, upon closer examination, I notice his makeup is on the wrong side.

“You put that stuff on the wrong side.” I figure if I distracte him for a moment or two, I can make my escape from the flesh-eating, delusional psychopath.

“Duuude. I know, right? It’s like a mirror thing.”

“Okay. Well, uh, have a nice—”

“Come on, take a picture with me.”

Christ.

“Fine.”

Harvey puts his hand on my shoulder, gives a huge, shit-cating grin.

“You know...we work on commission. We don’t get paid to stand out here.”

I narrow my eyes in disgust. Hand over a dollar bill, anyway. Back home, I would have told the guy to go fuck himself. You can’t swindle a native.

But standing in zombie-California with the *Thriller* cast, I was the tourist.

MARIA Di LORENZO

English Holly

On a narrow street the brick house stood
smaller than the rest, firm in ground like
teeth sunk in a neck. And the roof, coarse
skin, ready to sand me down, buffed me
out as if I was a scratch on a floor. My side
door hung from loose hinges like a broken
jaw. *Wire me shut.* Couldn't shut tight, out
side air always found a way in. Blinds fluttered
like moths swarmed beneath porch lights. Across
the kitchen window English Holly stood in trimmed
grass. Glossy leaves fall when you're not looking.
At six years old ran over hot pavement, stepped
on the leaf's sharp spines, thought: *rusty nail,*
glass. I bled and bled down that driveway. I
never walked barefoot again. In autumn, berries
ripened to plumped globes. The urge to grab the
English Holly from its roots, knead it into dirt
beside the new house, put the house in a head
lock, let it squirm in the knot of my arms. Each
leaf pinched my hands, scabbed my thumbs for
a week. Visiting that old street, find a new side
door sealed like a locket, white plastic fence
smooth as a slide, sheer curtains draped from
windows, the English Holly sawed down, slamming
to the ground, effacing the words I pronounce
clear and slow as traffic. *I never lived here.*

A Poem Never Promised

I would write you a poem, but
your face is like the beheaded
cherry from my cigarette, when I
flick too hard. I can't relight it or
imagine it again. We went for nightly
drives to Bergen Beach only to find
not a single patch of water billowing
out from behind the trees. We only
found a breed of homeless people and
their whisky bottles stacked in a ditch
like lost limbs. If we went back today
I bet we would find our old neighborhood
smoking the last of New York's dope. No
one ever moves away. Some just get trampled
by stomping two-steps in the stampede
of a mosh pit. Others eat up Xanax
like God and shut their eyes like an
alligator's jaw clenching a rib bone.
My birthday twin died last week and
I think I might die too, to prove how
connected we really were. Tomorrow
I will travel to every pet store in the nation
and set loose every animal in his honor.
The swinging of cages will be like the blasting

and set loose every animal in his honor.
The swinging of cages will be like the blasting
of fireworks into a sky, pink like a scraped
knee. We will find the tail of a scorpion in a
May sky, wagging the other stars into a black
hole. This poem is a constellation. Each star
throbs with the beat of our pulse. We are
caricatures of the teenager who will never
be straightened out, like a wrinkle in silk,
waiting to be pressed with steam. Our friend-
ship sticks to the roof of my mouth like a thumb
tack. It staples my fingers with thorns. Washes
my hair with garlic. I am leaking from your hour
glass like air from a raft. I will never have another
minute for you. You have snapped the hurdle
like a neck and sutured the finish line like a
wound you want to tumble through again.

“Those who live are those who fight.”

Victor Hugo

SAL TARANTOLA

AVENUE ENNUI

My pea coat weighed down upon my shoulders and back even more heavily than when I left my apartment on Avenue A at five o'clock. Dusk had brought with it an oppressive wall of humidity that was carried over the East River by a quiescent Atlantic wind, and it smothered South Street in an ominous cloak of mist that obliterated the recently visible Brooklyn skyline and saturated my clothes with a dampness that could only be experienced in New York. I left work early, got home at around three, changed, ate, and decided to take a walk along the now vacant, garbage-strewn lots of the Fish Market to lose myself in the black, swirling currents and watch the terns as they fought for French fries and the long forgotten coffee cups of New Jersey tourists and Wall Street wannabes. Summer's transformation to autumn ushered in early darkness as sneakily as ever, and before long, the late October sky was stained an inky, tangible violet.

I was compelled to be outside. The past six weeks in my walkup were spent at my computer with the intent of writing short stories to submit to *Esquire*, *Penthouse*, or some other unobtainable conceit, but each day the writing went nowhere and became instead a trip to the bodega for beer and Slim Jims, and a return to the apartment to get drunk, watch Godzilla DVDs, and jerk off to mental snapshots of the Polish waitress that worked at the Stage Diner down the block. I thought 25 years of keeping steady day work and posing as an author at night would have yielded more laurels for me to rest upon, but drawers full of rejected articles, essays, and manuscripts, and the now meaningless work-ridden mornings and afternoons served only to rape me of any remaining desire I had to create. I'd come near giving up hope of ever leaving my mark on the world. I wasn't married, I had no children, girlfriends came (although I'm sure that sometimes they didn't), and went, and I hadn't written anything worthy of being published outside of college. I was 42 and drying up, but thank God for the City. It was that *thing* that is New York, that aspect of the place that cannot easily be articulated, but is experienced in its smells and sounds and the chinks in its armor, that I'd hoped would revive me and put me back onto some navigable course. I'd immerse myself in its soup and hope for some inspiration. A turn along the Manhattan waterfront was a good place to start.

I headed southeast on Pike Street toward the River after jumping out of a cab on East Broadway, and pulled up the left sleeve of my coat to check the time on my dad's old *Patek* it was after six. The pedestrian-smoothed cobblestones were slippery with the moisture of the sea and the Manhattan Bridge loomed on my right like a silent monolith that cast its great shadow upon a veritable army of apartment buildings that stood slouched and sparsely lit to my left. I side-stepped

a pile of dog shit and stopped to fill my lungs with the dense, cool, salty air. The bridge was magnificent. I stood motionless for a moment and wondered at the engineering of the structure; the tall, blue-painted suspension towers and the intimidating block trusses upon which they rested were amazing. It was my favorite of the three spans that connected Brooklyn to Manhattan; she was the youngest of the trio, and only while crossing her inbound by bus or train could you see some of the best graffiti Chinatown had to offer.

I thought I'd make the trip a bit longer by starting further south on Dover Street to make my way back home, so I turned right into the long passage that ran through the massive stone support that finally anchored the bridge to land. Rectangular, fluorescent lights, a hundred feet overhead, lit the brick walkway in sporadic episodes of offensive bright followed by lengthy seconds of dark. My entry excited resting pigeons; they fluttered from their cinder perches and filled the vast tube with loosed feathers, dust, and the harsh clap of virulent wings. Condensate and other liquidy stuff fell from far above and the hum of crossing cars, trucks, and trains provided background noise that was strangely comforting and musical. I pulled a pack of cigarettes from my coat pocket and stared one-eyed into the puddle beneath my feet; my reflection always looked better than the real thing. My butts and lighter back in storage, I began to walk and smoke. Just after exhaling the first billowy mass, I felt a flat, cold thing pressed to my left cheek, but hard! I was pushed against the arched wall of the tube and my boots were suddenly submerged in a deep puddle that I meant to avoid; the cigarette near fell from my mouth, but clung to my lower lip and swung there like the pendulum of a small, agape, birdless cuckoo clock.

“Gimme the watch muthafucker.”

His voice wasn't discernable, but there was an accent. He spoke almost conversationally; not so much a demand as a statement of fact, and it came from a mouth that was above my head and separated from my body by what must have been a long, rigid arm. This was no joke. I didn't know anybody down here. I almost reached with my right hand perfunctorily to undo the clasp and give him the watch, but I sensed by his tone and my own fear-driven fantasies that we would not so easily part ways after the transaction the neighborhood seemed desolate tonight. He pushed the gun with increasing pressure into my face, and the right side of my head nearly fused with the bridge. *I can't believe this is happening. I can't fuckin' believe this.*

“Give it up, bitch. I ain't waitin' no more.”

To my surprise, I became enraged like I've never before been my face and torso swelled hot with blood. I did not swallow or breathe or move a toe or a finger or feel my fibrillating heart. All stimuli from the surrounding cityscape suddenly vanished, and I stood there waiting for the gunshot; but I didn't let it come. I snapped my head backwards across the rough surface of the wall and jumped left on prostrate legs to get behind him. He was six feet and I had to reach to wrap

my right arm around his neck; *if he's gonna shoot, then let him shoot*. I choked him hard and tucked the center of my elbow firmly under his jaw. I placed my left arm behind his head and my left hand on my right shoulder, twisted a little, and lunged rearwards to pull us both to the ground. We hit the floor fast and most of the contents of my pockets were rocketed throughout the tube.

"Fuck you, bitch. Fuck you, bitch. You want the watch? D'ya still want the fuckin' watch?"

It felt so good to speak. He couldn't utter a word. I wish I could've seen his eyes from my place under his bulk. He searched at my face with angry, stiff fingers; he wanted an earlobe, or a lip, or an eye, but he was too concerned about his inability to breathe and the flow of blood to his brain, and instead held on tightly with both hands to my forearm. He was heavier than me, probably 250 or so, and the collar of his jacket had a thick, fake, stinking pelt that hindered me from maintaining a comfortable hold. He writhed and squirmed and kicked and spun us both full circle at least five times in those twenty seconds. I felt like I might lose some strength soon, so I stopped trying to keep him still and let my body go limp except for my arms. I bore down upon his carotids with lustful vigor and envisioned them pinching-off, then exploding in his head. *Come on, man. Stop. Fuckin' stop already. You can't have this watch. It was my father's. He left it to me. Forget it.* Holding on to him was almost no longer an option, he was like a rhino, but thank God, as an intolerable cramp seized my right arm, he went still. His hands slipped from me and splashed at my sides. A siren screamed a mile away and I lay under his crushing weight stiff and exhausted until I couldn't hear it anymore. As soon as I was certain that it wasn't headed our way, I pushed against his back and slid myself free. He was out. He wasn't faking. Even if he was, I was too tired to care or do anything about it.

My eyes were all over the place. My heart was numbed by fright before, but now I felt it pound in my face. My ears rang and I felt suddenly cold and I trembled. We ended up in the center of the puddled passage. I walked back to where I entered and looked across the street at the apartment buildings. *Was anyone looking? Did anyone see this shit?* I looked up and down Pike Street and into the windows of nearby parked cars. *Nobody. Nobody's around.* I walked back to him. He was definitely large. He was dark Spanish, maybe Panamanian or something. He had big lips and a broad, square face flanked by earlobes studded with cheap gold. His jacket was brown, a sort of bomber, and he wore a blue, wool cap with one of those Wu Tang things on it. His fingernails were longish and filthy. He seemed amazingly detailed from my new position, whereas before, the sound of his voice and his unjust request projected to me something less than human. The flickering bulbs brought his image to excruciating vividness, then took it away and replaced it with equal obscurity. They made it seem like he was moving. I couldn't tell whether his chest rose and fell, and I didn't see the gun that he put in my cheek. He was surrounded by quarters and nickels. I didn't care for my change. I found my cigarettes but couldn't find my lighter. I wanted to run. I wanted to call the cops. I did neither.

Exhaustion persuaded me to rest. I stepped back against the wall and slid

my ass to the floor. I sat there and looked at the watch. The second hand swept flawlessly above the Arabic numerals and the thick, sapphire crystal reflected the fluorescent light with twitching glimmers of blue. I held it to my ear and listened to it tick. It was perfect.

