THE BROOKLYNER

Spring 2013

WEB ISSUE NO. 8

FICTION

Lynn Bey Peter Blauner Steve Danziger Sam Edsill
B.G. Firmani Lou Gaglia Tadzio Koelb
Charles Lamar Phillips Wally Rudolph Dave Schofield

ART

Matthew Brandt Heather Cantrell Bart Gulley
Josephine Halvorson Karen Heagle Christopher Moss
Rachel Shim Brent Steen Patrick Whalen Roger White

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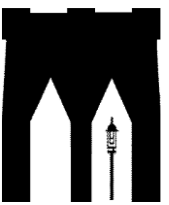

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THE FICTION ISSUE

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Bather Bitten by Snake

ART

By Karen Heagle

Woman Bitten by Snake, 2006, acrylic and ink on paper

I Give What I Get

FICTION

BY LYNN BEY

He calls me over with snapping fingers. Seeing as I tend bar, this is him being funny.

"Rub my foot," he says. "You know which one."

I rub the way he likes, hard.

"Enough," he finally says. "Jesus, you're a brute."

I get myself dressed: tube skirt, pink halter, lipstick he calls pay-the-bitch red.

"Hey, Magic Mister J," I say, "shoot me the keys." He blind passes them across the room so they smack in my hand. "You stay put for a change, okay?"

He wheels over to the door to watch me fire up the truck, waits till I crank down the window.

"I will, you know, I'll take off!" His yelling scares the kids in the pool, makes the new maid duck behind her cart. "Know that, you brute!"

I wave and shout back, "Cripple, don't I know it!," then floor it onto Frontage.

It's after two by the time I get back. The light spitting from the motel sign doesn't hit this end but I know my keyhole by now. He's passed out on the bed, the TV

hissing snakes like the desert up and moved in. Used to be I looked for signs of someone been to blow him, but who does a one-legged man for what I bring in?

I drop all but a five onto the table that's his. I say loud as I want in the shower that maybe she's out there like he says, someone that gets him being independent. Like it's a conversation I say back how she better be the other side of town, here tips are for shit.

Lake Selmac, OR 1

COVER ART

By Matthew Brandt

Lake Selmac, OR 1, 2008,
C-print soaked in Lake Selmac water, 16 x 20 inches

Holy Land, USA

FICTION

BY B.G. FIRMANI

It had been his idea to go to the Holy Land.

The Holy Land U.S.A., which was in Connecticut. The idea was that he'd take photographs with his enormous wooden Wisner, while she'd walk around absorbing the strangeness of what was basically a derelict tourist attraction, and then write about it. He had already pitched the idea to a friend of his, the editor of a journal, with the notion that his photos and her essay would interact in an arresting, heterodox, how-freaky-is-this kind of way – it was the early nineties, which was still a lot like the eighties, and things were all about "alternative histories" and "reclaiming the margins." For the essay, Chet – an architecture writer, even if what she usually wrote about were things like floor area ratios and commercial-grade cladding – would try her hand at the rigorous-yet-contemplative voice that she admired in writers describing spaces such as forgotten cemeteries, urban ruins, and architectural follies.

Unfortunately, "folly" was turning out to be the operative word for this trip.

They weren't a couple. He was just a guy she knew from the Polish bar on Bedford Avenue, a down-at-heels place that always had elaborate, insistent decorations for any given holiday. Actually, she'd officially met him one Sunday morning in her own apartment. She'd opened her bedroom door and there he was sitting on the couch, with his ironic, slightly too small 4-H tee shirt and Williamsburg soul-spot facial hair.

"Hey," they said to each other. Chet immediately looked away and disappeared into the bathroom, glad she'd been wearing clothes that covered her body.

When Chet came out again, her roommate Tamara was in a languid sprawl beside him on the couch. She introduced him as Schuyler. He was a photographer. Tamara was looking comely, smudgy, noncommittal, and Chet wondered how long it would be before she gave the guy the heave-ho.

Misery makes me promiscuous, Tamara had once told her. That morning Tamara had turned to Chet in such a way so that Schuyler couldn't see her face, and mouthed the words *Save me*. Tamara was not exactly a "girl's girl"; she had a way of arching her back and plumping out her lower lip around men – another form of Save Me – that made these men want to buy her all sorts of things: dinner, winter coats, expensive pharmaceuticals. Chet had actually seen Tamara step in front of other women at parties if those other women were talking with an attractive guy. Tamara also regularly lied about her age: she had been thirty-three for years now. Women who knew them both often wondered aloud what their friendship could be "about," and Chet would just shrug. There was a been-through-it-all quality about Tamara that she respected, perhaps it was her discontent, her anger; perhaps it was something in the story she had once told Chet about having to walk, literally, out of the Soviet Union as a little girl once they opened up the Jewish immigration quotas after 1970. Chet would ask her to explain this more but all Tamara could remember was walking across a broad beach carrying a rucksack on her back. Her grandfather was there, very old and broken by prison, and he had given her his hand.

Chet would close her eyes and see the anonymous beach.

But Chet was not in an expansive mood that morning, so she'd shut her bedroom door and left Tamara, with Schuyler the pick-up, on the couch, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. In time she heard the TV go on, and she recognized the depressing strains of *Xanadu*, the roller-skating fantasia from the eighties, which was Tamara's cheer-up movie.

Often Chet would come home in the middle of the day to find the curtains pulled against the light, the air choked with cigarette smoke, and Tamara stretched flat on the couch watching *Xanadu*, a world of melancholy on her face. *Is it nice out?* Tamara would ask in her languorous Russian way, and Chet would say yes and Tamara would draw her gaze back down to the television and say, *Oh, I should go out into the sun.* But she never did. She ate only steamed cauliflower, and often Chet found mysterious flaxseed derivatives in the refrigerator which suggested that Tamara, already thin to the point of perilousness, was doing the sort of body purges that would kill a healthy yogi.

But maybe the reason why Chet and Tamara could remain friends for so long was because they didn't criticize each other's choices. They kept out of each other's way. Since Chet was sporty and had short hair, other people assumed she was a lesbian but deeply closeted, like some interesting nun from their youth. But Tamara never questioned her. Chet had friends but, in general, there was something about her – the mark of bad lessons learned – that made her shun any sort of deep entanglement. Release for her came only in drinking.

She had gone out quickly that Sunday afternoon, although

she had no plans. She got pancakes at the breakfast place on the corner, and then found herself walking, elbows dangling from jacket pockets, down the street. She looked in at the CD store but she didn't have any money to spend; a bookstore would have been the place to go, but there weren't any around there and she didn't feel like getting on the train to Manhattan. Usually, in her neighborhood, she ran into people she knew, and that would determine her day. But no one was out, and a flattened Sunday feeling was on Chet as she walked down Metropolitan Avenue.

She was sliding into her late 20s and, with this, there was the notion that the shape of life should be changing about now. Some nights before, in the decorated Polish bar, Chet had been talked at by a woman who had told her about her imminent Saturn Return. It was clear that the woman thought Chet was gay and was trying to pick her up, but Chet was interested enough in the topic – which she would have scoffed at only a few years before – that she just let the woman talk, taking refuge behind the affectless demeanor she put on so well. The woman, who was a good deal older than Chet and very butch, told her – *How old are you, twenty-seven?* – that she, Chet, was crossing a major threshold in life, and leaving youth behind. She even got a little biblical on Chet, telling her she must *put away childish things*, perhaps misled by the medal Chet wore around her neck (which, had the woman just asked, Chet would have explained was simply a trinket her grandmother, who had recently died, gave her, and which bore no other significance). The woman was drunk enough at that point that she reached out to touch Chet's face – but Chet stopped the woman's hand in mid-air and, drunk enough herself to be a smart-ass, leaned into her to say that she was sorry but, contrary to appearances, she

was actually not a *You-know-what-bian.*

The woman pulled back, hurt and embarrassed. Chet instantly felt sorry for her. But apologizing would only mean further engagement, so Chet had simply spooled raggedly into herself and left the bar – and got home early, before two AM for a change.

Sunday, similarly, was a good day to start early, and Chet found herself pushing open the door to the decorated Polish bar round about five o'clock. The rule among their tribe was anytime after four, so she was well within her rights (before four o'clock – unless it was a special occasion – meant that you were a drunk). As soon as she sat down at the bar someone came up beside her. She slowly turned to look. It was Schuyler. She had a weird moment of thinking that there were two of them, one of them in her apartment with Tamara watching endless repetitions of *Xanadu*, and the other one here, smiling at her with a manly and sarcastic mouth.

"Hey," they said to each other. She was deciding whether or not to be mean to him when he quickly asked her what she was drinking and then gestured to the bartender in a take-charge way. She stopped herself in the act of rolling her eyes. She saw that he was wearing a different tee shirt now, one that said: *Where's the Beef?* He offered her a cigarette and, though she didn't smoke much, she took it. He lit it for her conscientiously. And then, up-close and in this public place, pints of beer before them, she looked at him.

But she knew him already. He was one of those guys, those Williamsburg Art Dudes. He would know about all the cool things, the thoroughly, safely cool things,

probably the cool things that had a little raunch in them: *RE/Search* magazine, *Sweet Movie*, the novels of Iceberg Slim. He would have a copy of *The Killer Inside Me* casually placed on the boomerang-pattern '50s formica dinette table in his kitchen. He would like a lot of the same music as Chet. He would come on strong, sure of himself; he was the type who would talk a woman into things. And then, after that woman slept with him, he would become sleazily non-committal. Later, much later, the woman would see him on the street wearing a wife-beater shirt and maybe even leather pants, and she would wonder: *What was I thinking?*

But this didn't matter, because such a woman would never say such a thing aloud. She would pretend to be as cool as he was, so that he wouldn't have anything on her. That was the best way to get through these things. And Chet had trained herself. This was the lesson of Chet's personal history.

It was strange, she probably couldn't even have charted it herself. She had gone to a "highly selective" college on a full scholarship, and though there were others in the same boat as her, most all her friends, oddly, were a certain kind of impassive rich kid. Their parents owned housing developments, hotel chains, their own islands, and for high school they had gone to places like St. Paul's, Exeter, Andover, Choate. But the key to these kids, these friends of Chet's, was that they hated all of this. Or pretended to. They went the other way instead, liked cheap black vinyl jackets cut seventies-style, had a kitschy interest in porno, Elvis, chop-socky movies, dabbled in casual heroin use (nothing to puncture the skin), and read the Gothic fiction of Nick Cave. They all went around singing: *I'll cut your head off and put it in my TV set*…

Sophomore year, she remembered, a bunch of them had been hanging out at their friend Anne's parents' co-op on upper Fifth Avenue. There was a rooftop garden and, after a lot of drinking, round about three AM they were all infected with a serious case of the stupids. Famous on this rooftop was a triple-height penthouse extension that the sick-rich top-floor owner had recently built, in a then-fashionable, vaguely Navajo-motif postmodern style. The co-op board hated it, and had insisted that the owner grow clinging vines to cover it up. At any rate, two of the guys in their group, Jonathan and Matt, had decided to climb up the trellis that covered the side of the penthouse. Chet remembered looking drunkenly up at them, a bottle of Red Stripe in her hand, and thinking to herself that Jonathan was slow but Matt was nimble, which was odd because Jonathan was slender and Matt was chubby. Suddenly, when Matt had just about reached the top, there was an ominous, complicated cracking sound and there was Matt, dangling from the buckled trellis high above their heads.

Oh shit, he was saying.

Oh shit, everyone around Chet was saying.

Something gave way and then Matt was falling. He was falling, falling, falling right to the edge of the building – and actually bumped off the waist-height ledge that looked down twelve stories over a tiny Fifth Avenue below. He landed in the roof garden on one leg, and did a curiously agile cat-like hop, popping back to his feet again.

What the fuck? everyone around Chet was saying. But she would not have heard this, because she was too busy screaming.

Screaming and screaming and screaming.

Hey, spaz, Anne was saying to her. She must have taken a hold of Chet's shoulders, because Chet felt herself being shaken. The sound of her screaming quit suddenly, as if it had been shut off from the outside. And then in an instant everyone was in her face, teasing and laughing at her, laughing at how Chet had freaked out.

They hung around for a while after that, and she saw that Matt was limping and in pain. *Are you all right?* she whispered to him privately as some point, still aghast, and he fixed her with a disgusted look that as much as said, Why are you being so uncool?

Why are you being SO UNCOOL?

Chet would grow away from this specific group but, with a few exceptions, most of her friends remained…people like this. It was easier, somehow, to be with people like this. And yet, for some time now, she had the strange idea that her soul had gone missing.

At the decorated Polish bar now, Schuyler was telling her about himself.

He talked about art actually – which was to him, she saw, the same as talking about himself. He had the swagger of someone who made big iron sculptures. He'd look away from her as he spoke, and then pivot his head sharply back to her as if to catch her looking at him, and thus read some appraisal, bedroom or intellectual, there. But she didn't blink; she wasn't interested in him either way and she wasn't feeling shy. He used a lot of lingo, things only a certain kind of reader would know about, *cultural currency,*

signifier, but at some point he used a common-enough word wrong – it was something like "amenable" or "caveat" – and he stopped and did a little hitch with his head, realizing an error had been made, and oddly panicking. It was so naked that Chet almost liked him. But then the swagger and the jargon came easily back, and she decided to be a lesbian with him, to be her fictional lesbian self – an unbreakable, amused character.