“Are you alright, man?”

“Why am I on tha floor? Who tha fuck are you?”

“You just tried to mug me. We had a fight, and that’s it.”

He took a deep breath and seemed to hold it for some seconds. Then his expression turned to one of sudden realization; like someone who remembers something they’re embarrassed for. Then he started to cry, and then I became embarrassed for him.

“Hey, before you get any stupid ideas, I already picked up the gun. It’s in my pocket.”

His sobbing quickly turned to laughter. He actually looked friendly in this state, like a big construction worker or a fat uncle with Dizzy Gillespie cheeks.

“Yo, man. Forget that bullshit; I didn’t have no gun. That was a Zippo lighter against ya face. For a blanco, you sure are a bad liar, bro. ‘I already picked up the gun’, please!”

He flicked a tear from his cheek with the pointy fingernail of his pinky, and I took my place against the wall and sat and rested my arms on bent knees. So far, both of us were liars, but I wasn’t the one that tried to rob him. He fumbled in his pockets and patted his chest and sniffed away the last of his sobs.

“Hey. You gotta cigarette?”

“Yeah.”

I dug into my wet pea coat and pulled out the Marlboros. I put one in my mouth and threw him the pack. He caught it with the adeptness of someone who was used to catching things thrown at him with great speed.

“You got a light? I lost my Bic in one of these puddles.”

“Well, I had a Zippo, but that disappeared when you tried to kill me, bro.”

“Kill you! You come from behind me and put something in my face and ask for my watch. What the fuck did you expect?”

“Hold on, B. I think I got matches.”

He found a light and we both sat and talked in a great cloud of our own smoke. We must have looked like two soldiers on a newly-taken hill with the fluorescent lights representing exploding bombs in the distance, and our tired, traumatized eyes looking like the thousand-yard stare. His name was Billy. He lived somewhere in Brooklyn.

“What’s ya name, bro?”

“John. I suppose you’ll understand my reluctance to give you my last name, right? How did you know I was wearing a watch?”

Billy thought John was a ‘weak’ name, so he started referring to me as El Guapo. I didn’t know what it meant, but it sounded authoritative.

“I followed your ass from East Broadway. You got out tha taxi, pulled up your sleeve, fogged up tha watch with your breath, and starting cleaning it right there on tha corner. Then you looked at it again half way down tha block. I don’t need

to see a high-end Swiss watch more than once, bro. Plus, you was tha only white person in tha mix with all them Chinese people, wearing that nice, warm coat, hair all perfect and shit, Timberlands, nice pants. That's when I stalked your ass into this tube. I been outta work for a year, El Guapo. I'm hungry."

Billy stopped talking and looked like he might cry again, but he didn't. The sole of his left sneaker had a big hole. I could see the wrinkled, whitish bottom of his foot. He wasn't even wearing socks. Foghorns intermittently moaned from the River and another N or B train rumbled across the tracks above. I couldn't believe we were still talking; sitting like old friends rediscovering each other's identity as if we hadn't seen each other in twenty years.

"Did you call tha cops, bro?"

"Why? Was there a crime committed here?"

We cracked up. He reached out a hand to touch mine to signify his approval of a good joke. He may have been setting me up to make another move, but his openness, my *new* name, and no gun reassured me that the worst of our meeting was probably over.

"I live in Brooklyn, bro, but I live in tha street. Sometimes I sleep at my sister's, sometimes I sleep at the Y. I used ta work in tha Navy Yard doing construction and shit. Here, this is my son. His name is Norberto."

Billy excitedly reached into a pocket on his stained cargo pants and revealed a picture of a beautiful little boy. The kid was sitting on wooden steps leading up to the porch of an orange house. He was smiling with gapped teeth and wore blue shorts. His skin was just as umber as his dad's, and his eyes were big and hopeful and shining, like the eyes of all children should be. I held the photo like a precious jewel. I looked at the boy and I looked at Billy. Billy's smile reported spaces of black just like his son. He was so proud of his accomplishment.

"Where was this picture taken?"

"That's at his mommy's house in Las Tunas when he was six. He lives with his grandma now in Havana. I don't see his mother any more. I left Cuva ten years ago. What about you, El Guapo? Married? Kids? What do you do?"

"I manage some banks in Queens and Long Island. If I give you the addresses maybe you can stop by sometime and hold them up. I'm not married, no kids, but I'm really a writer. That's my passion. That's what I love to do. Unfortunately, no one else thinks my writing's good enough for print. The past couple months have been a bit of a dry spell for me. I haven't been able to start or finish a thing."

Billy didn't seem impressed or moved by my occupation or my state in life. He just nodded and stared at me like a child listening to the monotonous and meaningless words of a grown up. I think we spoke for another hour or so, mainly about Billy's stints in jail and our mutual appreciation for Latina ass. Our postures began to stiffen as night's temperature descended with the steady climb of darkness. Billy got up and stood before me in all his bigness and intimidating demeanor and held out his dirty hand to help me up. We absorbed each other's image for a future memory, and then we hugged. Billy could have crushed me. We touched knuckles and Billy started back toward East Broadway. As his image evaporated from view, I got a sudden, satisfying feeling of ownership; I'd finally earned the

watch. I headed home aching.

I paid little mind to the terns that screeched and circled over South Street or to the sound of the River as it smacked the pier. I got home and went to the bathroom mirror; a cut began at my left eye and ended at my right nostril. The lump on the right side of my head resembled a small stack of pancakes. Billy had gotten in some digs after all. I shed my wet clothes and sat down to the laptop with a brain finally swollen with ideas. Eighteen key strokes broke the silence. The words that appeared on the screen were *El Guapo and Billy*. I wrote unimpeded until morning and over the next few days; no beer, no Slim Jims, and no Godzilla movies, though I can't say there weren't one or two psychic visits to the Polish waitress. Ten-thousand words and the story was finished. I received three rejections to publish it, but it didn't matter. Billy quite possibly had saved me from giving up, and he showed me that there are more stories to be written about life; I just had to start living it.

ROBERT *De* LORENZO

Revealed

You can tell a lot about a man
By the way he does his tie,
The half hearted Windsor,
The all or nothing full Windsor,
Even the bow tie,
As if the man who wears it is
A gift, a present for the eyes.

You can tell more
By the way he makes his coffee,
Three packets of sugar with milk,
No sugar with extra cream
Or the maverick
Who takes it black
To emphasize originality—
I think this line should be deleted.

You can tell some more
By the way he bowls,
Full speed with no intent for perfection,
All about the curve, sans the strength,
Or even the guy who finds a way to contain
The charisma of the 7-10 split.

You can tell even more
By the blade he uses to shave,
The straight razor badass
The quad razorpilegic
Or the electric razor user
Dependent on electricity
To perform maintenance.

But, you can tell the most about that man
By the way he treats his mate,
The liar who conceals himself
In weak verses that never push limit,
Slowly recognizing the irony
In the title of his poem.



MATTHEW BRYAN BECK

The Courage of Chigger McGraw

I.

It's a widely-accepted fact that Chigger McGraw is the most cowardly sheriff in the territory. 'Ol Chigger don't have a backbone. Everyone in town says so. Yessir, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more spineless lawman. He don't even carry a gun. Folks say that's on account he's mostly scared of them. (He wears a gun belt with bullets sure enough, mostly to keep up his britches, but the lead pieces are all rusted.) Any loudish noises put Chigger in a state. He ain't been to an Independence Day fireworks since nobody can remember, on account the booms give him a head-ache. He ain't arrested anyone for near seven years, and last one was only on account that half the women in town threatened to burn down the jailhouse (and Chigger in it!) unless he arrested Amos Gilby, the town drunkard, for public indecency. (Amos, fresh off a bender, took a stroll down the main avenue one fine morning in nothing but his union suit and old velvet derby.)

Chigger's as dull as dishwater, folks say. He's been engaged to Harriet Fogerty for near nine years, three times to the alter, three times fainted dead away. Folks say Harriet will be resting quietly in her grave before Chigger musters up the courage. No backbone is what ails him. Everyone in town knows that. Once a mad dog got loose and ran about town scaring folks half to death and Chigger said he didn't have the heart to shoot it but folks said he just didn't have the guts. Chigger was in a spot for awhile, jawing the issue with the townfolk, until little Jimmy Dooley shot the poor animal dead with his sharpshooter and put the matter to rest.

Chigger McGraw is a big, wheezy sort of feller, sweating all the time. He sorta...*waddles*. Kinda like a newborn calf or one of Widow Delancy's geese. Slow as molasses in January, folks say. Mostly he just sits napping in his rocker on the front porch of the jailhouse with his boots crossed and felt Wadell propped over his eyes, only getting up around noon (mebbe a little sooner, mebbe a little later, depending if the gall-nippers are biting) to waddle over to Charlie Rafferty's Saloon for an axle-greased steak and a glass of warm beer.

And every Friday, regular as sin, Chigger gets a ten-cent shave at Pat Mahoney's Tonsorial Parlor (so as to be presentable for Sunday services and afternoon tea at Mrs. McGrady's boarding house) and sips apple jack and gossips with the other lazybones for three or four pipes. Even after a fresh shave and touch of witch hazel, Chigger still comes out looking uglier than a new-sheared sheep. Yessir, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more queer bird than Chigger.

II.

Most of the actual sheriff work is handled by Buck Stevens, his fine-looking, capable young deputy. Buck's a smart young kid, going places in the world. Born and raised right here in this town. There's a boy who knows his business. Ask anyone, Buck should rightly be sheriff. He's the best man for the job, not that idiot Chigger. But Chigger just don't know how to step down gracefully. You'd think he'd take a hint, people laughing at him and making jokes and such. But no! He's as stubborn as a Missouri mule. Every man is entitled to scratch his own itch, sure, but Chigger just don't know when to call it a day.

Once a troublemaker come into town, one of them big-city dandies with a fancy waxed mustache and store-bought striped suit, talking nonsense about women's suffrage or some such gibberish and handing out inflammatory literature and getting the town ladies all excited and stirred up. What did Chigger do? That's right, *nothing*. Justs sits on the porch. *Let the man say his peace, Buck, he ain't hurting nobody*. But Buck don't listen. He swears up a storm, runs the troublemaker out of town, throws him by the scruff of his starched collar up on his rented buggy and slaps the mare so hard she flies across three state lines. Buck comes back, dusty, sweaty, breathing heavy, slapping his hat against his thigh, grinning from ear to ear. He's mighty full of himself, his chest puffed out halfway across the street. He looks Chigger square in the eye. Now, Mr. Sheriff, whaddy think of that? Chigger just leans over slowly and spits out his chaw.

Annie MacDougal, the post-mistress, is Buck's girl, and a finer girl you couldn't find. She has reddish hair like a shiny new penny, rosy cheeks, and a pretty little flock of freckles. Every Saturday evening, Buck shines his boots, slicks his hair, and sits in Annie's parlor conversating for an hour before taking her out in his buggy for a ride around town. Buck has asked Annie to marry more times than anyone can count, at least two times a fortnight. But she won't have him. *You're such a hot-head, Buck. You act like such a spoiled boy sometimes. I want a man, not a boy. I won't marry a man who lives by his guns and swears and drinks and raises hell like you do.* Annie, is there another man? *No, Buck.* Don't lic to me, woman! Who is he? Who is he! *Buck, I told you, there's nobody else, I just won't marry you until you grow up.*

To put it lightly, Buck ain't happy. She can't say no forever. He's near blind with jealousy. Every man that steps in the post office he eyes suspiciously. Hothead, huh? Spoiled boy, huh? Grow up, huh? Just 'cause he ain't a choir-boy don't mean he ain't the right man for her. She just don't know it yet. She can't stall him forever. When *he* runs this town she'll learn to have more respect for him.