She ordered the next round.

When she got home, Tamara was sitting up on the couch in an ugly nylon nightgown with an afghan around her skinny shoulders. She was smoking a cigarette with the filter ripped off, a sign that she was in a bad mood. She barely grunted at Chet, looking straight at the TV and aiming the channel changer at it with a kind of malicious disappointment on her face, as if the remote could launch a rocket that would blow it up.

Chet fell in next to her.

"Hah, the *Prisoner*," she said, when she saw what Tamara had turned to.

"I am like, what is with this weird show?" Tamara said.

"He's trapped there, in his jacket and sneakers, and there's this big white balloon that chases him back if he tries to get away. Sometimes he almost seems to get away, but it only ever comes to naught."

"Comes to naught," Tamara repeated, not looking at her. She furiously stabbed out her cigarette. And, suddenly, she let her head drop against Chet's shoulder, and was wailing.

"That asshole," she managed to choke out.

Amazed and embarrassed, Chet put her arm lightly around Tamara's shoulders.

"That stupid fucking stud asshole," Tamara said.

"He's a loser," Chet said.

"He went to bar, huh?" Tamara said, sniffling.

"Yeah," Chet said, "he showed up all talking about art, trying to impress me."

Tamara quickly pulled away from her.

"I showed him your *thing*," she said. Chet didn't understand but Tamara gestured across the room. Chet had recently written an article for a neighborhood art paper; nothing much to her mind, but to Tamara an object of fascination. The magazine was sitting open to the article on the table, her name on it – *Chet Lawrence* – looking strangely aggressive.

"He *likes* you," Tamara spat at her. She got up, yanked the afghan out from under Chet, and pulled it around herself. Then she banged into her room, slamming the door.

Chet remained on the couch, surprised. She took Tamara's snubbed-out cigarette out of the ashtray, straightened it, put it in her mouth, and lit it.

Two nights later, she was back at the decorated Polish bar.

Schuyler was there, as he would be for many nights

thereafter. He had a seemingly endless supply of ironic tee shirts advertising exterminators in New Jersey, national-brand laundry detergents, *Hugs Not Drugs*. Chet would look at him and shake her head. She didn't like him, but she didn't exactly dislike him either. His interest in her flattered her, but it also insulted her because she wanted him to be better than he was.

But something kept her talking to him. Maybe it was because he had *plans*, he talked about the future, he talked about places he wanted to go and take photographs: Howard Finster's homestead, the Oregon Vortex, a Stonehenge in Nebraska made entirely of cars. At some point it struck her that she didn't know people who did funny hipster road trips anymore. In fact, she didn't know people who did any kind of road trips anymore. Most of the people she knew, in fact, could barely be bothered to shift their butts out of northside Williamsburg. They beat a triangle from their apartment to their place of underemployment to their favorite take-out and then back home again. A lassitude had taken over them, a kind of permanent Brooklyn-bound *Duh*.

What they did more than anything was smoke pot and watch TV. Or, they drank.

"Check this out," Schuyler said to her one evening at the bar.

Although St. Patrick's Day was still weeks away, the bar was already fancied up for it, decked out with green and white streamers, four-leaf clovers, leprechauns hugging their pots of gold. Schuyler held out a postcard to her. She took it from him and looked at it. On it was an old photograph of a city on a hill, a strange, mystical city,

taken with some kind of super-saturated film, the sky a too-bright blue and the red like ketchup. The city itself was white, dry and sun-baked, and it struck her as deeply familiar. Almost like a blood memory.

She flipped it over and read the back:

BETHLEHEM, U.S.A. Holy Land Replica. Waterbury, Conn.

She turned and looked at Schuyler.

"Bethlehem U.S.A.?"

"It's actually called the Holy Land U.S.A."

"It's so strange," she said.

"Do you want to go?" he said, excited.

"Go?" She held the postcard at arm's length. It really seemed so familiar.

"Isn't it fucked-up?" he said. "Isn't it creepy and…*unheimlich*?"

"Unheimlich?" she repeated.

"Uncanny," he said.

Yes, Chet said…it really was.

"But this thing's like thirty years old," she said. "It's probably gone by now."

Schuyler slapped his hands together.

"No, it's there. But it's a ruin from what I hear – and it's way cool." He was caught up in an unusual wave of enthusiasm as he told her about his idea – his photographs, her essay on *this wacko religious theme park*. He told her about the editor at the journal, how it would help her career. It was an easy drive, he could borrow his friend Bean's old Chevy, they could even make a weekend out of it and stay in some cool motel with plush carpeting and a rabbit-ear-antenna TV. They could go to cool old diners and eat corned beef hash.

But somehow the more he insisted the more hesitant she became; she found herself actually leaning away from him, slowly pitching herself backwards off the barstool. The Holy Land U.S.A? It sounded ridiculous, she said, looking straight ahead at the barmaid, an older lady who appeared, above anything else, to be exhausted and ready to pack it all in.

"Oh come on," Schuyler said to her, "don't be so lame."

"I'm not being lame," she said.

"Yeah you are," he said.

She grabbed his pack and shook out one of his cigarettes. What she was actually thinking about more than anything was the motel situation and how such a thing might play out. She put the cigarette in her mouth – and he snatched it away.

"You can have it," she said, shrugging.

He put it in his mouth, lit it, and then handed it back to her.

"Pretty please," he said at last.

"I don't know," she said.

"Come on, Chet," he said.

He leaned on the bar with his big meaty forearm and said: "Come on, Concettina."

Her mouth might as well have fallen open.

"Tamara told me," he said, winking at her. And he was immediately repulsive – like someone who goes through your garbage to find something to embarrass you with.

♦

Concettina. Was there ever such an unwieldy name?

She'd always hated it, Concettina, my god, it was not cool, it was not American, it had no snap and it took too long to say. Her extended family was full of these dowdy, medieval-sounding names, these "ethnic" names that did not travel well: Filomena, Palmira, Eufemia. Although her mother had almost named her Ermalinda, so perhaps she should have been grateful – ?

And where she grew up, within the starved confines of a grim, working-class city on the fringes of the area known as "Pennsyltucky," her family hadn't even the cover of living in the Italian-American section. No. Her father had been a schoolteacher, an over-committed person given to grandstanding and moral imperatives, and Chet's family was the lone white family on their block. She couldn't help but think that her dad thought he was *doing these poor folks a*

favor by living there, an attitude she found not only patronizing but inaccurate. They lived where they did, in a concave, asphalt-shingle house in the $9,000-per-capita-income part of town, Chet knew, because her father was at base a failure, someone who had big ideas and hopes but not the heart to carry them out. He was benighted by personal demons. He had read his Paulo Freire, gone South for voter registration drives in the 1960s, gone north to support busing in the 1970s – but in his own house, here was a man who was a tyrant.

He was an incessantly, ridiculously angry person, and he took it out on his family.

Chet had three older brothers, and among them it was a race to see who could get out of the house the quickest – when Chet was still little, they had already joined up with the army or gone to work sixteen-hour days as fishing boat slimers; the idea being that, after dealing with their father, jobs like these were noodle salad. Chet was left to fend for herself. Their mother, her head in the clouds of willful fictions, spent most of her time sitting in the kitchen playing *My Sweet Lord* on her acoustic guitar. Their father liked kicking things down the stairs. The final member of this household was Chet's grandmother, Filomena, the oldest person in the world – a solid, ceaselessly grieving piece of gloomy prehistory.

She was a short, square woman, heavy and slow of movement but constantly in action. Outside of the house, she was an ill omen in all-black, motoring down the sidewalk to 6:00 AM mass with a doily pinned to her head. At home she favored snap-front housecoats worn over cotton print dresses, white baseball socks, and vinyl "ice-pop" slippers. She never wore slacks, finding them, on

women, symptomatic of loose morals and bad housekeeping. For some reason, everyone called her by a different name – Sadie, Fee, Minnie. She answered to all of these. She would have answered to "Fred." She was constantly working: picking, skinning, and canning tomatoes, crocheting pineapple-motif pillowcases from Truman-era pattern books, clipping coupons with a specially ordered implement that looked like a dental scraper. And yet, all was negative with Fee. Hers was a life of wounds, slights, and wrongs. She never forgave nor forgot anything. She never forgave her parents for making her leave her hilltop village in the Abruzzi and go to America. She never forgave America for not being her hilltop village in the Abruzzi. She hated the sound of English, and – though she was no dummy and understood every word – she obstinately never spoke it but for the merest handful of nouns, insulting adjectives, and roughly conjugated action verbs. She probably loved her children and grandchildren but never showed it, because *it will spoil you*. If any of these children or grandchildren said anything at the dinner table that she disagreed with, she was likely to reach out and bop a nose with her agile, shockproof, digging-paw-like hand. She was a tough customer.

But sometimes, working in the backyard – which was cultivated to 98% capacity with tomato plants and pear trees, and ringed with azalea bushes – Chet would hear her singing.

These were not happy, upbeat ditties. These were unearthly songs, keening, dread-laden. They were not pretty, not about the moon and the sea. They were all about the inevitability of suffering – losing your arm in a threshing machine, dying of thirst on a mountaintop, sinking into deep snowdrifts.

But very rarely, the songs would change, and Chet's grandmother would sing of her village, of the village whose photograph she kept at her bedside like that of a lover who had disappeared. And Chet would listen hard to these songs, trying to understand the words. Because that was the only tenderness that Chet could ever detect in her grandmother.

Don' be stoop, was a frequent refrain of hers, as well as the constant *state zitt'* – the all-purpose plural *shut up*. If, female, you showed any pluck, she would rebuke you as a *testa tosta* – don't be a hothead, just calm down and take it. Life was suffering. Her parents had sent her and her three brothers over to the U.S. after their crops had failed; the idea had been to make some money and come back in three years. Almost right off the boat, two of the brothers died awful deaths in the influenza epidemic of 1918; the third drowned in the East River a year later. Fee worked as a seamstress in a sweatshop near Times Square and never tired of telling Chet how they would take the guards off the sewing machines in order to work more quickly, and sometimes you'd drill the jumping needle right through *you fing'*. Your fingers. In the midst of all this, word came from Chieti that an earthquake had leveled her village and both her parents had been buried.

Fee married a cousin who had also come over, a stonemason. He took her away from the city, to rural Pennsylvania, and she had three boys with him: Pasquale, Paris, and Pietro. *Paris?* Yes, Chet had had an uncle Paris, but he was born with a severe and unnamed disability and, confined to a wheelchair, he died at twenty, long before Chet was born. They always said of Paris that he never grew bigger than the size of an eight-year-old child. Such things were repeated many hundreds of times: *he never grew*

bigger than the size of an eight-year-old child! Pasquale, meanwhile, grew quite large and scary, and Pietro, the baby, grew to be Chet's terminally furious dad. But before all this happened, their own father, Fee's husband Marinello, contracted silicosis, and died. Fee moved her family to the Italian slum section of Philadelphia and took in piecework; she got a nickel each for elaborate collars that took a half hour each to embroider. Fee worked eighteen hours a day at this, until she met her second husband, Dominic. Things were good until he fell out of a tree while picking apples, hit his head, and hemorrhaged to death, leaving her a widow with two more children, Alfonsina and Concetta. Concetta was swept away by some unexplained crib death, while Alfonsina had been *born crooked* and spent years laid up in iron braces at the charity hospital, which had the effect of turning her into a bitter, greedy adult. Fee did marry again, but this third was a bad man, whose name was never spoken, though there was a joke among Fee's surviving children – Chet's father Pietro, aunt Alfonsina, and uncle Pasquale – about the man being a *knife-throwing Sicilian*. Crazy laughter would ensue, and Fee, dependent on her mood, would either attempt to slap her grown children, or retreat into imaginary deafness while these good-for-nothing children of hers cackled away at her misery. She didn't seem to understand that they were actually cackling away at their own misery, which their mother had handily passed on to them all. Chet, a disgusted adolescent – a *testa tosta* – wanted nothing so much as to open the front door, run out of the house, and keep on running.

So she was overjoyed to go away to New York for college, and slough off this past.

Of course, when Chet had to say a formal goodbye to her

grandmother, Fee could do nothing but complain and berate her. What was she going to New York City for? Didn't she know what a dump that place was? Why did she cut off her nice hair? Why didn't she eat? Didn't she see how ugly she made herself? *Eccetera, eccetera, eccetera.* Chet, sitting in her grandmother's first-floor "in-law" suite, looked up at the old bakelite clock on the wall, diligently ate her *carota in brodo*, and agreed with everything her grandmother said. *Whaddaya, stoop'?* Fee finally spat out at her, and Chet said, *Si, sono stupida, è vero – sono stupidissima.* Fee looked at her as if she had committed the worst indignity. And then, Fee lunged.

Chet knew to duck. But Fee was just – what was this – *hugging her?* Hugging her. Hugging her tightly, as if her heart would break. She smelled like vanilla extract and Jergen's lotion and her flesh was moist and robust. Chet felt a great sob welling up in her throat and just when she would relax into this hug, Fee shoved her away. Chet sat reeling. Her grandmother straightened up gruffly and then she was pulling over her head the long chain she always wore, the long dull chain with the silver Mary medal on it; and this she pressed into Chet's hand almost violently.

Impossible to explain the relief Chet felt when she finally got away from this family.

All through four years of college, she went back only twice, the second time to clean out her room. When Chet turned twenty-one she did something she'd been wanting to do for a long time: put an end forever to Concettina Lorenzetti, child of operatic-level grief and misfortune. She legally changed her name to its final, deracinated form, squeezing the Guido right out of it.

She lived her life in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and it wasn't a bad thing.

And then when she was twenty-six, word came that Fee, who everyone always said would *outlast us all*, was dying. How unreal it was to think of this.

Her last memory of Fee would be at the hospice, sitting with the awkward hospice armchair pulled up to her bed, holding her hand as she lay there fighting for breath. Fee's hand was cold and the skin felt loose…she was shrinking down to nothing…*tu sei polvere, e in polvere ritornerai*…she was losing ounces every second it seemed to Chet, who studied her face in a way that had never been available before. Her skin was lax and spotted, her hair still thick and obstinately dyed shades too dark. None of this was gentle. Fee increased her grip on Chet's hand all of a sudden, squeezing it tightly – then she burst out crying. Fee was delirious, and she was shouting at her own mother, her mother dead almost eighty years. She was yelling in pure dialect, the dialect of her village, and Chet would later never be able to transcribe the words, but she understood her grandmother was shouting at her mother: *stop hitting me, please stop hitting me.*

And so it was like a weak heart passed down through the ages.

Back in Williamsburg, Chet found the medal that her grandmother had given her when she went off to college. She put it on and did not want to take it off. She felt a criminal ache in herself, a feeling of wasting, of drowning in the shallows.

♦

It started raining almost as soon as they got on the road that morning, and Schuyler insisted on going through Queens.

There was an accident, with traffic backed up for miles, and when they started moving again he insisted – through some bit of masculine vanity – on taking a "special short-cut" exit. They ended up on Long Island. They backtracked, and it was almost three hours before they hit the Interstate. They pulled off in Bridgeport and stopped to eat at the first place they saw, a chain breakfast restaurant on a dismal stretch of interurban highway. Everyone looked at them when they walked in – they were the only people not of color, and they were both wearing all-black; and Schuyler, for whatever reason, had put on his sunglasses immediately before entering. In the booth behind them was a little girl, clearly fascinated by the figure they cut, and she stood up on the seat of her booth and waved a festive plush rabbit at them. At some point, overcome with emotion, she threw the festive plush rabbit in the air, and it bounced off Schuyler's head. Chet burst out laughing.

Oh boy was that a mistake.

She tried to apologize but he just shook his head and clamped his mouth shut, as if to punish her. Back in the car they spent the next hour in silence, Schuyler still roiling with annoyance.

But looking around Chet began to realize something.

She'd had friends from Connecticut – Greenwich, Darien – and knew it as picket fences and old-stock Yankees. She'd had friends at Yale, and even gone to visit them

back in the day; but some obvious conclusion about Connecticut had eluded her until now. The cities were not rich. They were sad and flailing. They were poor, and they were "ethnic."

The sight of Waterbury made her spirits crash. From the highway, it was a dim city of hills, bedraggled and cheerless with its late-winter trees. Cruising into its downtown, it indeed felt distinctly *unheimlich*. The streets were empty. There were grand old buildings, but they seemed almost vacant, as if something big had blown through the place and passed it by. Schuyler wordlessly drove them down the main street, which bent to the right, and then passed by a great old building with a clock tower.

"Oh, look at this!" Chet called out, "it's like a mini *Torre del Mangia*!"

She felt a quickening in her chest; architecture spoke to her. They followed the bend around and then they were driving beside a long, solemn green, surrounded by slumbering old municipal buildings and churches. It was a strange dreamscape in the drizzle. Schuyler made a sharp, impatient turn, and Chet looked up to see a marvel of a church, a white Baroque church with a Latin inscription. It had a hugeness and grace and authority; it was the real thing, and she could practically see the hands that had built it.
"Look, look," she said, actually shaking his arm.

"What, it's a church," he said.

"But it's a wonderful church," she said.

"Not so interesting," he said.

A sweep of sentimentality went over her; she couldn't explain.

They drove away from the green, and he abruptly turned to the right. They started climbing a hill. He made another turn, and then they were coming back down.

"Hey, Schuyler," she said finally, "any idea where we're going?"

He muttered something back at her.

"Did you just *shush* me?" she said.

"I said I'm thinking," he said.

"Why don't we ask someone?"

"Because I don't fucking want to ask someone."

She felt the urge to slap his sunglasses right off his face.

"Since when did you get so autocratic and snotty?" she said.

They found themselves back on the main street. It was late enough on a Saturday, and few things were open. Then they saw a pizza shop, with a young Italian-American-looking guy standing in its doorway, twirling up a towel. Just as Chet was thinking about how when you go to a sad dormant town there will inevitably be a pizza shop, Schuyler did an abrupt U-turn, which threw her against the passenger door. There was plenty of parking up ahead but he was dead set on the spot right in front of the pizza place, and he began a herky-jerky sawing back and forth of

the big old Chevy to fit it in.

"I can totally parallel-park if you want to hand over the wheel," Chet finally said.

"Look, it's all parked," he said. He cut the engine and got out. Chet got out too, and saw that half the car was sticking out into the street.

Schuyler leapt across the sidewalk and bounded inside the pizzeria. Chet leaned against the car and watched as he talked to the guy who'd been in the doorway, who shook his head, put up his hands – no, he didn't know what that was. She looked down the street, where there were some kids, Black, lissome, bored. All of them were wearing do-rags, to protect their hair from the drizzle. She went up and asked them about the Holy Land.

"The holy *whaaat*?" one of them said. He was skinny and liquid, a tall fourteen or so; he would be the funny one of the group.

"It was a…theme park, but it's old," she explained.

"You looking for the park?" another of the kids said, a shorter boy with a wide, numb-looking face.

"Um, probably not. It was like, a religious place."

"Oh, *that* shit," the tall one said.

"You know it?" she asked.

He made a grimace like, Why would you want to go there?

"It's up the hill," he said. He laughed at her. "You seen the cross, right?"

No, she said, she hadn't.

"It's big as life," he said.

"CHET."

She whirled around to see Schuyler in the middle of the sidewalk. He was all clenched up and his face was red.

"Oh, shit," the tall boy behind her said, "your man gonna pop a blood vessel!"

She turned back around – to apologize, or side with them, because she knew that they knew what this scene was about – but the group was already off down the street, making teasing hooty noises at her and her "man."

"What are you doing?" Schuyler insisted.

"Geez, weirdo, just asking directions," she said.

"We can ask at the gas station," he said.

"It's up the hill," she said. "There's a cross."
He ignored her.

In the car again, they went around the same bend where the *Torre del Mangia* was, and then skirted the long, wistful green. Chet thought of what it would be like to be a kid trapped in Waterbury, Connecticut. They stopped at a light and then, when it changed again, it was clear that something was weird with the Chevy.

Schuyler pulled over and got out. Chet just sat there inside, looking down at her lap.

"FUCK!" she could hear him yelling outside the window. *"FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!"*

The back right tire was completely flat. They must have rolled over something.

At the gas station, the man shook his head. He directed them to a flat-fix place down a highway of strip malls. Schuyler was fit to be tied and banged right inside. *Can you look at my tire? How much will this cost?* They were in a hurry! There were a number of other people ahead of them, tired-looking people waiting for their cars, working-class people. New England working class, Chet thought; they were different from New York. Chet had grown up with people like this – they were shy, not pushy. They were used to waiting. They all stared at Schuyler, the imperious jerk in their midst, as if he were some kind of unlikely hologram. Chet was so embarrassed she walked right out again.

She found herself standing at the edge of the bland, cheerless highway, dead cold in the March drizzle, her hands jammed into her jeans pockets.

"Hey," she heard him say behind her at last.

"Hey," she said, turning.

He looked chastened now or, at least, out of steam.

"That flat-fix guy," he said, "just ripped me a new one."

It was clear now that they would be stuck there, in Waterbury, Connecticut, for the night.

They walked down the skinny highway in the drizzle, looking at the strip-malls: party stores, a down-and-out grocery, 99-cent stores, meager franchises. They stood in front of a closed discount department store and looked at a display of chocolate bunnies, marshmallow peeps, and potted azaleas. Options were slim. They found a liquor store and Schuyler bought them a bottle of vodka, "for later." They hadn't eaten for hours, they realized, and it was easy enough to cross the highway again to a chicken wings place to get some dinner. Inside it smelled of rancid oil, and the polite young cashier who waited on them seemed to be trying to warn them away. They were the only ones in there.

They sat and ate revolting buffalo wings.

Standing in the parking lot afterwards, Chet swiveled about on her feet, thinking she was about to vomit.

"Boy did that hit the spot," she said, thumping her stomach.

"Maybe it'd better if you did puke," Schuyler suggested. She shook her head.

And then, with a sudden mock-flourish, he gave her his arm, old-fashioned style. She was surprised, but she took it. They began walking down the skinny highway together – they'd seen a motel on the way in, when they'd still had the car. It was longer off than they had thought, but there was really nothing else to do.

Walking arm-in-arm, the day suddenly seemed funny to both of them. They repeated the many ridiculous things that had happened, laughing and putting on voices. It struck her that he was so much nicer than he'd been all day.

The motel was a relic, 1950s, with a scalloped "colonial"-style sign. They went into the office and rang the bell. Chet looked around. It was fine – very clean and a little sad. It had been updated, and there was an awful sort of clock with silk flowers under glass. Things smelled lemony.

A middle-aged Indian lady with a serious demeanor came out and looked at them blankly.

"Where is your car?" she said in that mellifluous up-speak way.

Chet explained that their car had a problem with its tire, and it was up the highway at the flat-fix place. They were from New York City; they hadn't expected to be staying overnight. For some reason, she wanted to be clear to this lady that she wasn't some kind of sleaze – and when Schuyler pulled out his credit card she cut him with her hand and said, *We'll split it.* In the midst of this Chet became aware of something else in the room, something like a big housecat, and she turned to see crouching by the side of the desk a little girl in unseasonal strappy sandals.

"Well hello," Chet said, leaning down to her.

The little girl looked at her with great chocolate eyes, apprehensive and struggling.

"What's your name?" Chet asked her.

"She is – " the woman began, and trailed off. "She is not used to it," the woman decided to say.

There was a condition, Chet understood. A "problem."

"Hello, beautiful one," Chet said to the little girl, making her eyes big. The little girl stared at her gravely.

"Come on, beautiful one," Schuyler said to Chet, rattling the key.

Inside the room, he turned on the television and they both immediately became engrossed in an episode of *Entertainment Tonight*. There was red-carpet footage from some sort of awards gala and Schuyler commented with great authority on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of each different celebrity's eveningwear. He got some ice from down the hall and they drank their vodka, diluted with cans of seltzer from the vending machine, and watched a vampire movie that seemed to involve Kris Kristofferson. They yelled *Oh, come on!* at the television from time to time. They flipped around with the remote for a while and then settled on something from the eighties involving dance routines; Schuyler commented that everyone's pants looked very, very high-waisted. They flipped around some more, landing on a nature show, and Schuyler went back out to the vending area to buy some snacks, which they broke into greedily, getting corn chips all over the quilted polyester coverlet. A fit of silliness overtook them, and two AM found them jumping up and down on the bed, strategically positioning themselves so that, with their arms raised, they could successfully pop the acoustic ceiling tiles up and out of their frames and then back down into them again. They were jumping up and down and popping out

the acoustic tiles and screaming with glee when a sharp knock came on the door. It was Mrs. Patel, warning them about the noise. They apologized, and were chastened. They fixed the coverlet, and sat down on it.

Schuyler made them another round, and they sat there drinking their drinks and watching soundless images flicker on the screen before them. The bottle of vodka was almost empty.

"You really are," he said to her at length.

"Really are what?" she said.

"Beautiful," he said.

She looked away.

"You should grow your hair," he said.

He reached out and touched his hand to the nape of her neck.

She looked back at him. She was drunk, but not that drunk.
"You're kidding, right?" she said.

"Why would I be kidding?" he said, in a deep hypnotic guy voice.

"For one, because you've already slept with my roommate."

"That girl sleeps with everybody," he said.

Chet got up and rigidly put her glass down on the table.

"You're kind of a creep," she said, except that it accidentally came out like a question: *You're kind of a creep?*

"I guess," he said, laughing.

"No, no," she said, not laughing at all. "You *are* a creep. Trust me."

She turned away from him, disgusted. She thought of Tamara back in their airless apartment, with her *Xanadu* and her heartache, cocooning in her aloneness. *That girl sleeps with everybody.* He didn't know her at all. He didn't know either of them.

And then it struck her: but he might as well know them. Because, Chet thought to herself, in a few years, *you'll be just like Tamara.* Alone, hungry, bitterly disappointed. Just this side of desperate. Putting on an act to disguise how miserable you are, not realizing until too late that the phony act had become the reality.