III.

I bet you're wondering what's all this got to do with anything? Just hold on to your hat there, I'm getting to the good part. (I myself hate when stories dawdle about too long before getting to the point, so I won't waste no more of your time.) It happened like this:

One fine cloudless summer day, Buck is sitting in the saloon, throwing back one after another, stewing in his jealousy and irritation. He's whipping himself into a foul mood, all puckered-up and ornery. Suddenly, he gets a notion into that big handsome head of his. Why not just up and take the sheriff job? Why not? (Maybe if he was sheriff, Annie would finally become his wife.) Who will stop him? Chigger? Har, that's a hoot. He has a mind to walk up to Chigger right now and plain tell him what's what. That tub of lard ain't carrying a gun, that's a certainty. And if he does want a fight, (can you imagine it!) Buck is your huckleberry. He ain't no juniper with a Colt. Love your enemies and keep your gun oiled, his daddy always used to say. Charlie says to go home and sleep it off. Lay off the stuff for now, kid. But once Buck gets his mind wrapped around something, he can't think of nothing else.

So him and Blackie Coogan and Jim Donovan swagger over to the jailhouse, two or three bottles of whiskey between them. Sure enough, Chigger is napping as usual in that stupid rocker. Buck starts calling him out: *Chigger! Chigger McGraw! Get up, you tub of lard! I wanna talk to you! What's on your mind there, Buck? What's on my mind? I'll tell you what's on my mind! I've been standing around long enough, watching you make a laughingstock of the sacred office of sheriff!* Calm down there, Buck, you don't know what you're saying, get the liquor outta your system, boy. *I don't need your advice, thank you very much! If you don't step down this very moment, I'm gonna make you! How do you like that?* Settle down, Buck. *Put a gun on, you coward!* Settle down I said, boy. *Put on a gun and draw, draw like a man!* Buck, I'm warning you--*blast! blast! blast!* Three gunshots--

--and *silence.*

So here I am, deputy Buck Rogers, with two smoking holes shot clean through my big strapping chest, my guts bleeding all over the main avenue, my drawn Colt still in my hand, and wouldn't you know it, standing behind me is little Jimmy Dooley and his smoking sharpshooter (Jimmy, smart boy, had heard the ruckus from his bedroom window nearby and came out fully loaded, patiently perching himself like a silent eagle behind a hitching post across from the jailhouse), which put the matter to rest.

TEUTA AVDIU

Those things that touch

She touched my umbilical cord
With those things
She touched my body
Everywhere.
Even the places I couldn't get to.
She touched my butt
When it was full of shit
She touched my bruises
When people only looked
At the bloody mess
She touched my tears
When they wouldn't
Stop coming
She touched my heart
When she gave me
Her touch
She touched my belly
When it was my time
To touch.

CHELSEA GENDVIL

Ink-Veined Language

Ink-veined fingers,
the lips of the mind.
Language, a constricting
and swelling
flood. The poet's blood
pours into the breath
of a line,
and in that, the word,
the thought,
the embraced mistake
of meaning, the mis-
interpretation, the mis-
understanding. Black and blue,
it blots out the white
from your eyes,
for their eyes,
for no one.
How many ways
can the hair on the arms
and neck be raised?
I'll allow you
to put me on,
to stretch me
without ripping
while you get a sense
of the material,
wonder at how it's made.
It's not always me.
I think of you often
and rarely.

Tendril

A hum of words
vibrate
spastic behind salt water
crusted eyes. Between
lips, a tongue muted
by a cage
of clenched teeth.
Lanterns of
fire swing
from the ribcage, spilling
searing molten wax,
blanketing cords
of intestine.
I possess you
like a fistful of air.
The invisible molecules, a circus
blown
by your whim.
Blackened and bruised,
I,
the tendril that clung on
somehow
too loosely, coil
back onto
myself.

LAURA FABRIZIO

Illegal Picket Fence

Ma's feet were glued to the ground
There was no way she could flee to town.

In less than a second, their eyes choked her
Police or Gestapo? It was all a blur.

They asked if she had papers
To them she was nothing but a japer.

Ma spoke shoddy English and it was the truth
Away from the Americans she always stood aloof.

They grabbed her hands and whisked her away
Shoulder to shoulder like halay, without delay.

Uniformed people recited the Immigration law
Huddling my knees, my eyes watched their jaws.

They tore her American dream
Shredded it until it was just a gleam.

A few months later, dragged to court
My family realized our money was beyond short.

Handcuffed Ma back to her home
To her little village-where she couldn't roam.

Frida's Photosynthesis

A woman should be fertile.
It's a universal crime if you're not.
And so she decides to take her revenge,
Laying down on the earth, making it her bed.
The unknown seed was planted somewhere.
The hollowness on her chest gives us a rare glimpse.
Green roots have been born.
The gigantic leaves clench on the barren ground for
Oxygen and that innate desire to grow.

One must wonder, if you look long enough,
If more and more roots will continue to sprout,
Just like multiple snakes gliding in unison,
From her insides and latch themselves everywhere.
Intertwining with each other, making it impossible
For anyone to rip them from the ground.
If someone dared to pry them from the earth,
Would the fresh smell of nature have the aroma of
Metallic blood?

DEREK PINTO

The Curious Case of Cereal Killers

(All Characters, with exception of the News Reporter, preformed by puppets,)

*News Reporter
Anc Horman
Count Chocula
Masked Man
Toucan Sam
Cap'n Crunch
Snap
Crackle
Pop
Trix Rabbit
Barney
Sonny*

*The curtains open up and a screen is lowered from above center stage. The lights are off in the theater, and the only thing that can be seen is the screen. On the screen, various clips of the television show *The Flintstones* is playing as well as stills of the characters involved in the play. The voice of the news reporter can be heard over the pictures, but can not be seen at the moment.*

NEWS REPORTER

Live at 10. We bring you to the scene of this past week's gruesome murders. Plus we have new information concerning the victims and people involved in the unforgettable acts which have hit the entire community. Stay tuned. Only on News at 10.

*The lights and the screen go black. The screen comes back on showing commercials. The first commercial is for *Lucky Charms*. Then *Fruity Pebbles* comes up. The other cereals follow one by one. The screen and the lights go black. The left side of the stage has a back drop with a picture of a house on it. On the right side of the stage is a seat facing the audience and a coffee table in front of it. The curtains open and the lights shine on the left side of the stage.*

NEWS REPORTER

I'm standing outside the, newly active, residence of once great honey mogul, Buzz Bee. The media and community both have been trying to get a look inside. It seems since the incident occurred, everybody has been attracted to the scene of the crime. The media wants to know the story while the neighbors search for answers. For years, parents have been feeding their children information about people they

thought they knew, but, boy, were they wrong.

It has already been a week since the small town of Mill-Logs has been put through such devastating times. We have exclusive, never before seen interviews, with eye witnesses. We also have first hand discussions with the victims which were in the building we are standing in front of, that very...scary...night. Also, for the first time since being sentenced, our Anc Horman interviews the three men responsible, live. These men decided to come forth, so the public could know their side, "the true side", of the story. Our first tape reveals a civilian which knew the people that attended the party.

The spotlight on the news reporter goes out, and a spot light goes onto the chair on the right side of the stage. Count Chocula puppet is sitting on the couch.

ANC HORMAN

(A voice can be heard over the speakers, but there is nobody onstage but the puppet being interviewed.) You were close friends with everybody involved in this unfortunate incident. Can you tell us a little bit about what your relationship was like with all of these people?

COUNT CHOCULA

(Man speaks with Transylvanian accent) Yes, I was acquainted with each person involved in the unfortunate events. We aren't as close as we once were, but we were still friends, nevertheless.

ANC HORMAN

What caused you to become estranged?

COUNT CHOCULA

Ever since the passing of my two best friends, Boo-Berry and Franken-Berry, I am rarely seen during the day, and I lie awake most nights.

ANC HORMAN

What can you tell us about some of the guys involved?

COUNT CHOCULA

I always got along with everyone. None of the guys every acted differently around me. They were actually some of the most kind-hearted people; I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.

ANC HORMAN

Can you please share some light, on what you mean?

COUNT CHOCULA

Although we haven't gotten together in a while, all of the guys, for the past 5 years, have always attended my annual blood drive for the starving children.

ANC HORMAN

It sounds as if you were surprised to hear this happened.

COUNT CHOCULA

Most definitely. The last thing I expected was getting word that a horde of my friends were murdered, and the fiends responsible, were in fact, my own confidants. It just boggles my psyche.

The lights go out on Count Chocula and shine back on the news reporter.

NEWS REPORTER

In this next interview, we hear from a witness that was at the party. He wishes to remain anonymous for his own safety.

The spotlight goes out around the reporter, and shines on the chair revealing a large puppet with a black tablecloth covering him.

ANC HORMAN

Please explain to us the vibe of the night, prior to the events that took place.

MASKED MAN

At first I thought it was Grrrreeeaaaaaaattttt!!! Everyone was having a good time. It's been a while since we have all been able to get together as a group. We are always busy. Between filming and... ya know. It's kind of hard to maintain a social life. Marketing in today's economy especially, is enough to keep you busy.

ANC HORMAN

Would you say everyone was getting along?

MASKED MAN

Oh yea, definitely. Everybody was getting along Grrrreeeccccaaattttt!!!

ANC HORMAN

Looking back, could you place anything that seemed different than usual?

MASKED MAN

Maybe one of the other guys was able to tell, but I couldn't. I thought everything was going smoothly until...well...ya know.

ANC HORMAN

How do you feel now that it is over?

MASKED MAN

Hurt... *(Beat)*...not so great. I just feel taken advantage of.

ANC HORMAN

What do you think hurts most?

MASKED MAN

They were friends. Not the people that died, because every body dies. The ones who did this were friends. I trusted them, and strangely; there is no way to sugar coat it, I still do.

The light goes off and the spot light shines back on the news reporter.

NEWS REPORTER

In a tragic time like this, feelings are always jumbled and perception can be skewed. We see from this bystander that the attack was unnoticeable, unjustifiable, and unprovoked. But can we say that everybody thought it was so farfetched? Did every friend of these people think that these actions were incomprehensible?

Light shuts down, and a new light focuses on the chair where the Cap'n Crunch puppet, can be seen.

ANC HORMAN

You were friends with all of these people. Is that correct?

CAP'N CRUNCH

(In a not-so-pirate-like accent) Well I wouldn't really say they be me matey's. But, aye, we all knew each other.

ANC HORMAN

How close would you say you were with all of these people?

CAP'N CRUNCH

I wouldn't say we be close. We just knew a lot about each other, due to the trade life and all. I knew as much about them as I would know about one of me crew. Photo shoots with this mate here and a commercial with that mate there. That be the extent of our friendship. If ye be call'n it that.

ANC HORMAN

Do you feel bad about what has happened in the past week?

CAP'N CRUNCH

I'm not heartless. I feel bad that it happened, but at the same time, I'm just glad it wasn't me. I be wiser.

ANC HORMAN

Are you suggesting that the victims knew something was wrong?

CAP'N CRUNCH

I'm not saying that. I be saying that tis a reason I've never invited any of those guys aboard me ship. I had plenty-o opportunities to "hang" with those, swashbucklers, but I have me status to report to. When ye be gallivanting with anybody, ye be looking for trouble.