Something exploded against the wall – Chet jumped in her skin. She whirled around to see Schuyler's vodka pouring all down the paneling and the glass burst all over the carpet.

He reared up in her face, ugly with indignation.

"What the fuck else are we supposed to do?" he said.

♦

Sounds from outside awakened her. There was a

gentleness she was aware of. She stirred.

"It's snowing," she heard the little girl saying, "it's snowing!"

She's fine, then, Chet thought in her half-sleep. *She will be just fine.*

She was freezing. She opened her eyes. She was swaddled in the thin coverlet. She struggled to sit up, understanding that she was lying in the bathtub.

It had quickly got ugly with Schuyler the night before – she distinctly remembered slapping him across the face. She also remembered him laughing at her. The whole thing had been so stupid, driven by nothing more than boredom.

Like so much of the life she was leading.

You're not all that, he had spat at her, mocking her. And she had slammed the bathroom door in his face and locked it.

Chet stepped out of the tub. There was a window in the bathroom, a small, tilty window, and she cranked this open and looked outside. It was snowing, an odd Spring snowfall. But looking about, she didn't see the little girl at all.

A booming knock came at the door and Schuyler was telling her to open up because he had to take a leak.

She unlocked the door and they glared at each other.

"I'm not a fucking rapist," he said, pushing past her.

And so there was nothing left to do but go to the Holy Land.

Mrs. Patel knew all about it, and even drew them a map. It had been closed for years, she told them, but people still came by to visit it. She even used the word "pilgrimage." They walked down the long skinny highway back to the flat-fix place, not touching each other's arms at all.

"Lucky for you kids I decided to open today," the guy who Schuyler had insulted the day before told them once they got there. He was an older man, in ancient bifocals.

"What's so special about today?" Schuyler, ever the jerk, said to him.

"It's Easter Sunday," the man said, as if these New York City kids were nothing short of imbeciles.

They found the route easily, and after trying out the silent treatment Schuyler changed his tack. He seemed to have realized what a long ride it would be otherwise. He became chatty, animated. He was all nonstop patter, in fact, commenting cuttingly on whatever scenery they passed, which was easy to do because as far as Chet could tell, the Holy Land U.S.A. was in a pretty sad part of an already sad town. They climbed the hill, and small, homemade-looking signs started to appear. *Holy Land*, they said, with tiny arrows pointing the way. They followed the signs and Mrs. Patel's directions through residential streets until they came to a dead end, overgrown with weeds. They stopped the car and got out. In front of them was a sand-colored

archway, closed off by a chain-link fence but easily skirted. They went around this and there was another set of arches, white stuccoed at some point but now quite dilapidated. These they passed under, and then they stood looking.

Schuyler fished around in his pocket and pulled out the old postcard.

He held it up at arm's length in front of them, superimposing the picture of the sun-bleached city on the hill over the weed-covered ruin it had become. He moved the card out of the way, put it back again, moved it out of the way, put it back again, the straw that captures the elephant.

"Fucked up," he said appreciatively.

He turned to get his big wooden camera.

But Chet remained standing there. She was looking. She was looking, and she was thinking. She was thinking about expectation versus reality. This was a terrible, terrible place to have come to. She was thinking: *What do I choose in this life? What do I even choose anymore? When was the last time I really cared about anything?* The scene affected her strangely. It was hurting her heart.

But up on the hill, there was movement in the little village. There was slow but steady movement. Who would be there, who but other people like them? Sarcastic people. She felt angry at these other people who were people like them. The movement stopped, resumed, and then stopped again, as if made by a fugitive trying to avoid detection. Then there was a clearing and Chet saw a flash of livid

pink. Someone was carrying a potted azalea bush.

It was a little old lady, dressed in black.

She understood what the postcard had reminded her of now. It was her grandmother's village in Abruzzo, the village on the hill, the village that had been flattened by the earthquake.

Chet turned with a snap and walked out under the arches. She squeezed sideways, slatting herself past the post of the chain-link fence. Schuyler was at the trunk of the car, messing with his camera equipment, and he didn't even look up as she passed. But then she heard footsteps and he was behind her.

"Chet, what the fuck? Where are you going?"

"I'm going," she said, barely pausing.

He was holding some wooden bracing thing for his camera, which almost gave him an air of menace.

"Come on, don't be ridiculous," he said, at his last tick of patience with this annoying girl.

"I don't want to make fun of this place," she said to him. "It's already so sad. It stinks of suffering here, the whole place. I want to leave it with some dignity."

She turned on her heel and kept walking.

"You're a fucking lunatic!" he yelled at her.

She kept walking.

"It's a fucking scary neighborhood!" he tried again.

This made her laugh. The world was a fucking scary neighborhood. A body just had to figure out where to go.

"I can find my way out," she said.

And then, she ran.

Untitled

ART

By Roger White

Untitled, 2010, oil on canvas, 22 x 15 inches

Advice

FICTION

BY CHARLES LAMAR PHILLIPS

Like many Southerners, my father was a casually brutal man, but I learned over time to stand up to him. So maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that he asked my advice when his marriage with my mother ran afoul.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, my father tore down missile programs and sold off the hardware, which took him to Rock Island, Illinois, several times that year. I lived in Iowa City then, and we got together each trip for dinner. I knew mother's narcissism had grown suffocating, and when he turned to me—twice divorced—to tell me he couldn't take it anymore, I was prepared.

"Decide to be generous to her," I said. "Make sure she can live well for the rest of her life on what she gets from you. Then, put everything in your name, the cars, the houses, the investments, the insurance policies, the bank accounts, because once the lawyers get involved you're in a brand new semantic world they control with their legal language, and you won't be able to talk to each other in normal English. Tell her you want out and how you plan to divide things up and only then speak to the lawyers."

He took my advice, evidently to the letter, and it worked. They had one of the better break-ups I know of. That Christmas I spent with mother in her big house off the grand golf course in chichi Dumfries, toasting the New Year, and we talked a little about the split.

"Honey," she said, "it was so strange. He just didn't act like himself. He snuck around, put everything in his name behind my back, then just sprung it on me. I was more hurt by that than by his leaving me. My lawyer was shocked, too, and angry, but she finally said she couldn't do much better than what he was already offering."

"Listen, Mom," I managed to say. "I know you are upset now, but you have money and a new job and, one day, you are going to just look around and realize that you are making it on your own, that for the first time in your life you are really free. And you are going to feel about yourself a way you never have felt before. Trust me."

My father got hitched again within the year to a wonderful woman he adored who buried him at Quantico in 1994 with a twenty-one-gun salute. Long before then, though, about six years after the divorce, I spent the holidays at my mother's swank new high-rise near Old Town drinking myself senseless over the collapse of my third marriage. Dressed in her elegant casuals, sipping white wine, her hair dyed a perfect red, her first face-lift barely noticeable in her smile, she sighed, "Son, listen, as someone we know once said to me, you are going to be fine on your own. Soon, you are even going to feel about yourself a way you never felt before."

What did she know?

Camel Car Door

ART

By Josephine Halvorson

Camel Car Door, 2010, oil on linen, 23 x 18 inches

Conception

FICTION

BY SAM EDSILL

Claire and I used to spend our weekends shopping for cribs. She had the perfect one in mind, shaped like an airplane, with wings on the sides and a removable toy cockpit you could put in it, for the baby to play with. It would be painted in cheerful, non-gendered colors: yellow or green or purple. Claire wanted the baby to feel like life was just taking off, like anything was possible. We'd walk around big, fluorescent-lighted stores looking for something like an airplane, but nothing ever seemed right. Eventually someone would come over to help us. Escorting us over to the latest models, the clerk would ask how far along we were, and Claire's hand would move instinctively to her flat, babyless belly.

"We're just thinking ahead," she'd say.

We've been trying to get pregnant for two years. After we were married we made love spontaneously, ravenously, and we simply assumed that sooner or later it was bound to happen. We'd spent our adult lives trying not to get pregnant, so how hard could it be?

At night, after I came home from the office and she came back from her job at the public library, we would cook dinner together, kissing each other as the pasta sauce simmered, occasionally abandoning everything and making love on the couch. After almost a year with no results, we started reading books like *What to Expect Before You're Expecting*.

We tried herbal regimens, special diets. Claire charted her ovulation cycle and put stickers on our calendar to mark the nights we were supposed to have sex, which we jokingly referred to as "baby-making time." At first these stickers were playful and suggestive: a pair of puckered lips, pink fur-covered handcuffs. But as the months went by, Claire replaced them with teddy bears, storks, and bottles of milk. Romance faded into necessity. We were nearing our mid-thirties and facing the slow decline of our childbearing years.

"Something's wrong," Claire said one afternoon. We were driving to Spokane to check out a store called The Baby Experience.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Should I pull over?"

"I mean something's wrong with us, Ethan. It shouldn't be taking this long to have kids."

In the distance I could see the sharp peaks of the Rockies and the faint glint of a jet heading toward the airport.

"We should see a doctor," she said.

The doctors ran tests on both of us. Our specialist, Dr. Cohen, asked us about our medical history, our diet, how often we had sex and when. She reassured us that many couples have trouble conceiving, and that the problem is usually treatable. She had helped hundreds of couples get pregnant. Dr. Cohen had a slight gap in her front teeth and wore thick-rimmed glasses, which gave her an intellectual look that was comforting. We went home confident.

In the weeks that followed, as we waited for the test results, Claire and I decided to try to build the airplane crib ourselves. She drew up the plans for it: sixteen slats on each side, with a set of wings that folded up and down attached to the middle. It would be big enough to transition into a toddler bed so we could use it for several years before we'd have to buy a new one. I went to the hardware store and bought lumber, various sizes of drill bits, packages of nails, a belt sander. I moved our old Camry out to the driveway and set up a permanent workstation in the garage. We felt that by building the crib we were keeping the positive energy flowing, creating a space for the baby that would surely arrive. Then one afternoon we got a phone call from Dr. Cohen's office telling us to come back in, that they'd found something.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Adams," Dr. Cohen said. "It seems your sperm count is too low."

She looked at the charts in her hands, adjusted her glasses, and handed me a copy. Claire looked on over my shoulder. My count was only six million per milliliter, far below the 20 million normally needed for fertilization. I looked at the sheet, shocked that my problems could be reduced to such base-sounding numbers. Somehow I was missing a population the size of Los Angeles.

"This problem is not at all uncommon anymore," Dr. Cohen continued. "It's hard to know what causes it. Poor diet, pollution. Some studies have suggested cell phones may be to blame."

"Cell phones?" I said.

"It's not proven, however," she said.

"Isn't there anything I can do about this?" I said. "I mean, it just takes one sperm, right?" I tried to laugh, but it came out like a phlegmy cough.

The best thing I could do, she said, is to eat a healthy diet, exercise, and keep trying. I should stay away from extreme heat or cold. If my count didn't increase we could try artificial insemination. "Sometimes that helps in these situations," she said, and smiled.

On the drive home I didn't say anything. Claire put her hand on my thigh at a stoplight.

"Ethan," she said. "It's OK."

The next day I woke up early and went to work on the crib. I spent the morning sawing and hammering and sanding the boards, covering the concrete floor in a layer of sawdust. The radio station was playing a Woody Guthrie marathon in honor of the 58th anniversary of the Grand Coulee Dam. Claire came out to the garage with a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of ice water and watched me drill holes into the frame to fit the slats. I put down the drill and wiped my forehead with a towel and she handed me the sandwich. She smiled and kissed me.

"Hey there," she said.

I could smell perfume on her, sweet and flowery. She was wearing a purple tank top that revealed the black straps of her bra, one of the sheer, see-through ones she had picked up at Victoria's Secret. I took a drink of water and bit into the sandwich.

"Care to take a break?" she asked.

"No," I said between bites. "I should keep working. I'm almost through drilling the holes on the first side."

"Okay," she said. "Take your time."

Later that night, as we were lying in bed, Claire gently pulled my hands from around her waist up toward her breasts. I saw the pale glow of her cheek in the moonlight flooding through the window, and could smell her dark, curly hair, which was spread out over the pillow like the wild tail of a Betta fish. At one time I would have kissed her neck, would have slid my hands gently beneath her nightshirt to caress her, but that night I couldn't. As Claire pressed my hands into her, I pretended to be sleeping. After a few moments she let my hands go, and the gentle whisper of her breathing slowed until she fell asleep. That's when I started thinking about David Hutchins.

Claire didn't tell me about David until we'd been dating for six months. He had been her first serious boyfriend, a guitarist she'd met at a party her freshman year at the University of Washington. David had dropped out to be a full-time musician and played in two bands, and Claire went to all of his shows. Sometimes she would skip classes to go with him when they toured down I-5 to play gigs in Portland and Eugene. Then, after they'd been together a year, Claire got pregnant. Neither of them understood how it could have happened. They'd been careful. Despite the surprise, she was happy. She'd always wanted kids, a family of her own, and now she had dreams of the three of them living on the road, a life of love and music. David promised her he'd help raise the baby, but a week later Claire woke up and David was gone. On the kitchen counter she found an envelope with two grand in it. She never saw him again. And then, two months into her

pregnancy, she miscarried.