ANC HORMAN

Did you think the three individual taken into custody were capable of doing what they did?

CAP'N CRUNCH

It doesn't surprise me, if that be what ye mean. They be what I call rabble-rousers and don't know when to cut the malarkey. The only thing that does surprise me is how shocked everyone else be.

The light shining on the Cap'n goes out, and the light shines on the news reporter.

NEWS REPORTER

Were the guest careless or just naïve? Could they have prevented these events from unfolding? We have another first hand interview with another party goer who states things that would help fight that argument.

The light goes off and the other spotlight shines back on the chair. In the chair is Toucan Sam's puppet.

TOUCAN SAM

I had a hunch something was wrong.

ANC HORMAN

How did you know?

TOUCAN SAM

I don't know. It was weird. I just had this feeling that something wasn't right. Like...on the tip of my nose, I knew something or someone was up to no good. I just did what I had to do.

ANC HORMAN

So you acted on your animal instinct?

TOUCAN SAM

Yes. I just got up, followed my nose, and flew out of there. It always knows

ANC HORMAN

You didn't think to ask anybody if they felt the same. Or at least tell them what you felt?

TOUCAN SAM

You know something? I have been thinking about that question every day for the past week. What if I had asked Lucky? What if I spoke to Buzz? Who knows? All I know is...I did what I did and I can't change it.

ANC HORMAN

If you could go back, would you change that?

TOUCAN SAM

(Long beat) The sad thing is I wouldn't change anything I did that night if I could. I did what I had to for my family. I have nephews. I want to see them grow up to become their own toucans one day.

The light shining on Toucan Sam shuts off a new light shines on the news reporter.

NEWS REPORTER

Some may call it survival, while others call it cowardly. This next interview shows three heroes who said, "Enough is enough", and decided to fight back to ensure the stoppage of the chaos which was taking place.

The spotlight shuts off and the spotlight on the chair switches on. On the chair are three puppets.

ANC HORMAN

What made you guys stand up for yourselves?

SNAP

Bro, we totally saw what happened to Fred. There was no ways we were gonna let that happen to us.

POP

In all seriousness, dude, all week long people have been callin' us heroes.

CRACKLE

We aren't heroes.

POP

We only did what every body else would have done, dude.

ANC HORMAN

What were you thinking when the three of you got up and decided enough was enough?

CRACKLE

Son, I can't speak for my brothers here, but I know for sure that I dint think about

it. It was just impulse. Ya dig?

SNAP

I would never say that we lived a hard life, bro; but we totally know when something isn't right.

POP

Standing up for what you believe in isn't heroic, dude. It's...like... just nature.

SNAP

Bro, we just did what was expected of anybody if they were in that situation.

CRACKLE

Yea, son. The real hero in this story is Buzz. Ya dig?

POP

The poor little dude stung the bird but...like...couldn't hold on that much longer afterwards.

ANC HORMAN

Tell us a bit of how you guys feel now. From what we see, you're all a bit banged up.

POP

Well, dude, when I jumped on Fred so he wouldn't get hit anymore, I...like...got kicked and wound up popping my hip.

SNAP

Me and Sonny were totally in a scuffle and he threw me down onto the floor. When I fell, I wound up snapping my neck, bro. Doctors say I will have to wear this brace for a couple of weeks.

CRACKLE

I was punched in the face, son. Hit after hit. Ya dig? He cracked my nose and my tooth.

ANC HORMAN

Some of the other guests have said that they weren't as surprised that this happened. They were saying that they got the feeling something was up. Did any of you pick up on that?

CRACKLE

I most certainly didn't think anything was wrong. Son, (*beat*) none of us did. We saw that Touc had left, but that's about it. Lucky was just being Lucky. Ya dig?

SNAP

Bro, he was totally always on the paranoid side.

CRACKLE

Son, he kept saying he was getting dirty looks. That they were after his lucky charms, ya dig? But we just ignored it.

POP

Dude, when you know people for years, their behavior just becomes natural. That was Lucky. No one...like.... thought any differently.

The light goes off on the three puppets and the light on the news reporter goes on.

NEWS REPORTER

With the story unfolding as it is, the people in the community are finally getting answers; but now we are about to show you, for the first time, an interview with the ones held responsible. I warn you that being a live segment, the footage has been unedited and left in its entirety. The content may contain strong language and may not be suitable for the young. Once again, we bring you to our correspondent Anc Horman.

The light on the news reporter goes out and the spotlights are now shining on the middle of the stage. In the middle of the stage is a large couch with the three puppets sitting down. When speaking of the deceased people, the screen is lowered behind the table, just above the suspect's heads showing clips of the characters.

ANC HORMAN

Well, gentlemen. I should start by asking the most important question. Why?

SONNY

(Shaking) I am innocent. I can assure you that.

ANC HORMAN

Can you please tell us why you did what you did? Everybody at least deserves that much.

BARNEY

We have our reasons. But to be honest, it's mainly about respect. I've been carrying that fat, fuck, Fred on my back for the past 50 years.

ANC HORMAN

What do you mean you were carrying him? You were friends.

BARNEY

Friends? FRIENDS?!?! Did you ever watch a show called 'The Rubbles'? Or what

about a show called Fred and Barney? No. You haven't. That stupid prick was always the dumb one. For six years that son of a bitch got into more trouble than anyone could ever dream of. Who saved him every single time? Me. I did. I was the brains of that show and everybody knows it.

ANC HORMAN

Are you saying you killed your best friend of over 50 years over an act of jealousy?

BARNEY

Jealousy? (*Beat*) Not an ounce. I killed Fred. I murdered my "best friend" in cold blood. I clubbed him with a bowl of his own cereal until I couldn't tell if the milk was colored from the pebbles or blood. I killed Fred because he made me steal from him. You would think that after doing a television show with someone for 6 years, you would be able to ask for a bowl of cereal. We've made movies together. Vitamins, toys, pajamas, and bed sheets have all been made in our benefit. For fuck's sake, I'm on a MOTHERFUCKING POSTAGE STAMP. Never once did I get a thank you from Mr. Flintstone; which by the way, is the name he made me call him for the past 5 years. You believe that? That dumb prick made me call him Mr. fuckin Flintstone. He said Fred was too casual. Anyway, after 50 years of this bullshit, never once did I get a thank you. I have never asked for a thank you and to be honest I never wanted one. The only thing I have ever asked for was a bowl of Fruity Pebbles. He couldn't let me have a bowl because the colors were so pretty. He actually had the gall to say that to me. I said ok. Then I asked him for a bowl of Cocoa Pebbles. I would have been happy with either or. "But Barney, those are my favorite. I wish I could, but I would miss them so much." That fat tub of lard could have done with one less bowl let me tell you. I had to resort to stealing from a so called "friend".

ANC HORMAN

What about you, Trix Rabbit?

TRIX RABBIT

Well to be honest, I believe my good pal Barney summed it up quite well. Respect. Nobody gave us the respect we deserved. How many years is it going to take for one God-damned bowl of cereal? All I want is a bowl of Trix and those dumb mother fuckers run along with their pig tails, and overalls having fun. Maybe I wouldn't be so damn sensitive if they were at least nice about it. Instead they had to ridicule me and call me names. (*Mockingly*) "Silly rabbit nooooooo. Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids" (*Jumping out of his seat*) WHO'S SILLY NOW!!!!

ANC HORMAN

How do you explain yourself, Sonny?

SONNY

(Rocking back and forth playing with his hair in his hand) I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

BARNEY

(Laughing) It didn't take much to get this guy on the same page. Now you all know why they say he's cuckoo for cocoa puffs. All me and T had to do was put a bowl of Cocoa puffs in front of him, and he danced for us like a puppet on a string.

ANC HORMAN

You really expect us to believe this was really all done in favor of respect?

TRIX RABBIT

We honestly don't care what you believe. We are all confessing to doing the crime. Hell, I will even confess to the murders of those other forgotten rejects.

ANC HORMAN

Are you saying that there are more, dead?

TRIX RABBIT

Did you really think that Boo-Berry and Franken-Berry were just on vacation?

BARNEY

Yeah. Next you're going to tell us that the Cookie Crook, and Smak the frog are with them.

Both men start laughing

ANC HORMAN

Tell us why you killed all of these people.

BARNEY.

You really want to know why we killed all of these people? You want this one T, or should I start?

TRIX RABBIT

I'll just come out and say it. We killed Boo and Franken-Berry because they were gay with each other; and to be honest, that makes us sick.

BARNEY

I said it before and I'll say it again. The only thing I like fruity is Pebbles.

TRIX RABBIT

We wrote that one off as a "difference of opinion".

BARNEY

We didn't want to kill the Cookie Crook. We actually asked him if he wanted to join. Similar outlooks, ya know.

TRIX RABBIT

His problem was he always got caught. We couldn't have no snitches running around. That type-a-shit just don't fly.

BARNEY

So I shanked his ass.

TRIX RABBIT

As for Smak... Well let's face it; no one even knows who he is. We did him a favor. We did what should have been done a long time ago. My only regret is we didn't do it to that stupid fucking Kellogg's Rooster too.

BARNEY

Well you know why I killed Fred. I'll move onto Buzz Bee. That was a mistake. He wasn't supposed to die. This dumb fuck-a-lobe (*smacks Sonny in the head*) doesn't know how to follow plans. T and I both told him not to touch the Bee. We were both fond of the little guy. Even though we didn't agree with his message, he was still a good guy. Bee happy, Bee healthy, my ass. That is the one thing I will regret about this whole thing. Other than that, I wouldn't change one thing.

ANC HORMAN

Why was Buzz supposed to be safe?

BARNEY

He used to get us this dope-as-fuck weed. I'm talking killer bud. Like, in all seriousness, you smoke half a J, and your shit was tighter than that fat ass's wife, Wilma.

Both men start laughing and high fiving each other.

BARNEY

But in all seriousness, we are going to miss you, B. (*Looks up and points to the heavens above*).

TRIX RABBIT

Last but not least...Lucky. I took great joy in killing that cheap, Irish, prick. Wanna know something? Every body was after your lucky charms, asshole. Maybe if you would have given them one bowl, they would have left you alone. Did you ever think about that? Instead of using your head, you would pull magic FUCKING marshmallows out of your ass to make them want your dumb cereal even more. Didn't it ever occur to you that maybe, just maybe, that wasn't such

a good idea? I really enjoyed killing him. I felt better after every, fucking, stale marshmallow, I shoved down his throat. He stood for everything that made me hate this world.

ANC HORMAN

Well we all know that you guys are all going to jail for a long time. Is there anything you wish you could do before you went away?

TRIX RABBIT

You really think we deserve to go to jail? Yea? You know who deserves to go to jail. That stupid stuck-up ass-pirate. That's who.

ANC HORMAN

Are you threatening the Cap'n?

BARNEY

You could say that. He's the one you guys should be mad at.

TRIX RABBIT

What do you put in that cereal of yours? Razor blades? I feel like I'm eating the Vietnam War every time I have a bowl of your cereal.

BARNEY

That motha-fucka's been feeding your children napalm every morning and you're all mad at us. Ain't that some fuckin' shit.

Light goes out on the center table and the spotlight goes on the news reporter.