When she told me, somehow it had made sense. There had been a kind of sadness to her that I could never understand. I would catch her staring off into space, and sometimes she would seem to be on the verge of tears for no apparent reason. Whenever I asked her about it she would tell me that she was fine, but now I knew that she had been holding in a secret pain, and I felt deeply guilty, as if somehow I should have known and tried to do something about it. For a long time afterward I had tried to imagine the moment of her double loss: her waking up, seeing the bloody bed sheets, trying to stifle her scream. She never described it to me, perhaps because it was too painful. But I had also never asked. In the back of my mind, I held David responsible for everything.

I'd seen him in pictures Claire had shown me of her rock concert days, back when she wore heavy black eye shadow and Sleater-Kinney T-shirts. David would show up in the corners of group photos with their friends or in the background at parties, never in the center, never completely in focus. I would catch glimpses of the back of his head, his shaggy blond hair poking out from under the back of a baseball cap, or of him sitting on a beat-up couch, hunched over his guitar, playing, I imagined, the kind of song that had made Claire fall in love with him. I never saw the pictures of them kissing backstage at shows, or embracing each other desperately, tenderly, like skydivers. But I knew, from the way she talked about him, from those pictures she did show me, that these moments existed.

I began to think that what had attracted Claire to me in the first place was the fact that I was so unlike David: I

wanted a house. I wanted kids. I was a law student with a promising future, someone who could be depended upon. She was searching for David's negative image and found it in me. At one time I managed to put those thoughts aside and focus on the love that we had: no matter what had brought us together in the first place, we were committed to each other. But now, lying in bed with Claire asleep by my side and the doctor's report running through my mind, David seemed even more the man I wasn't.

I began spending most of my time at home in the garage. When I would get home from work I would kiss Claire, change into a pair of jeans and an old shirt, and start working on the crib. This was a problem I could solve. I had a plan. I had tools. Each smoothly sanded board, each spindle put in place, was another step toward my goal. On those nights when we did have sex, I found myself unable to concentrate. I kept picturing Claire at a concert, looking up at David in awe as he played, and imagining what she must have thought about in those moments. I imagined her desire for him, how he had occupied a place in her heart that I could never reach. He had been what she wanted, and I was what she had settled for. I stopped abruptly, and Claire opened her eyes.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

"Yes," I lied.

A month or so later we went back to see Dr. Cohen. There had been no improvement. If anything, things had gotten worse, and so we agreed to try artificial insemination. Somehow they would run it through a machine that would concentrate everything so my count would be higher.

"It's not perfect," Dr. Cohen said. "Even with this approach, it might take several tries before you conceive."

Miraculously, Claire conceived on the first try. To celebrate, we went out to dinner with two of Claire's friends from work, Ron and Jessica, who were recently engaged. Jessica was in her mid-twenties, but Ron was our age, divorced with a son in Vancouver.

"I swear, my ex-wife decided to move to Canada just to piss me off," he said. "Do you know how it feels to need a passport to see your own kid?" I took a bite of my lobster Alfredo. Ron seemed to catch himself and looked back to his plate. "Oh, sorry. Well, it sucks."

Jessica asked how we met, and Claire started telling the story, which I hadn't heard since our wedding.

"I used to be a server at a bar in Montlake called Jackson's Cannery," Claire said. "A lot of our customers were college students, and I got really good at figuring out who the bad tippers were. You've got the clean-cut frat guys, the ones who wear polo shirts all the time—"

"The douchebags," Ron said. He looked at me and laughed.

"Right. They may look rich, but they act like they're entitled to everything. And then you've got the dumpy ones, who are usually nice but don't have much money on them. They'll sit there for hours on one beer or a cup of coffee. One time one of them tried to tip me with a song."

That had been David. I'd found that out at the wedding reception, when I overheard Claire telling the story to a

group of her college friends. An old roommate, her face flushed from wine, had blurted out his name, and Claire said yes, that was an old boyfriend, but she never saw him anymore.

"So in walks this new guy, all by himself," Claire said. "And I think I've got him pegged as one of these poor shlumpy guys. I see the scruffy face, the old grandpa sweater, the stained sneakers. And I'm thinking- Bad Tipper. Where he sat down was supposed to be my friend Meg's table, but she was ready to clock out and didn't want to deal with him, so I took it. He ordered a beer and a veggie burger. A real quiet guy. He hardly looked at me. And so when he was done eating, I went over with his tab. It wasn't more than ten dollars. And what does the guy hand me? A hundred dollar bill."

"Seriously?" said Jessica.

"I'm pretty sure it was fifty," I said. "I used to keep a stash of emergency funds in large bills so I wouldn't spend it. I was low on cash back then."

One of the servers walked by and refilled our water glasses and brought over more bread. I asked her to bring us another bottle of wine and a soda for Claire.

"So here I am, scared to death, because I hadn't been checking on him much. I'm thinking I screwed up and ruined my chance at a decent tip. So when I come back with his change I smile extra big. As I'm handing it to him I bend over a little bit and flash him some cleavage. You know the little tricks that usually work on guys."

Claire and Jessica laugh. Ron nudged me, growling like a

tiger.

"And you know what happened?" Claire asked. "The son of a bitch didn't tip me one cent!"

Ron laughed. "What a bastard!" he said.

"So then the next week, he comes back. He's by himself again, and wouldn't you know it he sits in my section. So I walk over to him, trying to convince myself not to give him a piece of my mind, and before I can say anything he asks me out to dinner. It turns out that he was so nervous the last time that he couldn't say anything and he just ran out. So, I said yes. And now…"

She gestured over to me, like she was presenting a prize she'd won at the fair.

As Claire told the story I was reminded of how things had been before, when David was just a footnote. Our future seemed impossibly vast and open, a place ready to be filled with the sum of ourselves. And now, at last, life was again growing inside of her. We knew how quickly these things could be taken away. The crib was almost finished, and now we'd have more projects to do: clearing out the guest room, painting it to match the crib. There'd be a lot of work. I listened as Jessica started telling the story of how she and Ron met. I listened and waited to hear what came next.

Haircut Parking

ART

By Bart Gulley

Haircut Parking, 2003, oil, collage on board, 24 x 18 inches

An Unknown Soldier

FICTION

BY TADZIO KOELB

I moved up, or so I thought at first, accepting a job writing for a magazine on the brow of readability. The heavy faced editor who watched us from his all-glass office would require needless last-minute rewrites, a weekly crisis with deadlines and presses, to fuel his self-importance; it made me feel important, too, for a short while, but lost its flavour soon enough. The editor and several others, however, whether like-minded, or toadies, or just more capable of appreciating the fun of life than I am, I don't know, never lost their excitement, and did whatever was necessary to recapture it week after week.

Each Wednesday all about me sat men and women busily inventing their Thursday columns in a daze of anxious hopes orphaned to blind luck and backhanded ill humour. In this atmosphere of action and adventure I had at first thought there was an opportunity to be seized, and worked hard, writing with as much attention as four hundred words can bear; but when I came to see the things in print they had been completely rewritten, humour, pathos, and language ripped out of them, along with the point, too, as often as not. I learned over the next few months to pay little or no attention to what I did; as a result there were satisfyingly fewer rewrites, and sometimes an article passed practically untouched by the blue pencil. The kind of slip-shod work my slow mindlessness produced bore for others of greater importance than myself hallmarks that deceitfully implied the speed and brinkmanship that made journalism exciting.

For a while, the magazine became for me a kind of retreat:

by ruining my every effort beyond recognition it relieved me of responsibility to try harder, excused my small daily failures. Once those are spoken for, the mind grows impervious to the larger problems; I was left free to sit at my desk in the overheated offices and wither unthinkingly. To my own surprise, however, the frustration of it could not be ignored; I grew bored of it eventually, and began searching for a way out – out of my job and at last out of the city. The idea that I had to leave Brussels came upon me suddenly and became at once unshakeable. At first I sent letter after letter to companies of all kinds wherever I could find to send them, but mine was not the kind of experience for which one made exceptions, and since I was not available for interviews my applications were discarded. Finally I decided I would simply go, get out: I would move to England. I anticipated a different kind of life there.

I emptied my shelves, leaving a dusty outline of my possessions against the dingy white walls. My small room was full of boxes and suitcases that made my clothing and books seem of far greater volume and importance than they could possibly have deserved when the telephone rang and I heard from him at last. It had been more than two years since we had spoken to each other. I had sought him out for a while, trying his unanswered and finally unringing telephone, traveling a few times to his house, where I banged on the huge door without response, and at last found the windows blinded with cinder-blocks, the great entranceway gagged with work permits and petitions.

He was calling from someplace he refused to name, and his voice sounded odd, caked in an unfamiliar androgyny, the voice of a stranger. I guessed that he was in a public booth: the sound was muffled and echoed as if he were

phoning from a pit. He didn't mention his long silence, and I didn't ask about it. I told him I was packing, and of my plans to move. I had felt like a dilettante writing about nothing; I was going to London, I would take a real job. In fact I had the highest hopes for my new life there, free of the strange transience that marked both myself and the city I had lived in for so many years, the cloying sense of being in a place that could be blown away in the next wind, but which refused to be marked in even the smallest way by either my presence or departure, although I didn't bother explaining that; it seemed too much so suddenly, after he had been gone for so long. The events that had led up to the decision were already lost in forgetfulness, in the birth pangs of the future that I promised myself.

He said, "I think you are talking about someone else."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Now is the time to be honest. If you tell me you are honest, I will believe you." Talking this way made me tired. I found I was shouting to compensate for the quality of the line, and my voice sounded harsh, angrier than I intended, when I answered him.

"I was talking about me."

"If you say so."

There was a silence. When he spoke again his voice was so faint I could barely hear him over the sounds that rose to me from the street, and the quiet animal hum of the telephone line from time to time would swallow his presence. Sounding more alien than ever, he said, "Don't be frightened. My friends are all frightened when I tell

them. I have missed you so much. I was in a long sleep and thought I might not wake up and I knew we missed each other. I woke up to ask you a favour. It's not safe, but I need to ask you.

"I once gave you a painting. I didn't know then that you must destroy it. The others are gone. Don't worry, it isn't important, there is nothing worth worrying about. There are other things more important. Faith is very important, you must remember that. Faith is life and life is nature; I am nature. God is nature. Europeans have belief, you know, addition, it is what they invented for themselves, what they understand, and now they worship it, a plus sign around each neck, on the whitewashed wall of each church, a cross: *le croix*, you see? The cross is hope, but hope is not life. In the dark, in the cold, a European says, *Je crois*: addition. The Arabs are more powerful because they invented multiplication – *deux fois deux*, you follow? *La foi*. Khorezim had faith and lived in sunlight. It knocks addition forward; the cross spins like a wheel. Faith is more than belief. Geometrical progressions are greater than algebraic progressions. This is important knowledge, you mustn't repeat it to anyone. Truth is life and life is truth.

"That is why the painting is unimportant, you see, but it shows what I have understood. You don't see yet. I am scaring you. I am sorry to make you scared, but you will soon see I am right. Someone you know has faith. In Turkey we fear the Europeans but we fear the Arabs also, with faith sometimes they can look into your soul. They do it here as I pass them in the street, but I don't let them look into my eyes, so they can't. The Turks are like Jews, between two worlds, and the star gives no sums. No, don't say any name. You mustn't say my name on the telephone,

there are many people listening, but I won't tell them. My name is something else now, so they will have more trouble finding me. I am always moving. Soon everyone will understand.

"Oh, God. It is the Christians who listen. There are twelve buttons on the phone. You see: the apostles. In Italy twelve is the dangerous number – thirteen was used to trick us, understand, but in the city of the Vatican the Italians learned the truth. It can't be hidden, it is nature and nature is everywhere. I made paintings, and destroyed them, which made them angry but I had to do it. They are playing a game, but pretend it is something else, that is why you haven't seen it. They mustn't see that I know, so play along, pretend you know nothing. I will tell you as little as I can, to protect you. When I destroyed the paintings they understood that I knew. Think of Isis, reassembling, undoing what was done, as if nothing had changed. Yes, unchanged. I unchanged things. It made them angry.

"The Arabs are all apostles, they are not so limited. There is a book you should read, I can't remember the name, in a minute I'll remember. My father knew all this and that is why he died. He bled through his skin, did you know that? I could see the cuffs of his shirtsleeves speckled with blood, there was blood on his face. His eyes were surrounded by blood. He was a very good man, he tried so hard for everybody. He had too much knowledge. Now I will die, too, I can already feel the tingle, and the worms are in my stomach. I have felt it for a long time. I don't want to. I wish you could help me, but I know there is no help. I know you know what I am thinking, but I trust you not to tell. You should read my father's books, there is important information hidden in them, and they are

beautifully written, like a piece of music, until the blood came out. I am not drinking, no. I drink vinegar instead of wine, it's refreshing, and the Christians can't use it. They have great power over wine, while it's in your body they can control you with it, control your blood. That is the reason of the Eucharist.

"They are upset about my memory. They have belief, which is forgetfulness: they must forget what disproves their beliefs. Faith is emptiness that must be filled by the substance of your faith, empty like a puppet that waits for a hand. I have memory, it worries them, and I am not empty yet.

"I wish you could bring me the things I need. Oh, God. Some card, to write on, and ink, a white shirt, a cloth – a white shirt and a white cloth. God is whiteness and whiteness is God. I need other things, too. I think maybe you have them and are keeping them from me, but I know you are scared and I know you love me. I can't, I can't come to you to get them, it isn't safe. Are you scared? I understand, I am very sorry. I am caught between the Germans and the Arabs, you see. It is because things are broken and need mending. They knew it all along, and I knew it, too, although for a long time I tried to escape from it. They put the knowledge in my head, though, so I could see the truth and understand God. There is no doubt about what will happen. I have no choice, I have to play the game of pretending I don't see.

"When I first met you I didn't know this yet, but I suspected. I knew that you could understand, that you are capable. That is why I started that argument. There was a hand on my shoulder. You are still angry with that. No? Good. It was a test. Do you remember once we got lost,

and I yelled at you? It was a test, too, although I hadn't understood that yet either. We were both being tested, but we made it all right, yes?"

"Yes," I finally whispered.

"My mother doesn't know about this, you must not tell her."

"I was going to go see her." I breathed.

He sounded closer when he answered, and his voice was more like his own. "Please keep a secret, she worries enough. Why do you see her?"

The terrible tide of his talk had deposited me on shores where the truth might pass for counterfeit; in my voice I heard the pitch of dishonesty. Speaking felt self-conscious, as if to form words of such a commonplace nature were an unnatural act, as if I were speaking in a language I hardly knew. "She was going to pay me the money I loaned you."

"Ah, a business trip. Of course, I'm sorry; if you are moving you'll be needing it. She understands, I'm sure. You don't know it, but she is very understanding." I told him that in fact she had been very kind to me, and even offered to introduce me to some people in London. I talked vaguely about my plans; I found the temper of specificity so frightening when Iskander spoke that for my part I urgently avoided it. When he answered, Iskander seemed entirely himself. "I am so glad for you," he said. "It is good to see new things when you have the opportunity. Eventually you may find something that pleases you better than this place. Of course I am sorry

you are leaving, it is not going to be the same for me without you here. I think my mother's friends in London are very kind. Tell them my hellos." I wondered for a moment if he hadn't after all been playing a very poor joke, when he reminded me, "Yes, but when you call my mother, remember not to tell my name. I must go now, so burn the painting. I will call you again."

"I'm moving," I told him. "I don't know my new phone number. I'm not even sure where I'll be living." Iskander said he knew.

"You will do what you have to, I will call again," he hissed, and hung up. For some time I sat without moving; I found I was exhausted. Boxes and piles of books and other things stood like a city about me, bordered on all sides by walls, capped by the sloping eves of the roof: horizon, sky, the bare bulb a tiny sun that flickered uncertainly. I thought about Iskander's father, too insubstantial finally even to inhabit his own body. I suddenly felt I remembered the old man facing death, as Iskander had described him: panicked, uncertain, blood on his shirt and his cheek, fear drawing tears to his eyes, calmly but in terror doing what he was told by the men from the ambulance.

The painting lay on the bed, the edges curling a little. There awaited it a cardboard tube recovered from the garbage outside a fabric store, invested now with the duty to preserve; around it I gently rolled the canvas, paint on the outside, as Iskander had taught me, watching the face there first distort like a portrait seen through water, then disappear beneath itself, as if it had turned away. I had nothing better so I wrapped the whole thing in pages torn from an old exercise book in which I had long since

ceased writing, stopping as I packed sometimes to read the words I found there, the voice of a person I barely recognised.

The next afternoon I visited Iskander's mother. The tram rode quietly along its tracks, ringing an occasional warning, trying to lull me as I looked out the windows or studied the shoes of other passengers with unseeing eyes: contemplating whether I would lie to this poor woman who lost her son so long ago she might not even have realised she was losing him again. Enormous cranes filled the sky like cruciform monsters; so many of them for a place that seemed capable to me despite the new buildings and new citizens only of inertia and decay that I wondered if some terrible but irrational force wasn't moving the city just an inch or two to the left, rebuilding it there brick by brick.

We stopped for a moment for a traffic light by the great open square, the eternal flame and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and from that high vantage point could see the colossal cranes raising their frightful necks for miles into the hazy distance. Looking at the tomb I read again the reverential inscription that had once so confused my bad French, that grave instruction in which haplessness and self-discovery mingled: *Passants, découvrez-vous*. All that carved stone, all that worshipful language: how grand it must have seemed at the time; and inside, the hero of a nation, unaware of his own glory, equally ignorant that it had already passed, that he had become part of the unseen landscape of the city, that the great construction cranes looked down on his reward and dreamed of car-parks. Could anyone ever have aspired to be the Unknown Soldier?

She was still living in the same place, surrounded by the artifacts of her husband's career and the articles of their collective respectability. She looked tired, but greeted me warmly, shaking my hand and calling me by name. I felt as if it were all a question of form, somehow emptied of content; in the right tone I could have said any words at all and made no difference. For a while she left me waiting, leaning lightly on the little demi-lune table, its two ornate legs the claws of an animal, its blunt other side dependent on the wall beside the front door. I could hear her opening drawers or cupboards as I looked around at the small human accessories to her life: on a mat the old umbrella, skin falling from the bones, and some shoes; on the table top a few small coins, gloves, keys on a worn little key-ring graced by a smiling cartoon fish and the name of an aquarium – a comforting pile of household debris.

I wanted to walk through to my friend's bright room at the end of the hall, but didn't; I waited instead until she called to me, then followed her voice to the study. The innumerable books there muffled sound from their neat resting place along the dark wooden shelves, and made the room unnaturally quiet, still, intimate: as if the world had left us. She began immediately serving me new bills from a brown envelope, counting in a still, flat voice, a professional-looking eye on the money. I held this scant wealth in my hand for a minute, the paper silvery in the half-light, each bill shot through with a strip of metal. I saw Iskander in his mother's face, like his had been when I met him, although different in a way I had always perceived – perhaps more different now than ever. We walked together to the front door, making so little noise on the hall carpet we might not even have been there, finally tick-tocking reassuringly on the parquet of the foyer.

"Do you know yet where you will be living?" she asked me.

"Not yet, no. Soon, I hope." It was the same lie I had told her son.

"*Je te souhaite une très bonne voyage, alors*."

I waited, but she didn't ask me how he was, or where, or if I had heard from him. I felt grateful: although I had never done so before, I kissed her on both cheeks as I left, a custom foreign to both of us. I could see she didn't know what to make of it, accepting my actions as if I were the host and she a tourist afraid of being gauche. Outside the streetlights had come on, and in their yellow glow the pebbled concrete pavement looked ephemeral, ready to sink away at any minute, like sand.

A Study in Portraiture: Volta

ART

By Heather Cantrell

A Study in Portraiture: Volta (Larissa Bates), 2010, silver rag archival ink jet, 15 x 12 inches, edition unique

Porter, Amy

FICTION

BY WALLY RUDOLPH

Ten minutes ago, Porter's sequined schoolgirl skirt shot vanilla scented lightening across the club. I didn't see where it landed. When she threw off her top, her breasts stole my heart. Two sops in the front row spilled their drinks. The rest – men, old men, lonely sacks – watched with their mouths gaping as Porter stripped to The Cure's "Pictures of You." Her ass was a marshmallow. Her brown eyes flashed everything I could never have.

She disappeared after her routine and then materialized in front of the DJ booth with her black hair tucked under a Dodgers cap. She peeled her long, fake eyelashes off her china doll face and flicked them into the trashcan at my feet. As she counted my tip-out from a plastic grocery bag stuffed with wadded up cash, the voice of Billy, the night manager, cracked through my walkie.

"Ricky, you out there?"

I rolled my eyes and cued up Stardust's last song on the CD player.

"Where else would I be?" I answered. "We still got a couple of hours by my watch."

"Is Porter at the DJ Booth?"

Porter set a stack of singles thick as a Bible in front of me.

"You don't have any bigger bills?" I asked her.

"The bar's out," she said. "No one went to the bank."

I rubber-banded the cash in half and dropped it into my bag.

Billy's voice burst through the radio. "Ricky, don't ignore me you sack of shit. Is Porter with you?"

"I heard you, Billy. She's here, all dressed and ready to leave."

"Tell her to stop at my office on her way out."

"I'm running late. I got a sitter," whispered Porter.

"Billy, she's gotta get out of here. She's got a baby sitter."

The radio fizzed two patches of static before Billy came back on. "Mary Poppins can wait," he barked. "I'll pour her some champagne."

I took the batteries out of the walkie and threw them in the trashcan. "What'd you do to piss the boss off?" I asked Porter.

"What do you mean?"

"When Billy's pouring champagne, it's your last night."

"That's 'cause it is – I quit."

"That's a shame, I never even got your real name."

Porter ignored me and watched Stardust step on stage in a shimmering silver gown. I turned on the microphone and

held it close to my mouth before I started.

"Alright, Gentlemen. Get your cash out and hold onto your pants. Next up, one of The Jet Strip's finest ladies – the one, the only, Stardussst! Let's tip those waitresses and dancers."

Stardust stood with her back to the crowd, shaking her hips to the opening guitar licks of Van Halen's "Panama." On David Lee Roth's first scream, she dropped her gown and swung around. Her pink bikini glowed under the black lights, and her blonde hair and tight, tan skin looked like another costume she'd squeezed into.

"How long has she been doing this one?" asked Porter.

"As long as I've been working here. It's either this or 'Hot for Teacher' for her last song."

One by one, all the regulars set their drinks down, got up and tossed cash onto the stage – nothing smaller than a five.

"She's definitely got her fans," said Porter.

"So do you."

"No, I've got the creeps. I always get the creeps."

"I'm not a creep."

Porter pulled out a glossy postcard from her purse and set it in front of me.

"Tomorrow's your day off, right? You should come to my

show," she said.

"I see a show every night."

"Say you're a friend of mine, they'll give you a discount."

"I like that. I'm a V.I.P. now."

I looked over to see if Porter heard my joke, but she was already halfway across the club. She dropped some dollar bills onto the stage as she passed. Stardust winked at her and mouthed out, "Call me."

The ghetto bird lit up my car on La Brea on the way home. It was still dark, close to five in the morning, but the police helicopter's spotlight was as bright as day. It followed me north through Inglewood lighting up strip malls, 99¢ stores, Yum-Yum doughnut shops, and rental storage spaces that speckled all of L.A. like ugly moles. When I didn't spook and gas my car down a side street, the helicopter let off. I put a kiss on my Buick's broken sun visor and watched the silhouettes of Baldwin Hill's lone palm trees crop up with the rising sun.

The city was waking up by the time I hit Hollywood. Folks in all different colors and shapes pushed grocery carts down the sidewalks and in the slow lanes. Their carts overflowed with soda cans, plastic and glass bottles, and an occasional trashed baby stroller or blown speaker cabinet with exposed wires and splintered, raw wood. Every half-mile, twenty more cars filled the street, and when I turned down Melrose towards my apartment, there was steady early-morning traffic in every direction.

I got lucky with a parking spot in front of my neighbor's

building. I let my car idle and finished my Winston with the rumble of my Buick's rotten engine. I poked through my lunch sack of tip money and thought on what would've happened if the cops pulled me over with all that cash. There would've been a shoot-out. I'd be on T.V. All my old friends from Fairfax High would've seen me on local news, KCAL 9 hovering over the scene. Whitney Drolen, that sweet-titted newscaster, would be wearing a short gray business skirt; her wet, blonde hair dripping down her chest as she called out my name.

"There's a situation in Hollywood this morning. The police have caught up with notorious, international DJ Tip-Top Ricky Staggs, and he's putting up a fight. SWAT teams and the National Guard have been dispatched. Oh, I have to catch my breath. What's that? His hot, baby-faced wife, Porter Staggs, is on the line. Ricky, if you can hear this, Porter says she loves you, and so do I. We want you to take off your shirt, work up a sweat, run around with that bad ass fucking gun."

I woke up on my couch in the afternoon. My apartment stank of the bag of street tacos I must've pulled from the fridge, but passed out before eating. My left cheek was wet from sleeping on a beer-soaked cushion. A magnum of Coors Light lay on the floor, just out of my reach. I rolled onto my back and pulled my phone from my pocket. It was three o'clock, and I hadn't missed a thing.

I took an hour-long shower and washed my hair for the week. I soaped up my hands till they were slick, had myself, and washed it all down the drain. I lathered my face and shaved with a new razor. I saw weight on my face that I had never seen before. My wrinkles creased my skin in dark, fat lines. I wished there was makeup for people

who worked nights – a cream thick as batter. I'd spackle it on with my pocket knife.

I wrapped myself in a towel and called my sister while I trimmed my toenails.

She answered after the first ring. "Ricky, can I call you back? I'm checking out at the market with the kids."

"Make it fast," I said.

"Don't be an ass."

"Don't be a bitch."

I swiped my pits with Right Guard and sprayed myself down with Drakkar. It tingled and dried just how I liked. I turned on my living room stereo and picked up my jeans from the floor. Porter's glossy postcard fell to my feet just as my phone rang.

"Ricky?"

"Ricky's not here."