NEWS REPORTER

Well there you have it, folks. With the confession of over five murders, we should see these three men go to jail for a long time. Now that the bad guys have been put away, the town of Mill-Logs can ponder other things: the contents of the Cap'n's Crunch, whatever happened to that Kellogg's rooster, was the Vietnam war really necessary, more importantly, why was there only one girl in Smurf town? These are all question left for the people...YOU...to answer. That's all for tonight. Thank you and have a good tomorrow.

“Eighty percent of success is showing up.”

Woody Allen

“The antidote for fifty enemies is one friend.”

Aristotle

JEANETTE LANE

For Feudal Politics and Your Love of History

Can We Still Be Friends?

You are my past, you will always haunt me, and you know this. Know you will always have this power over me. Power; like the Rights of Kings. Divine right; I am the country in question. You keep me in your court, a jester, the musician. When the music stops the court knows what will happen. I am the ghost that you give up on, not the ghost that you give up. Most people give up what they can't let go of. A habit, you have one, a secret, you keep one. One is a lonely number. I will always be lonely. A lonely ghost haunted by you, the one soldiered army invading my future. Companionship is strange kings and jesters alike.

Have you found someone who's good for you yet?

The jester is no longer funny, the musician no longer inspired. Inspiration runs from the court. The court, the chorus in a Greek tragedy, judgmental, has learned too much about the jester. Too many Kings and countries under the juggler's belt. A belt with many scratches but only a few notches. The King's bedpost whittled away but the jester is judged. The musician, the music, unattractive-the notes, shattered window panes. The beauty that was the act is gone; the juggler lays down her mask. The one she never wore to begin with. The jester, the musician, made the King wear the mask. The King sees the musician for the first time and the lonely monster underneath begins to show its teeth. Teeth that I was once told looked good when I smiled. I don't smile anymore.

Why don't you understand?

She is my King, my captor, the court, the bed, the backseat, the reason I'm desperate. Desperately trying to find someone to make me feel... the way she looked at me, that way. The way that buckled my knees and tastes of cement. I was alive by the skin of my teeth, skin grazed from you neck, salty like the cement you left me to die on. My skin still crawls with your presence. The king is present, everyone kneel. You walk on royal floor, on air, on nothing, on me. Always trying to make something out of the nothing I tend to be. A void, illusory. You look through me, a phantasm you can't quite touch, reach through the transparency, grab the palpating mass. You're too late, it's not beating anymore, the King doesn't approve.

CHRISTOPHER RIORDAN JONES

An event horizon stares at me...

An event horizon stares at me,
Its gaze more destructive than a dead scar that stretches ever wider with rot pouring forth.
Spawned of Typhon and Echidna is she, yet more riddle and intrigue,
Than the Sphinx doth she have (I note here that she could outwit an L).
Infinite persistence, 200 vigilant orbs, triplex wrath, and one brave spirit – fused as one.

Skadi is an infernal, so cold is she,
Though she still holds, with great loyalty, the hand of Isis safely in her grasp.
It was the effort of Hephaestus' hammer and fire that forged her from,
The medium that only I know how to mold.
Meanwhile, Njord's tumultuous rain hardened her for the bulls' malicious swarm.

A jeweled hilt she holds in one hand and an icy one in the other,
Can she balance the different souls of the princes of anger and morality?
One name resonates with that of a Goddess,
The other rose up from the ebon storm.
Forgotten by those who abandoned her, she unyieldingly continues the trudge.

I have hunted with white skin, black horns, and flayer of death scuttling by my side,
For the singular horror of legend; imperfection at its best.
She can transform into a warrior with the force of a depth charge,
To maul all in her path to protect the yellow glow of he who has been a boon to all.
If apathy is death, to do nothing, to not be as quick as silver, is to truly die.

Has she smashed away her fear, like the Geoforn for the metal valkyrie,
And chosen the right path to link her to goodness?
She would give an arm and a leg to protect her kin from apocalypse,
And do battle with sin to the bitter end.
With the endurance of Rock, fluidity of sand, and insight of leaf she remains hidden.

Do we share the same tainted embodiment,
That the waters of Odyssey drew forth?
The one that is rarest of all, which cannot die,
Will evolve to master and survive the coming mob.
What cards has she been dealt in the spectrum that exists?

Has she the barred gate, to hold back the raging Onslaught,
Her closest ally and confidant, that which is immortal and ever squandered by many.
She cherishes the same as I, and basks in its midst,
Yet to do so is to become sickened from the act of cherishing that which is cherished.
It cannot die and cannot breathe, yet when it gives us life, only then does it live.
Do you still embrace the wind and see the ram...?
Or have you already been consumed by the infinite ring.

MATTHEW BRYAN BECK

Shrunken Skulls

(Word).

A mirror to my
blackened face,

(Word). Form

to my hunchbacked

thoughts,

substance

to

my desires,

flesh

to my fears.

(Word). Fire,

burning

my tongue,

singing

my fingers.

(Word). A

razor,

fresh blood

on

the

paper.

(Word). Evil,

wicked devices

strung together like

shrunken skulls.

An old woman,

vowels like her

misshapen

breasts.

(Word). A drug,

a magic elixir,

commas in love,

me,

the chronic

abuser.



ELIZABETH MURPHY

It's like Drowning Puppies

After much thought, I opened the door. A gray cloud of smoke confronted me as the faint smell of vomit crawled its way up into my nostrils. The walls were covered by dark colored wallpaper and a tiny window sat in the middle of one of the walls. As I took a step further in the room, I noticed her. Her face, illuminated by the light from the moon, appeared through the darkness. Around her neck beads of sweat sat like a pearly necklace. Her hands rose to her mouth and her pointer and ring fingers guided a cigarette between her lips. Inhaling slowly, her eyes crept in my direction. Smoke oozed out her nostrils as her head turned my way, "What?"

I neared closer to the rocking chair she was sitting in and noticed some items placed on the windowsill: A pack of Marlboro cigarettes and dentures sat on the corners. In the center a small green cactus plant was placed. It was short and fat and looked like two little balls sitting on top of each other like a snowman. On the top, a ring of small yellow flowers sat in a perfect circle.

"I said, whatcha' want boy?" Her gray hair hung loosely over her head. The hundreds of pieces of string seemed to tickle her chest as the ceiling fan blew the strands gently across her shoulders. "Dontcha' gots respect fer ya' elders?"

I bent down near her chair to grab a towel lying on the floor. My fingers sank into a warm chunky liquid.

"What in the world? Wha-what is this?" I stammer.

She took a drag of her cigarette again and exhaled deeply, "Whatcha' think it is?"

"Why didn't you call me when this happened?" I asked wiping my hand on the dry part of the towel.

"Ahmma call ya' somthin' alright . . ."

"Okay, okay." I said standing up looking off into another direction of the room. "I'm not trying to start an argument."

A grunt, small but demanding, forced me to look down into her eyes.

"Chris, ah wish ah hadda drink. Ah wish ah hadda gun, a knife, sumthin'. Ain't no one care 'bout lil' old fart like me."

"Oh, that's not true. You have—"

"Ah ain't got shit but a hole ta crap outta and one ta vomit outta. Don' tell me 'bout da haves and haves nots. Whatcha' know 'bout life? I sits in this room fer hours and don' see a soul some days!" She took another drag of her cigarette, "Take me out boy." She pleaded, "Please, just take me out."

"You expressed that you would rather be left alone in your room. But, you are accompanied when you are taken to the bathroom, for walks and when you're fed each day. You're never alone." I reasoned.

She was quiet for a moment, placed the cigarette between her gums, and

pressed down. "Look!" came a muffled demand as if she discovered a new trick. "Ah ain't got no teef!"

"I see." I said looking off.

She spit the cigarette in my direction. "Oh get out ya' too good college boy! All ya' walk 'round here like ya' too good for me. You snobby nosed, good fer nothin', rich collar wearing, shiny shoe walkin', steak eatin'..."

Her arms wailed and her skin, thick like curdled milk gave off the sheen of a mornings dew. I shuffled out the room as the insults stabbed my back. "I guess I'll come back when you're ready for your bath mother..." Thirty minutes later, Don opened the door her bedroom again and peeked in. He noticed that she was sitting in her wheelchair now instead of the rocking chair by the window. As he walked in, he heard her snores and realized that she was sleep. A sigh of relief escaped his lips. The sleeping pill he crushed into her food for dinner had kicked in. As he walked toward her dresser to grab her towel and washcloth, her eyes followed him across the room; she often slept with her eyes slightly open. For the last few months the only way he was able to bath his mother was if she was asleep. For the old women, stubborn and dramatic, complained about everything constantly. Recently, she had begun to patronize the young man and it was quite frustrating. Don walked toward her and gently wheeled her out of the room. She wore her a robe. When he stopped in earlier she wore a pink housedress with yellow flowers embroidered around the collar. He was beginning to come under the impression that she liked to argue with him and make things difficult. So many times in the past he had entered her room to get her ready for her bath, and she had cursed him until he couldn't take it anymore. However, later when he would return, she would be sitting in her rocking chair wearing her bathrobe and slippers. She would always be asleep. Yes, the sleeping pills did have an affect but this, he would assume, was because the argument an hour or so prior tired her out. Once out of the door he turned the wheelchair left into the hallway. The bathroom was the second door on the right. He looked down at the top of his mother's head. Her hair, braided and pinned back into a bun, resembled a giant King Cobra sitting atop her head. With her body slumped, her neck stretched long toward her right shoulder. He noticed beads of perspiration trickling down from behind her ear. He would bathe her in lukewarm water he thought, not too hot and not too cold.

Don turned into the bathroom and slowly pushed the shower curtain back to one side. He turned the faucet on and put the plug in the drain. Once the water reached more than half way full he shut the water off. He placed the wheelchair in front of the toilet and sat down in front of her. He slipped the robe off one of her arms and revealed her long, flat breast. Because she was slouched over, they hung down low to her navel. A few gray hairs sprouted around her nipples like weeds in a flowerbed. He turned his face away then turned it back again. She smelled. He had not had the chance to bathe her yesterday; he had run out of sleeping pills.

He looked down between her legs. She had remembered to take off her

underwear. He stood and placed the wheelchair as close to the tub as possible. He lifted her legs over the rim of the tub one by one. Then, he put each hand under her arms and lifted her up to sit her in an up right position. When the stay at home nurse was there, she used to wash her up at the bathroom sink. But Don liked to watch his mother soak in the water. Ever since the nurse quit a few months ago, he had to leave school to come home and take care of her. He was studying Anatomy and was a semester away from graduating.

He walked out of the bathroom and into the hallway where the radio sat on a burgundy table and turned it on. Jazz music seeped out of the speakers and into his ears. Nothing else soothed him more than the slow blended melodies of the clarinets, trumpets and piano keys. Don looked at himself in the mirror that sat on the wall in front of him. He hated the way he looked and wasn't happy with anything. The only thing that he had going for himself was school, however, his mother never said anything positive about his achievements. And now that he had to stay home to take care of his mother, school couldn't be his escape anymore.

He stared into his deep, gray eyes and saw nothing but confusion. His complexion was pale and never managed to grab hold of the sunlight. His nose was pin straight and seemed to curl in at the tip. Worst of all was his face; it sprouted enough pimples to see the constellations in. He was ugly, he thought. Just ugly. Didn't he have control over anything anymore? He didn't always feel like this, though. Lauren used to make him feel like Prince Charming- like a man. It had been exactly two years since they had ended their relationship and the foul episode that led to their break-up occurred right there in that house.

He had met her at his college. She was studying to be a Pharmacist. They had dated for a year before he decided to take her home to meet his mother. He knew this was a bad idea, but he wanted his mother to be apart of his life. So, he ignored his gut feelings and invited her over to his mothers house.

"Done found yo' self a Nigger?"

These were the first words out of his mother's mouth. Laurens face, cold and confused, turned to face him. Her long sandy colored dreadlocks swung around her shoulders and looped around her neck like a noose. Her mouth opened and her lips fluttered like that of a butterfly- Speechless. Words gurgled out her mouth but the sounds didn't make any sense.

Don had stood in awe. His face carried the expressions to laugh, to cry, and to scream. His fist bulged; he had wanted to strike his mother. His mouth moved- he wanted to say something. But, all he was capable of was nothing. He tried to beg Lauren to stay after the insult so that they could be together. But, she refused to put up with his mother as he had. He was going to ask her to marry him, but his mother had ruined it. . .his mother. And now she was gone forever.

Don looked down from the mirror and turned to walk back into the bathroom. When he walked in he realized that the shower curtain was pulled closed. Was she awake? The dark blue curtains prevented him from seeing her. He pulled back the curtains and looked down at her when her eyes popped open.

"Don'cha got 'spect fer ya' elders, boy?"

"Yes, mother. I was just making sure you were all right. I thought maybe--"

"Ya' thought what? Thought ah was dead?"

"No, no. I-I just got a little nervous, that's all. This wasn't closed when I left here."

A smirk appeared on her lips, "Ah ain't dead yet, son. Ah wanna be ah ain't." Ignoring her comment, he closed the shower curtain back and sat on the toilet. A few minutes passed before she asked started conversation.

"Say, how'd he die again?"

"Who, mother?" He asked, as a sigh escaped his lips.

"Ya' know who I'm talking 'bout."

"A heart attack. Dad died from a heart attack."

"Umm..." Water splashed around a bit. Was she washing her legs? Her arms? Her face?

"And how long ago was this again?"

"Mother, please!" he shouted irritated. He didn't want to think about his dead father. He had been dead for over ten years now.

"Ah wonder sometimes why he had ta die before me?"

"Everything happens for a reason, I guess."

"Oh, don'cha come at me with ya' damn quotes! That saying is fer people that shit always happens too!"

"Okay, okay, okay," he mumbled.

"Ya daddy, loved to go hunting in the fall. He'd bring home fish, rabbits and other critters. He'd go down into the basement ta' skin 'em and cut 'em up. Then, ah'd cook 'em fer ya', ta eat. Yuh, 'member dat boy? He loved dat knife, though. ah keep it right there in hallway under da' burgundy table, so when ah pass ah can think of 'em. Ah 'member how he died. Sometimes though, ah just got to hear it from somebody else. Ah reckon ah'm ready to meet 'em now. Why don'cha do me the honors, son. Come on, do it."

His body flinched. He hated when his mother spoke like this. He hated himself for not know how to handle the situation, and because he didn't understand her his own feelings.

"Stop it, Mother. Just stop!" He screamed. He wanted to cry. He shoved his head down between his knees and tried counting to five. He picked his head up and stared at the blue shower curtain. Was she staring back at him? He imagined her eyes piercing the curtain as she silently urged him to pierce her flesh with the knife. And after five minutes when there was still silence, he thought to himself, Is she actually waiting for a response?

"Mother? Mother . . . I love you."

"Is dat music ah hear? What ah tell you 'bout playin' dat racket so loud in mah house? Turn it down! Ah-Ah can't breath when its dat loud, God Dammit!"

He walked out of the bathroom and stood in front of the burgundy table. I can walk out, he thought to himself. Just walk out and never return. He brought his hands to his temples and rubbed them gently. He did not want to kill her, did he? No! He must stop thinking these thoughts. His hands shook violently as he removed it from his head to turn down the music for the both of them.



ALISON LANGLEIBEN

The Red Door

Jane - (late-twenties)

Jill - (thirties)

A red door sits upstage center. On each side of it, a row of chairs. Jill is seated, knitting. The red thread in her knitting needles connects to the carpet. Jane enters through the red door. Jill's knitting needles clatter to the ground.)

Jill:

What are you doing here?

Jane:

I...I'm not sure.

Jill:

(Studies her for a moment.) Well, you'd better have a seat.

Jane:

I'm not sure.

Jill:

Honey, I don't know anyone who is, but there's no use standing there.

Jane:

What is this place? Where are we?

Jill:

Where do you think?

Jane:

Well, I'm not...

Jill:

Sure?

Jane:

But I didn't...I'm not...

Jill:

I know honey, I know.

Jane:

No.

Jill:

Oh, wipe your face, you don't get any points for that.

Jane:

I don't want any...points?

Jill:

I've been here God knows how long. Don't worry, it gets boring quick. Best to just accept that you're here. Nothing you can do about it. Get comfortable.

Jane:

Nothing I can do?

Jill:

Nothing. At least for now. *(Rises)* Come now, it isn't all that bad. Don't use your sleeve, I've got a napkin. You won't be seeing new ones for a while, best not to ruin the only pair you've got.

Jane:

Oh God.

Jill:

Trust me, that doesn't work either.

Jane:

How do you know? Who are you? What's going on?

Jill:

I'm Jill.

Jane:

What the hell is going on, Jill? Where are we?

Jill:

God knows. *(She goes to pick up her knitting needles. Jane rushes over and snatches one out of her hands. Jill laughs.)* What are you going to do? Stab me?

Jane:

I can't remember how I got here. I was with my family...Where's my family?

Jill:

Hell if I know.

Jane:

Liar!

Jill:

(She stands up, holding the other knitting needle. She drops it.) I'm not here to hurt you.

Jane:

Give me my family.

Jill:

I haven't taken them.

(Jane gives her a hard look, then begins pacing the room.)

Jill:

Pacing. It'll only get you riled up. Trust me. I know.

Jane:

How long have you been here?

Jill:

Forever.

Jane:

But I don't understand! Do you remember how you got here?

Jill:

I've been here so long it seems like there was nothing before I got here.

Jane:

Then you know where we are?

Jill:

You know where we are.

Jane:

Obviously! Have I been kidnapped? *(Jill begins knitting. Jane slaps her.)* You're going to knit right now? Is that what you're going to do? I've been kidnapped and you're just going to sit there and - *(Jane drops to her knees and begins pulling apart the carpet.)*

Jill:

Please-

(Jane continues to tear at the carpet for a few seconds.)

Jane:

What the fuck am I doing?

Jill:

I knit this carpet.

Jane:

I know.

Jill:

It's a shameful thing you've done. Don't think it'll ever be the same.

Jane:

It won't ever be the same. My family is safe, right?

Jill:

Who's ever safe?

Jane:

Don't say that. Don't... Whose game are we playing? Some hidden psychopaths? Or yours?

Jill:

I find games to be very diverting. How about you?

Jane:

I play Trouble with my son every night. He always hits the centerpiece too lightly with his little hands, so I have to hit it again for him. And when Dan comes home he... Oh god, where are they?

Jill:

Well, they're not here, which is a good sign.

Jane:

Why me? There must be a reason for this.

Jill:

Just sit quiet. Think about that cute little family of yours. Never could hold onto one, myself.

Jane:

Everyone's got...

Jill:

Only kid I had was murdered. Wasn't meant to be a mother. At least, not in the traditional sense.

Jane:

I'm sorry.

Jill:

Why don't you start thinking about what you're going to say when the time comes to get out of here.

Jane:

(Rushing to her feet.) Get out?

Jill:

You came in through a door, no?

Jane:

Yes, but I...*(She turns frantically toward the door and tugs at the handle.)* It's locked.

Jill:

Look at it, all ominous and such. A door like that's meant to be opened.

Jane:

(She begins to beat the door.) Oh god, Oh god I can't do this! I can't be here. I want my son!

Jill:

You'll get used to it. I did.

Jane:

Congratulations!

(Jane continues to beat the door in futility. She turns and drops to her knees.)

Jane:

I think I'm going to be sick.

Jill:

Sooner or later someone's gotta come.

Jane:

You think so?

Jill:

This isn't the end of it, can't be. (*She puts on a sly grin.*) There aren't any demons yet.

Jane:

Demons? Like, crazy people?

Jill:

Like demons. Honestly, where do you think we are?

Jane:

What?

Jill:

What's the last thing you remember before you walked through that door?

Jane:

I can't remember anything.

Jill:

You're only lying to yourself. Don't be scared. There's no reason to be now. I bet you'll go straight to heaven.

Jane:

Heaven? We're not dead.

Jill:

Where are we then, Jane?

Jane:

How do you know my name?

Jill:

I know a lot of people's names.

Jane:

Why am I here?

Jill:

You're here. That's it.

Jane:

I'm a good woman. There's no reason for this.

Jill:

You can't remember how you got here?

Jane:

I...No. No, I can't. I'd like to go now.

Jill:

Jane, it wasn't your fault. Let it go.

Jane:

Stop it! You're insane. I'm not dead. This isn't what dead is. I'm dreaming! I'm having a bad dream. *(She slaps herself in the face.)* Shit! Would you slap me?

Jill:

You're being ridiculous.

Jane:

Please, slap me. Slap my face!

(Jill walks over to her slowly. She slaps her. They stare at each other.)

Jane:

Nothing.

Jill:

They'll miss you, and it'll be very painful for a long time, but they'll move on.

Jane:

Stop! What am I doing here? I can't remember how I...Dan! Dan? Where are you? Why aren't you with me? You promised. It isn't fair. It isn't right! This is bullshit. I'm not a bad person. I don't want to die! *(She grabs a chair and flings it against the wall.)*

Jill:

Jane?

Jane:

I'm not ready. I won't go.

Jill:

I promise you, where we're headed is much nicer than this place.

Jane:

Do you know how I got here?

Jill:

It'll be so much easier if you just say it. It's okay. And then you can go home.

Jane:

You'll let me go home?

Jill:

I'll take you there myself.

Jane:

I knew it. I read my son stories every night and loved my husband with all my heart and went to church for the holidays. I was a good person. Why did this happen to me? Is it true? Should I have confessed my sins or something?

Jill:

You lived the way you saw fit. I'm not here to judge you.

Jane:

That's exactly what you're here for. Okay. I'll play. But if I roll a six...

Jill:

I'm in trouble.

Jane:

(Beat) I was driving. We were out for ice cream. Billy wanted chocolate chip. We were laughing. Dan looked so handsome I could hardly keep my eyes on the road.

(Beat) That's it. Tell me they're all right. That I didn't kill them. Please.

Jill:

They're all right. You didn't kill them. Are you ready to come with me now, Jane?

Jane:

This isn't the way I leave this world. I won't bow and exit. I just won't.

Jill:

You have to. Take my hand. *(She holds her hand out.)*

Jane:

If I don't? What if I tear apart your whole damn carpet?

Jill:

The universe would collapse into itself.

Jane:
Seriously?

Jill:
No.

Jane:
You're my type of God, you know that?

Jill:
Despite the general consensus, I'm not susceptible to flattery. Come on now, I don't have all day. Souls to be damned, you know.

Jane:
Can you do me a favor?

Jill:
What do you need, Jane?

Jane:
Can you undead me?

Jill:
That isn't the way it goes.

Jane:
Not even for a minute? So I can kiss my husband and hold my son?

Jill:
You know I can't do that. Besides, you're in the morgue already. It would be awkward.

Jane:
And people pray to you...*(She takes Jill's hand.)* I'll never understand it.

Jill:
This is your last moment before utter, mind-numbing bliss. Don't screw it up.

Jane:
You're right. Hey, Jill? Make sure that Dan finds love. But not too soon. And maybe convince Billy that vegetables are his friend?