"Ricky, stop. I don't have time for this. The kids are driving me crazy today."

"There is no Ricky – only darkness."

"I'll hang up."

"Alright, alright. I stopped."

"What are you doing? Why don't you come over and give

me a break?"

"I'm not driving to Redondo today."

"Why?"

"It's my day off."

"And you're not doing anything, but going to the bar to play video games."

"It's trivia."

"It's a video game."

"I've got stuff going on. I'm hitting the record stores today. I'm working on my sets."

"Stop lying– "

"And I've got a date."

"One sec . . . Quit it, Jay! I'm serious . . . Give it back to her. GIVE IT BACK TO HER! That's it – no Papa John's . . . No, I told you guys twice already. You ruined it. Ricky, you there?"

"Don't take away Papa John's."

"Who's the girl?"

"She's from work."

"Here we go – another tramp."

"Don't say that, Annie. I hate when you say that. Everybody's gotta– "

"Make a living. I know, I know."

"Those tramps pay half your rent."

"Alright, I heard you. They're saints. Where you taking her?"

"We're going to see a play."

"Ricky, don't be a cheapskate. Take her somewhere nice."

"We're going out to eat afterwards."

"Where?"

"I don't know – sushi, maybe burgers."

"Sushi."

"Fine."

"And get your car cleaned."

"Okay."

"Love you."

"Kiss the kids."

On the front of Porter's postcard was a charcoal drawing of a fat woman gargoyle sitting on a flailing man's face. *Hag Phenomenon* was printed below the picture in small,

blurry, red letters. The only thing on the back was the theatre's address and a phone number. I called and got a recording of a young queer guy ready to bust. He thanked me for my interest and rattled off the show's dates and times. There was a six o'clock show on Sundays, and if I wanted to reserve a "…fierce, fabulous seat close to the ack-shone…," leave my name and number after the tone. I hung up, swept all my clipped toenails onto the front of the card, and emptied them into the trash.

I pulled a fresh, black sleeveless t-shirt from the dryer, cracked a beer, and got my comb and gel from the bathroom. I lit a Winston and did my hair in my bedroom mirror. The light was better in there; I looked like what I looked like to everyone else.

Judd Nelson was at the Snake Pit when I showed up. He'd claimed my seat at the end of the bar next to the trivia machine. The place was packed for a Sunday afternoon. A table of drunk college kids wearing burgundy and gold passed around dripping pitchers of beer while they watched the football game on the big screen.

Marla, the bartender, rushed back and forth from behind the bar to the cocktail tables trying to keep everyone happy. She was at least my age – forty-seven at the most – but still looked hot with her dyed black hair all the way to her ass. A month ago, she'd gotten drunk on shift and told me she was thinking about getting some work done. One of her tits was removed on account of some family cancer; she didn't feel like a woman. I told her I stared at naked girls every night, and she was twice as hot as any of them – with or without tits. Ever since then, she smiled when she saw me.

"Grab it! I've been saving it for you, Baby," Marla yelled, pointing to the only empty seat at the bar.

Dominic, the younger Mexican guy, was working the kitchen. He came out when I sat down.

"Where's Ruben?" I asked him.

"Fuck Ruben. You don't like my food?"

"I love your food, but Ruben usually works Sundays."

"It's his daughter's birthday. I'm trying to be a nice guy. You want your nachos?"

"You know it – steak and extra cheese."

Marla swung around the side of the bar carrying a full tray of dirty glasses. Her face shined with sweat, and the belly of her pink tank top was soaked from tossing drinks.

"Dominic, can you take these?" she asked.

"I don't do dishes."

She re-tied her hair with a rubber band and batted her eyes like a little girl.

"Please, I'm getting slammed." She begged.

"Get Ricky a beer and I'll think about it," Dominic said, winking at me.

"Deal. One Coors Light coming right up."

While she turned to pull my beer from the tap, I leaned forward to see if Judd Nelson had moved.

"Ricky, do you want me to say something to Judd?" asked Marla.

"No, he looks comfortable."

Judd's hair was tied back in a short samurai ponytail, and his goatee was out of hand. He looked tough as shit staring at the game through his red-tinted Ben Franklin's.

"You sure?" asked Marla. "He's a nice guy. He'll move."

"I know. I know Judd, I've talked to him a couple of times. He's cool. I'm not going to be here long anyways."

"Oh . . . Where you going?" Marla set my beer in front of me and leaned forward on the bar.

"A play," I said. "I'm meeting a friend of mine. It's right down the street."

"I'd love to see a play sometime."

"You should go. I just came in here to grab my nachos, so I don't get hungry."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And you felt bad for flaking on our trivia night."

"Play with Judd. He's got a great seat."

A fat college kid slammed two empty pitchers on the bar next to me. "REFILL!" he shouted.

"Take it easy, Kid. I'm right here," said Marla.

"Shut up, and get my beer, tranny– "

"HEY, WATCH YOUR FUCKING MOUTH!"

Judd Nelson jumped off my seat at the other end of the bar and pushed through the crowd to get to the fat kid.

"Apologize to the lady," he said.

"Who the fuck are you?" asked the kid.

I got off my bar stool, stood at the kid's shoulder, and stared him down.

"He's someone you shouldn't be messing with, Asshole," I said, cracking my knuckles.

"Sit down, Ricky," said Judd.

I couldn't believe he remembered my name. We had talked a couple of times, but I still couldn't believe it.

"Apologize to her or leave," said Judd.

The whole bar went quiet except for the blaring football announcers. Everyone watched Judd stand toe to toe with this fat, drunk kid twice his size. I clenched my right hand into a fist and nodded at his table of friends.

"Aren't you Judd Nelson?" asked the kid.

"Yeah, I am."

"No shit! I fucking love Breakfast Club . . . Benderrr– "

"Dude, apologize to lady." said Judd.

The fat kid looked back at his table of friends and dropped his head, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry."

"Her name's Marla," said Judd.

"I'm sorry, Marla. I was out of line."

"It's alright," said Marla. "Thanks for apologizing."

"Now, go get drunk and quit being a prick. The next round's on me. Go Trojans," said Judd.

"Judd, don't worry. I got their drinks," I said.

He looked at me, shook his head, and walked back to my Sunday night seat. The fat kid stared at me, smiling.

"Buttafuoco called and said he wants his hair back."

I left the Snake Pit with thirty minutes to spare before Porter's play. Behind my shades, the setting sun shot golden orange laser beams down Melrose Avenue. Everything was awesome red. I lit up a Winston and walked west towards the theatre.

The tourist shops were closing early because it was Sunday. Two skinny white girls struggled, pulling down

their storefront's rollaway security gate. They both wore heels and short, tight skirts that rode higher and higher up their thighs. Their legs looked like bare bones, and when they jumped and grabbed at the gate, one girl's skirt snuck above her ass. Her trimmed, naked bush was all over the street. Cars and trucks honked from every direction as the girls hung from the bottom lip of the gate.

The two of them bounced and yanked, but together those girls probably didn't weigh a buck-fifty. The gate snapped back up, and the mostly naked girl lost her shoes. Their laughter carried over the traffic. They squeaked back and forth, calling each other "bitch."

No one else does, but I remember tearing through this neighborhood when it was hot. I was nineteen, with greasy hair, bad teeth and flaring acne. I wore my Mom's Olay foundation to hide my skin. It made a big difference to me. I wore my high school 501s and a black sleeveless t-shirt when I flyered Hollywood Boulevard for The Weirdos and The Germs. The sounds were massive. The vibe was insolent.

I ate garbage dogs behind The Masque on its opening night. Nobody was there to see my braces jammed up with pig dicks, ketchup, and white dough. I shaved my head with my Grampy's old straight blade and got arrested at two different Flag shows with fresh razor nicks over my ears. I was billy-clubbed at the Bla-Bla and got my nose broken in Chinatown.

When the chicks-with-dicks poisoned the scene, I rolled with them too. I grew my hair back and sported a red leotard under my ripped, bleached jeans. I saw Halen at Garradi's, I loaded in PairADice before they tore Garradi's

down. One sorry wall on Sunset Strip was left, broken bricks and lousy rock all over the ground.

I hung out with London when Nikki was in the band, and when he took off, I saw the first Crew show before they were *Criie*. That night, I burned through a tall can of hairspray teasing my hair. I tried eyeliner and lip gloss, even though I knew those things made me uglier. I've never been a looker, but I swung with the trends.

I didn't enjoy coke. I liked beer, laughs, and speed. Once, I stayed up for a week on a friend's stash of black beauties. I walked from Sherman Oaks to the Malibu Drainpipes. I wanted to learn how to surf. At dawn, a pretty boy smacked my face as the swells rolled in. He ripped out my earrings and stomped my gut. I hitched a ride to one of the first Urgent Care's on the West Side. I paid cash, because by then, I was working the door at the Jet Strip down in Inglewood. The club paid and fed me after every shift. I bought my own makeup and switched to Cover Girl.

The theatre's door was locked. I checked my watch. I was right on time. I flicked my smoke onto the street and knocked but no one came. As soon as I turned back toward the Snake Pit, the door clicked open. The same queer voice from the answering machine called out after me.

"Get your ass back over here!"

The queer was well into his sixties, with a pink, balding, spotted head. He wore a crisp, purple polo with an upturned collar and a pair of white, thick-framed glasses that turned his eyes into giant blue hard candies.

"Oh my God, are you mute?" he asked. "I'm sorry if you are, but I know a lot of you can read lips – MY NAME IS STANLEY GATES. ARE YOU HERE FOR THE SHOW?"

He moved his mouth around like an ass, saying the words loud and slow.

"Is this the place for *Hag Phenomenon*?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm the hag. And I'm phenomenal. Let's go, let's go. I'm getting a chill."

He opened the door wide and waved me in. "Let me guess: your suit's at the cleaners."

"What?"

"We have a Rhodes Scholar in our midst. I'm honored. Keep your voice down. The show's about to start."

He spoke fast, chopping his words with his teeth and tongue. He latched the door and bolted across the lobby to a fold-up table with two Diet Cokes sitting on top.

"Box seats or nose bleeds?" he asked.

"I'm a friend of Porter's."

"Ohhh, you're from her other job," he said, smiling.

"I don't think she works there any–"

"Shh, Shh."

He held his finger to his lips and shook his head back and forth. "None of my business, no judgment – ever. If you're a friend of Amy's, then you're a friend of the show."

The lights clipped on and off throughout the lobby.

"That's our cue. Follow me."

He put the cash box under his arm and led me through a pair of heavy red drapes. "We were robbed during our performance last weekend. They took everything – our cash, the tickets, a bracelet my granddaughter braided for me."

We walked down a short, dimly lit hallway. The carpet smelled like dog. Black and white pictures of actors on stage covered both the walls. All the people were caught in motion, in the middle of a sentence or having a cry.

"I called the police, and they laughed at me," said Stanley. "Can you believe it? I can. Now I carry the cash box around like the Sheriff of Cockingham."

"You should get some cameras or a gun. I know a guy in the valley."

"I bet you do."

He pulled apart another set of black drapes with his hand. "Give your eyes a second to adjust," he said.

The theatre was black except for three lit candles floating in the middle of the room.

"What are you waiting for? C'mon."

"I thought you said–"

He grabbed my hand and pulled me into the black. I shuffled my feet. I couldn't see a thing.

"Watch your step. Look down, there's glow tape," he whispered. "You should shave your arms. Talk to me afterwards."

Three loud, hollow knocks, like brick hitting board, rang out into the theatre.

"Here, sit down, sit down."

I felt around and found a pair of armrests. As I lowered myself down, the seat creaked and whined. "Sorry," I said.

Stanley was gone. Two voices whispered back and forth, but I couldn't tell from which direction. An old man hacked and coughed and then grumbled something in a foreign accent. His voice sounded like a Russian gangster in the dark. Three knocks, louder and sharper than before, pounded through the theatre.

The lights brightened a bit, and from the front row, I saw that the three floating candles were actually set in tall, standing holders across the stage. A bare mattress in a rusted bed frame was in the center. Two pairs of handcuffs hung from the top of the bed.

Speakers popped on, sending low, whining feedback through the seats. A record needle dropped onto an LP, and for a moment, old clipping static hissed all around me.

Pipe organs blasted off, then thick church octaves scrambled up and down. I didn't know the hymn, but it was heavy and fast like the end of the world.

Red lights flashed the bare mattress. Smoke machines buzzed backstage. Grey, creamy fog covered the candles and spilled off the stage over my feet. A woman screamed at the back of the theatre. It sounded far away, deep behind the audience. The lights flashed faster, and the organ was so loud I heard its pedals clicking up and down.

"MOVE!"

I jumped in my seat and turned around. Four black hooded figures pushed a naked woman in a giant rooster mask down the center aisle. She fought back, screaming and thrashing into their robes.

"MOVE!" they yelled.

They prodded her with long, black staffs. Sweat dripped from her body, and her muffled cries slipped out from under the mask. She managed to break away and run for the back of the theatre.

"NEVER!" she screamed.

The tallest of the figures pulled a pistol from under his robe and shot her in the back. She collapsed to the ground with her arm outstretched to the lobby drapes. Her rooster head hit the floor like a piñata.