Jill:
(She sighs.) You're a good woman, Jane. Go home.

Jane:

What?

Jill:

You crashed into a priest. I needed to know what kind of person you were before making any serious decisions. Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind.

(Jane exits. Jill sits down and begins knitting.)

Blackout

(They turn, hand in hand, and exit through the red door.)

STEPHANIE SORIANO

Partnership

Dull places produce bland thoughts.
Your body breaks the monotony.
I am quelled believing you are my world.
I'd keep the pain that brings forever,
just to keep myself awake.
Forgoing faith for science,
I let you bleed me,
to know the liquid is still there.
Set my basis for reality,
In the staunching movements of your tongue.
I rip the tourniquet willingly,
enhancing dependence that pulses towards love.

A love Poem

You make me wanna say,
romantic things.
Like I wanna fuck you,
all night long
hard,
in the backseat
of a Cadillac.
With windows rolled down,
cool mist coming in.
I want to take
your face,
press it down,
on cracked
vinyl,
leaving creases
in your cheek,
rub each soft layer
of hot skin
off knees,
that dig,
on cold
metal
buckles,
that stab
in timed
intervals.
Then when
I cum,
I'll make love to you.
With dark dashboards
watching.
I'll twist
and wind you.
These uncomfortable
positions
contorting you
till your back
snaps
in half.

Talking

Like bodies in a turnstile,
ever revolving,
your lips moving
constantly in circles.
A station always full,
things in and out.
Not one word immobile.
Meanings lost like a daydream
during a commute.
Picked up and swept away.
Replaced by the next one waiting.

NELIDA L. TOLENTINO

Mi Barrio

A feeling of belonging and peace comes over me,
As I walk through Mi Barrio,
Where small, colorful concrete homes still stand,
And exotic animals still crawl all over.
A place where no matter where you go,
You'll find someone you know,
A place where everyone's treated like family,
And the city spins with personality.
I feel the vibration,
La Fiesta going on down the block,
Whose tempting frituras captivate those around,
Though with traditional calle's designed to attract the eyes of
tourist,
I find myself lingering down the road to la playa,
Where the sweet sounds of the crisp Caribbean water crashes,
Into the high orange canyons,
Where the island breeze covers me,
As I lie on the white sandy playa,
Such vibrant colors,
I see through the aqua blue agua,
Though the time has come when the yellow sun has fallen asleep,
Darkening my sky,
Now back at la casa,
I sit on a cold metal rocking chair,
On the front balcon,
Hearing the nights musical garden coqui's entertain.

A Glass Room

Im screaming in a room,
Always on display,
 Never knowing
Who
 What
 or
 when
The next judge
 ment will be said...
With every breath
 that im breathing
Nothing gleams on the days
 when I was normal...
The beams of their
 stares thaw through
 my back,
imbedding me
 their scrutiny
Piercing my body like
 a viper finally catching
Its prey...
Sounds of my yell
Repulsive, yet a sense of
 Pain!!!!
Is felt by it...
But I guess until I gain
 my sanity, this is what ill be...



The people on the street look like umbrellas with legs.
There's a dead bird in my radio; the humid air ruffles its feathers.
I won't hear any songs tonight.
You never paid attention to the weather.

I hear the dead bird in my radio, nagged by rigor mortis in the
humid air.
The sky is white; the bird wouldn't have sung today,
but you never paid attention to the weather.
Street cats fight under the shelter of an awning.

The sky is white, the birds refuse to sing.
I won't hear any songs tonight.
When you sleep with her, I hope you think of me
when I walk down your street, an umbrella with legs.

MATTHEW BRYAN BECK

White Narcissus

I hated my father growing up.

I know that's a terrible thing to say, but I did. It was a slow process, growing like a malignant tumor with each passing year. I was starved for his attention. He treated me like a tolerable guest at best, a complete stranger at worst. I don't mean he completely ignored me; I still got the presents on Christmases and birthdays. I was angry and confused. In some intangible, paradoxical sense, I hated him and yet I loved him so much. You know what I mean? It's just he was barely ever around to notice it. He worked twelve hours a day at a mechanic shop, perpetually smelling of grease, his hands and fingernails permanently stained. His weather-beaten face carried all the hurt of a man much older: chiseled, tight-muscled jawline, strong cleft chin, close-cropped military cut, his cheeks scarred, like a defaced statue of a Greek god that had been left out in the elements too long. I remember his steely blue eyes always looked tired and sad.

He had grown up on the streets, Myrtle Avenue in Bushwick, a child of the Depression, the youngest of a family of nine, Italian and poor. He had been a paperboy, got up at five o'clock each morning, brought back every nickel and dime to his mother, who gave him a dime back to go see Cagney. He never knew his father, a small-time gambler and big-time drinker who was doing ten-to-twenty in Elmira for knifing a cardsharp to death in a bar fight. He was a die-hard Dodger fan, collected every Leo Durocher he could find. He could name every Tommy Dorsey record. He dropped out of high school during the Second World War to work in the Brooklyn Navy Yards, helping his mother pay rent. He started smoking at fourteen, and smoked three packs of unfiltered Pall Mall's a day. He had fought in Korea, from 1950 to 1953. 1st Marine Regiment, George Company, 3rd Battalion, deployed to Changjin and P'yongtaek.

"I'd shoot every one of those damn Chinks all over again," he would say. He kept the nicked M1 Garand he had slung over his shoulder every day for three years mounted on the wall in the living room, over the 1958 RCA Deluxe and beside a shelf of Aunt Ruth's crocheted doilies and Mom's china set. He always kept it polished, to a shine. Once, he took it down and the butt knocked over one of Mom's white, blue-rimmed china plates. She cried.

"Would you shut up, Martha? It's only a damn *plate*."

I thought my father a coarse man, a brute, a beast.

My older brother, Peter, was born in 1950 before my dad left for Korea. I was named Thomas (after my dad's confirmation name), but everyone (except my mother) called me Tommy. I was born in 1954 when Dad came back from the

war and Ruthie, the baby, the only girl, was born in 1958. She was such a beautiful baby. I took care of her while Dad was at work and Mom was sick in bed, which was often. She became my only friend, who I would talk to for hours, her big brown eyes looking back wide-open at me, her delicate, heart-shaped mouth cooing softly at me. I told her stories I made up as I fed her Gerber's. She never yelled at me when I messed up.

I was a solitary kid, shy, soft-spoken, introverted. I was a wuss, as kids calls it. I'll admit it. I was underweight and constantly sick, had an asthmatic condition that kept me from running or much physical exertion, kept me out of sports—and my scrawny, jellyfish physique showed it. Peter was the opposite: outgoing, personable, athletic, always out of the house with his friends, playing baseball and football in the park, a popular kid in school, an overachiever in everything he did. I was jealous of him: jealous of his talents, jealous of his good looks, jealous of the bond he and Dad shared. Yet I emulated him, longed to have a connection with him, wished we were closer as brothers. Dad always seemed proud of him, went to all his little league games, hugged and put his arm around him when they won and don't-worry-kid-we'll-get-them-next-time'd him when they lost.

I was your textbook momma's-boy. She was protective of me, always thinking about me. Even if she had just had a blowout with Dad, she would come into my bedroom and, with the mascara still slightly running from the hastily-dried tears, kiss me goodnight, told me she loved me, told me to not be scared and go to sleep to a place where nobody could hurt me. I ran to her whenever my feelings were hurt by the taunting kids on the corner, or when I fell out of a tree and tore my new jeans and scraped my elbow badly, or had my stamp collection stolen by a bully and found later stuffed and torn apart in a garbage can.

"Don't worry, honey," she would say, brushing the hot tears from my cheeks, washing the dirt from my face with a warm washcloth. "I always love you."

I was an abnormally perceptive child, a morbid child, observing the macabre theater of my household and its sad players, quick to discern the volatile, fluctuating emotional affair between my mother and father.

They had a strange relationship. He would scream and yell at her sometimes, frustrated and irritated with something she had done or said, then later in the day I'd see them holding hands and cuddling with each other out on the back porch, whispering in each other's ears, giving each other light kisses on the neck and hair, her head resting on his shoulder. She'd laugh at something he'd say. It scared me. I didn't know whether he was going to haul off and hit her or buy her a new washer. Some days he was smooth as silk, all kind words and magnanimity, coming home jolly and chipper, with a smile and wink for Mom and bottles of Bubble-Up and Big Hunk bars for the kids. From playing toy cars on the living room floor, or reading a comic book on my bedroom window sill, I'd hear him come in the kitchen door, whistling cheerfully, waving and saying hello to the neighbor.

"Hey, kiddo, what's cookin'?" he would say when he saw me.

On days like that, I knew everything would be okay. I breathed easier. The heavens had opened up to me, because Dad was happy. I would hang on his every word, asking him stupid questions which he humored, following him around while he mowed the lawn or worked in his tool shed, asking him if I could help.

"Thanks, killer, I can handle it," he would say with a ragged smile. "Maybe another time, huh?"

Other days, he'd come in with thunderclouds in his eyes, barely saying a word, shrugging off his work coat with the sigh of Atlas shifting the weight of the world from one shoulder to another. He'd light a cigarette, crack open a Schlitz, plop down heavily on the sofa and turn on Ozzie and Harriet (the irony of which did not hit me till years later as an adult), falling asleep in minutes, the can still cold in his hand, the cigarette still smoldering between his fingers. On those days, I was scared. I would start to panic, start to feel physically ill, sick to my stomach from the anxiety. I didn't know if Mom would do something to set him off suddenly into a fit of anger, if I'd do something to annoy him. I'd witness silently the explosive fights in the kitchen, or blink back tears in the darkness of my cold bedroom, lying motionless under my covers as all hell was breaking loose behind the next walls.

By high school I had completely detached from my father. I had stopped trying to get his attention. If I had been an angry little kid, I was an even angrier teenager. I barely spoke to my father, went straight from classes into my room and didn't come out until dinner, sometimes not even then. The dinner table was a maudlin scene: Dad chewing quietly and blandly. Ruthie chattering on and on about her friends and her cute new outfits. Peter boasting about his latest romantic conquest and slipping in snide remarks at me between the mashed potatoes and pot roast. Mom looked like a robot, going through the motions of a home-life. She was constantly depressed, at times bursting out into tears for no reason.

I was a dormant volcano, calm and aloof on the surface, but seething and smoldering underneath. By that time my parents' marriage was in complete shambles. Married for almost twenty years, I could see no traces of love between them anymore. They lived in the same house, slept in the same room, ate the same food, occupied the same places, but they couldn't have been more strangers to each other, like prisoners sharing the same cell.

And Mom's mental health was getting progressively worse. She slept all day, lost interest in everything—even talking to Aunt Ruthie on the phone or going to their crochet club or playing their usual Friday night whist or chatting on the back porch with the neighbor. She wasn't eating anything, only her ritual morning coffee, then lived on cigarettes the rest of the day. She tried therapy. That didn't work. She kept small bottles of methadone (prescribed after a kidney operation) and imipramine (obtained from a particularly unbalanced member of her Manhattanite sewing circle) in the medicine cabinet and in her purse, swallowing handfuls whenever she felt panicked or jittery.

She was drinking heavily, too. It started out as one glass of wine at night, or an after-dinner cocktail. Now I would find bottles of Beefeater on the tops of the

kitchen cabinets. I'd catch her sneaking swigs between loads of laundry or washing the dishes; sips turned into slugs, slugs turned into gulps, and she was a sloppy, drunken mess by the end of the day, passed out on her bed or the living room sofa. I was worried to death, watching my mother fall apart before my very eyes. I felt helpless. I'd tell her to stop; she'd tell me to mind my own business.

After one particularly nasty binge, I decided to intervene. It was tearing me apart, seeing her in this disgusting state. Her hairy was greasy and matted, her legs unshaven, her once-radiant skin sallow and pasty. The pretty-smelling, beautiful young mother I remembered tucking me in had been swallowed whole by a gin-soaked monster. I shook her by the shoulders, told her to stop doing this to herself, or she was gonna drink herself into a grave. She pushed me away, cursing violently at me.

"Don't tell me what the hell to do, you ugly little bastard!" she screamed. "The shit I've gone through because of you! The hell you've put me through! Where do you get the gall telling me what to do? If I wanna have a drink or pop a damn pill, that's none of your damn business!"

I was stunned, speechless. How had I put her through hell? I was the good kid? I never made any trouble? If anything, I had been the only one to stand beside her, the faithful son, loved her unflinchingly, took her side every time. How could she talk to me like this? I was hurt beyond words. I heeled around and stormed out of the house, slamming the door. I wandered around aimlessly in the park for hours, my hands and face frozen, barely even noticing, pacing in circles, my thoughts racing. It got dark.

When I walked back to the house, two squad cars and an ambulance were parked outside. Police were inside. A tired-looking detective opened the door as I bounded up the porch.

"You Tommy?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "What's going on? What happened?"

"I'm sorry, kid."

"What happened?"

"In the kitchen..."

My panic mounted. I ran towards the kitchen. I stopped dead at the living room: two white-clad paramedics, escorted by a grim-faced officer, were carrying a body bag on a stretcher from the back bedroom—my parent's bedroom—to the front door. I stood frozen as they silently passed me, unable to move or speak. It was my mother. I felt the hand of the detective on my numbed shoulder. It was an accidental overdose, he said. She'd taken a handful of sleeping pills, forgetting the several glasses of wine she'd drunk earlier in the day. The county coroner said they'd know for certain once they pumped her stomach and got the toxicology report back from the lab in a week. This is a dream, this can't be happening, she can't be dead. I stumbled into the kitchen. Dad was sitting in her usual chair at the little kitchenette table, staring blankly into space, no emotion on his face, dazed. He looked up.

"Tom, there you are, I just got home from work, I...I..."

Suddenly, I despised him more than ever. I needed somebody to blame for

this. I lost control. Years of pent-up anger, bitterness, and resentment against my father exploded inside me, flooding out like a broken dam bent on destroying all in its path.

“You did this to her!” I screamed, spit flying from my mouth. “You drove her to this! You didn’t even love her, did you? Did you! You treated her like trash! This never would have happened if you weren’t always at your stupid work, if you gave a damn about her for once, if you treated her with an ounce of decency and affection! You were never there for her, for me! And now she’s dead, and it’s all your fault! It’s all your fault! What do you say to that,? Huh? HUH?”

He stood there silently, quietly, taking my abuse, not saying a word. I was on war path, ready for battle, expected him to yell back at me, throw things, throw punches—anything but just stand there. Tears were brimming in his eyes, steely blue, sad and tired. I had never seen my father cry before. I stopped yelling. He handed me a creased, worn envelope he’d been holding by his side.

“She kept this for you. I think you should read it.”

I dragged a deep breath, winded from my tirade. I grabbed it roughly out of his hand. Opened it slowly. I instantly recognized the smell of the rose-colored sheets of paper as my mother’s: lavender, laundry soap, and Cassini. It was her handwriting, too; the lines bore the grace and elegance of her education. I rubbed the edges of the paper gently, the scent rushing back a flood of sweet childhood memories. A lump caught in my throat. My hand trembled with rage and sadness as I began to read:

My dearest boy, Thomas,

It is your 18th birthday today! As I write this, you are only a boy, but when you read it, you will be a man. I must tell you something, a secret that has weighed heavy upon me for many years. It may explain much to you, and you are old enough now to understand and handle it like an adult. I’ve seen the contempt you held for your father, from an early age, the poor regard you’ve held him in. I’ve seen you crave his affection. I’ve seen you become offended and indignant at him for my sake, because you thought he was hurting or wronging me. He is far from a perfect man, he has his faults and flaws, but he is the kindest, most understanding, most forgiving, most faithful man I have ever known.

We met in 1949 at a USO dance in Canarsie. I was a good Jewish girl from the Upper East Side, slumming in Brooklyn for the weekend. My father was a curator at The Jewish Museum who cared for his Chagall’s more than his daughters, and I attended The Brearley School with your Aunt Ruth and drove a white ’48 Delahaye. We were bored to death. So we rang up two bored girlfriends and decided to hop the East River and see how the other half lived. We cruised for an hour before stopping at a well-lit ballroom, packed to overflowing with gorgeous, strapping Marines.

My eye caught a tall young man from across the room. He looked like Robert Taylor, and moved like Fred Astaire. I watched him dance with the fat girl, the short girl, the girl with the bad teeth, the curvy girl from Erasmus every other boy wanted to dance with. I wanted him. His confident smile magnetized me as he moved; he seemed to own everything around him, possess everything he touched. He winked at me once when we passed with our respective partners, as if to say “I’m the best guy in this place, you should

be with me, not him."

We were married three months and thirteen days later. It was all so dizzying and romantic. We were so in love. I never wanted it to end. We spent our first Christmas and New Year's together. It was glorious, absolute bliss. When we discovered I was pregnant with Peter, two people couldn't have been happier. Peter was born in the spring of 1950. It was so beautiful that year. Ruth and your father were there at the hospital when the baby came. He was so proud, beamed like a father never had beamed before. Those few months were the happiest of my life.

But then his commission came through. He shipped out the next month and left me all alone with a newborn. His letters were constant at first, but became sporadic as the fighting became more intense. Soon, they stopped coming altogether. I continued to write to him every week, hoping and praying he got them. I got no response. Thanksgiving came and went. I was alone. Christmas came. I was alone. Only Ruth came to visit, but she was busy with her studies. I felt like both a widow and a single mother. The war dragged on for a year. Then two. I was working at a department store, trying to make ends meet and feed myself and my small child.

I met a man who worked with me (I cannot even remember his name now) and we kept company, and he took me out to dinner every weekend. I was glad for the meal. I was glad for the conversation, the companionship. I had taken off my wedding ring, because in those day they didn't like to hire married women. I felt as if I was single again; I didn't now whether I'd ever see your father again, or even if he was dead or alive. This man and I soon became lovers. I felt guilty, I knew it was wrong, but it soothed the intense loneliness and filled the isolation that had become my life.

Then I became pregnant with this man's child. You were that child, Thomas.

The boss of the department store found out about our secret relationship and we were both fired. I was so humiliated. The man left New York for another job. He said he hated leaving me, but times were tough, and our fling had only been that—a fling. Let's not ruin what we had by getting clingy and emotional, he said. I didn't tell him I was carrying his child. I let him go. Never saw or heard from him ever again. By the time the war finally ended in June of 1953, I was showing. I was scared.

When I received a letter from Dad telling me he'd be coming home soon, I nearly died on the spot. I didn't know what I would tell him. I would just have to face him and beg his forgiveness, hope we could start our marriage over again with a clean slate—or as clean as it could be under the circumstances. When I met him at the airport, his face fell. He ran to embrace me, smiling, and when he saw my pregnant belly, his smile turned to shock, confusion, anger, rage. We drove home in complete silence. We sat in the living room of the same tiny apartment we had when we were first married, and I poured my heart out to him, told him the whole sordid story, begged his forgiveness, wept, told him he could kick me out if he wanted to. I'll never forget what he did next. He picked up Peter into his lap, stroking his hair. He lifted my face, and with tears in his eyes said, "I love you, baby. I'm alive and I have you again. That's all that matters."

From that moment on, we never spoke of it. It was in the past. I loved him more than I ever had before. He accepted you as his own son. He loved you like his own. Yes, it was hard for him. Yes, he didn't make all the right decisions, Yes, perhaps he showed favoritism to Peter. Yes, he could have invested ore time into you. Ewent though you were

a constant, daily reminder of my sin and unfaithfulness, he stayed, kept us together, made the most out of what Fate had handed us. Oh Thomas, he loved you. You may not have known it, but he loved you. And you judged him too harshly. You hated him without a just cause. He wasn't the brute, the beast you so easily took him for.

Over the years, I know I have become a mess and hard to handle. I know I am ill. It started slowly, in those early years. But he put up with my moods and my fits and my personality conflicts (as my therapists would call it) and my micromanagement and my nitpicking and my berating. Yes, he got frustrated, as any flesh-and-blood man would, and you witnessed many times the product of that frustration. But as a child, you only saw a very limited picture. You didn't know our history, you didn't see what went on or what was said between adults behind closed doors. You couldn't understand the all reasons. He wasn't quite the devil you thought he was, and I wasn't quite the saint you thought I was.

In recent years, we've grown apart, your father and I. My illness is the major culprit. I'm only half a wife to him, and less of a woman. He deserves someone so much better than me. I have disappointed him so many times. I know he still loves me, and I know he loves you. Give him a chance to show it.

Today is a day of celebration and rejoicing, remembering your birth. I've been waiting for the right moment to tell you the story of your birth for many years. Now you know. I hope you can now understand why I did what I did, and why your father did what he did, and I pray we can move on as a family, in love. The past is behind us. The future is bright. I pray this is a new chapter for your life, and a new chapter for our family. I love you, my son.

*Forever yours,
Mom*

I put the pages down. A cloud had been lifted off me. Had such a revelation come earlier, it may have broken me. Now it seemed to mend me. I was not his biological son, yet he had raised me as one? That was love. I felt tears begin to stream down my cheeks. Oh, how wrong I had been. How stupid I had been. How arrogant and selfish and petty and proud. I had tried and sentenced this man before I had heard any of the facts. I looked up at him, the lump still in my throat. I didn't know what to say to him. Words seemed useless. I just wished

"Now you know," he said in a cracked whisper.

Without a word or inhibition, I threw my arms around him in a strong embrace. We held each other in silence for a glorious moment. I don't think my father had ever hugged me before. He patted the back of my head, and I could smell his scent close like I had never smelled it before: aftershave and tobacco. I pressed myself into his chest and released the years of hate in one purging exhale.

We sat at the kitchen table and talked for hours, through the night. I hadn't talked with my father, face-to-face, in years. I felt I was meeting him for the first time. I hadn't realized what a cool guy he was. He told me stories about the war he had never told anyone. I listened. I asked questions. He told me about Mom. I listened. I asked questions. He had seen her from across the dance floor and noticed her sly, beckoning glances. She had a flirty white narcissus nestled in her dark hair.

Her silk-print dress fluttered carelessly as her long, slender legs moved between the rayon, her willowy figure swaying on the dance floor like a deadly cobra. He never noticed another woman again, he said.

In that one nightmarish, fateful, wonderful night, the healing took place. I could feel it, as if my heart and soul was sewing itself back together, like the shattered pieces of Mom's china plate were being glued back together, repaired inside me. I asked him why he stayed with her when he found out that I wasn't his, when she had cheated on him, why he decided to be 'noble' and forgive her.

"Because, son, I loved her," he said. "That's what you do when you love somebody."

“War is like love; it always finds a way.”

Bertolt Brecht



Cover Illustration: Street Art by Dolk Lundgren



**DONT PLAY
WITH GUNS**