"Some serious shit," I whispered to myself.

The two other couples in the audience didn't move.

Behind me, the older couple sat in the last row staring blankly at the girl on the ground. As fog smothered the audience, the old man started coughing again, and his wife handed him a handkerchief from her purse. I couldn't hear him over the organs, but he looked to be suffering some kind of fit.

A younger couple across the theatre couldn't keep it together. The guy was sunk in his seat, covering his mouth with his hand while his date slapped his arm trying to stop his giggling.

The four robed figures picked up the girl's limp arms and legs and carried her onstage. She moaned under the mask, and then one of the figures tripped on his robe and slammed her rooster head on the front of the stage. The girl in the audience gasped, and her date got up and left, his body shaking violently with laughter.

As the robed men set the naked rooster girl on the bed, I heard one of them ask her if she was alright. I guess she was, because they cuffed her wrists to the bed frame and rolled on with the show.

The music faded out, and the lights went black. The candles flickered through the haze. A man breathed heavy through the speakers. The microphone distorted his voice, turning his words into booming mush.

"These god awful sluts," the voice said. "The gashed out whores. This poverty, ladies and gentlemen. This moral poverty. Heavy drinking. Peeling skin. Swollen joints. Skin divers! Snuff flicks! Ambroooosia!"

His nasal voice screeched until he was out of breath.

"I'm going to take a sip of coffee, and let you think."

Slurping sounds filled my ears, while a single spotlight lit up the rooster girl cuffed to the bed. Her sweaty chest heaved up and down, glistening under the light.

"I want everyone to put a hand over their heart. Let this city close all over you. What do we know? What do we ever know?"

Two of the figures slowly lifted the mask from the girl's head. Porter's wet black hair fell around her flushed face.

"SLUTS DON'T SLEEP!" the figures barked.

The rooster head fell to the ground.

The rooster head fell to the ground. Porter shook out her hair while piercing techno dance music exploded into the theatre. Strobe lights flashed the stage. The figures ripped off their robes, revealing four tanned beefcakes in glowing fluorescent hotpants. Their hips popped in and out to the booming music as Porter busted the cuffs.

She stood up on the mattress, pulling her fingers across her black-and-blue-smudged eyes. I gave her a thumbs-up, but I don't think she could see me behind all the lights. She bounced over the front of the bed frame and landed like a cat center stage. She snarled a grin across the audience while the men lined up behind her. They all broke into a choreographed dance, but only stomped a few steps before a can of Diet Coke flew from the audience and nearly hit one of the dancers in his oily, smiling face.

"Watch it, Asshole," the dancer yelled, pointing behind me.

"Fuug you."

The old man flipped the bird as he walked out. His wife held his arm and steadied him down the aisle.

"Is bullshit!" the old man shouted over the music. "Buuullshit!"

Stanley handed me a clear plastic cup of white wine as I walked into the lobby.

"What'd you think of the costumes?"

"The rooster head was great," I said. "Were those real feathers?"

"No, we bought that, but the dancers' shorts – I designed them."

"They looked great too. They were really tight and shiny under the lights. Do you do
women 'cause I know a ton of girls–"

"Just the boys."

The kid who was the first one to walk out waited outside the bathroom for his date. When she came out, they looked at each other, laughed, and headed for the exit.

"Thanks for coming," said Stanley. "Tell your friends."

The front door slammed shut behind them. Stanley tried

to smile as he filled three more cups with wine.

"You know, the show's not for everyone," he said. "I'm really proud of it though. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears are on that stage."

"It shows."

A smile broke across his face, and his cheeks blushed. He said, "We just wanted to make a fierce show about what it's like."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You said, 'the show's about what it's like' – what what's like?"

Stanley took a small sip, swallowed, and closed his eyes, savoring the cold, sour wine.

"We have this wondrous life, but we hate everything. We hate our jobs, our homes. We're mean and spiteful. Right now, this precious thing is getting eaten up by everyone's hate. It's like the world doesn't want us to dance."

"Like in Footloose – have you seen that?" I asked.

"It's been awhile."

Porter walked out to the lobby in a pair of baggy jeans and a faded Smiths t-shirt. Her duffel bag was slung over her shoulder, and she looked like she just got off work, except her eyes were still painted with that serious makeup. She

looked famous.

"You were fabulous, girl!" Stanley rushed to her with a fresh cup of wine.

"We don't have any red?" Porter asked.

"Sold out last weekend. I can run and get you some, not a big deal."

"Do we have any water?"

"Coming right up."

Stanley disappeared behind the lobby drapes. Porter set her bag down and rolled her head back and forth, loosening her neck.

"The music was slamming," I said. "Did you pick it out?"

"One of the dancers' boyfriend is a DJ. He did a custom mix for us. That was him doing the monologue. I wrote that."

"Cool."

"I didn't think you'd come," she said.

"You invited me."

"What was your favorite part?"

"When they shot you, I freaked out. It looked so real."

"We worked on that for a week. The timing's a bitch. I

always get scared. I can barely see anything under that mask."

"Feel like grabbing some food?" I asked. "I know a great sushi place up the street."

"You buying?"

"I'm asking."

Porter picked up her bag and started towards the door.

"Oh, what about Stanley? Should we say goodbye?" I asked.

"He's not going anywhere."

Two gutter punks on skateboards nearly knocked Porter down as we walked up Melrose.
I caught her arm and swung around to give them hell, but they were already kicking through the next intersection. Their wallet chains whipped in the air behind them like steel tails.

"You can let go. I'm alright," said Porter.

Porter pulled a red hoodie out of her duffel and slipped it on over her head. She cinched the hood tight around her face and tied the drawstrings in a bow under her chin.

"You cold?" I asked.

"This is how I roll," she said.

Traffic sped up and down Melrose in raging batches of

light and noise. After sunset, everyone quit cruising for the day and the city was racing the cokehead party clock.

"Should I call you Porter or Amy?" I asked.

"Amy's fine . . . or Porter."

"How'd you come up with Porter, anyway? I never heard a name like that."

"I stole it."

"Yeah, right. From who?"

"No one. Everyone. A friend. How far's the restaurant?"

"Just a couple blocks up by La Brea."

She walked ahead, talking to me over her shoulder. From behind, she looked younger, shorter, like a kid wandering home late from school.

"Where are you from, Ricky?"

"I live right around here."

"No, where are you from?"

"I grew up around here."

I was having a time keeping up. She walked fast, with her hands in the belly pocket of her sweatshirt and her shoulders hunched like a hood.

"Are you from L.A.?" I asked.

"Not yet – me first."

"What?"

"You, then me. What do you care about?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a simple question. What do you care about?"

She slid her duffel from her side to her back. Her steps got shorter, and her feet moved even faster.

"Can we slow down? What's the rush?"

"No, walk faster. You didn't answer the question."

"I don't know. I love my sister and her kids and my mom."

"I didn't ask what you *loved*. I asked what you care about."

At the intersection a half-block ahead, the white walk signal flashed into an orange hand, and Porter broke into a jog.

"I care about my music," I said, running after her. "I like my job because I get to play music."

"Lousy."

Porter sprinted across the street just as the traffic light changed. I stopped at the corner as cars flooded the intersection, separating us.

"What gives? Why didn't you wait for me?" I shouted over the traffic.

"What did you think of the show?"

"I told you, I thought it was great."

"How did I look?"

I took a step into the street, trying to catch a break in the traffic. A car swerved and the driver laid on its horn.

"How did I look, Ricky?"

"You looked good."

"Just good?"

"You looked hot."

Porter started to walk up the street away from me, but then stopped and turned around.

"It's not easy getting naked onstage. Do you know that?" she called out.

"I work at a strip club."

"I hate it."

When the traffic light turned yellow, I started across the intersection.

"WATCH OUT!"

I heard the Mercedes whine and roar before I saw it running the light. It screeched to a stop a foot from my knees. My heart stopped. I could barely breathe.

"Get out of the street, Ricky!" yelled Porter.

I peered into the tinted windshield but didn't see a face. The car jumped ahead of me and peeled out down the street. Porter grabbed my arm and pulled me onto the sidewalk.

"I'm not going to fuck you," she said.

"Did you see how fast that guy was going?"

"I'm just letting you know."

"Christ, he could've killed me . . ."

"Why'd you come, Ricky?"

"Porter, you invited me."

"You thought you were going to get screwed."

"No. No, I didn't."

"So you want to fuck me?"

"I want to get something to eat. I need a drink."

"How old are you?" Porter scowled at me with her black-blotched eyes. She looked like a giant red raccoon.

"Forty-three," I said. "How old are you?"

"That could work. What'd you think of the show?"

"You already asked me that."

"Tell me again."

"You know what? It was stupid. It was ridiculous and too loud–"

Porter turned around and started walking back to the theatre.

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

"Home. I got a sitter."

I stood in front of the sushi restaurant. Its red neon sign blinked, "Fresh Fish, Fresh Fish."

"Porter, we're right here."

"I wanted to fuck you too, Ricky." She lowered her head and turned and jogged away. Her duffel bag bounced on her back, shoving her forward after every step.

Inside the restaurant, every seat was full, even at the bar. All the mouths chewed, talked, laughed, drank. I wished I had brought my jacket. I rubbed my bare shoulders and pulled a Winston from my pocket. The flame reflected in the window, and I saw smoke filling my mouth. I looked older in that reflection, not how I look at home.

Brown Chair

ART

BY PATRICK WHALEN

Brown Chair, 2008, gouache on paper, 12 x 12 inches

The Chair

FICTION

By Peter Blauner

As Arturo Burgos read the computer screen over his daughter's shoulder, he let out a cry of anguish so sharp his wife came running into the room.

"Ai, Nila." He held his right elbow with his left hand as if he was having a heart attack. "How could this happen?"

On the monitor of the secondhand HP desktop, which he'd paid a hundred dollars to have repaired so his daughter could take it to the rich people's college in Pennsylvania, was a review of his business.

"Arturo Burgos es a fraud," it began. "Most korrup furnechure-restore en the Bronx. Mi abuela's best dinning roomchar kollaps soon as she sets on it."

The corners of his eyes burned. Twelve years of long hours and earnest labor, trying to make a name for his business on Fordham Road and carry on the family tradition of the finest craftsmanship started by his great-grandfather in Bogota back in the 1920s. Years spent learning the subtle language of wood grains, of coming home smelling of glue and sawdust, of doing jobs at a loss just to build a reputation as an honest tradesman while trying to save enough to help pay for his daughter's school books at this faraway college. All of it threatened by this character assassination in white letters on a navy background.

"Oh, Papi, forget about it," His daughter Linda said. "It's

the Internet. You can't take it to heart."

The tender admiration with which she looked up at him, brown eyes and the same black pigtails she'd had when she was six, brought him back to sanity. His pride and joy. His heart soared when he thought of how she'd managed to rise above the norm at her mediocre public high school and win a scholarship based on her advanced math skills, but it plummeted when he considered how he would miss her.

"Let it go," she advised. "Look how many other good reviews you have. Eleven out of twelve give you five stars."

He nodded and kissed her on top of the head. But all through dinner and watching the Yankees that night, doubt and anger plagued him, distracting him even from a ninth inning rally led by Robinson Cano. Although he had only just turned fifty, this century bewildered him. A flurry of taps on a keyboard and one's honor could be besmirched forever. In a more noble era, such slanders could be answered in a proper duel.

A week later, he insisted his daughter log on again. Three new reviews had appeared. Two lauded his attention to detail and his sense of "old world" courtesy, but there was a new attack.

"Burgos ruind an antque rockin char that ben in my familia for many year! He returnd with crak spindeles! Hes a peasant pretending to be an artis."

A red mist fell over Arturo. The name on the slugline – SBoliver67 – was obviously a ruse, but he recognized the

pattern of misspellings and the author's birth year. Undoubtedly, this was the work of his old employee, Rafael Nunez, that boracchin from Cartagena, who had appealed to Arturo as a countryman in asking for a job and then abused his trust by showing up drunk and stealing from the cash register. He'd been badmouthing Arturo in the bars and bodegas of East Tremont for two years since getting fired, but now it was obvious the coward found a way to disseminate his complaints more widely.

Arturo waited until his wife and daughter were asleep and his beloved Yankees had fallen prey to the cruel stratagems of Boston. Then he went back to the keyboard, and using his daughter's password, logged on to the offending website. Nunez had posted a third scurrilous review, and Arturo began to type out a bitter reply, hunting and pecking with two untutored index fingers. But after two sentences, he backspaced furiously. If Rafael had used to trickery to get under his skin, he needed to be equal in stealth. Remembering the drunkard's predilection for unvirtuous women, he began imitating the way he'd seen his daughter copy and move blocks of words on the screen, his fingers flexing and prancing across the keys as gracefully as Linda had danced the role of the deceptive contessa at her tenth grade recital.

"SBoliver67, you are a man of passion…"

Two detectives came to the house ten days later. Swollen men in dark suits and polished shoes, not of the finest quality.

"We need to speak to your daughter." One sat down in a 1907 wing-chair with cherrywood legs that Arturo had spent months varnishing.

"She's busy packing," Arturo said, as his wife joined them in the living room.

"We were telling your husband, we need to speak to her about an investigation," the sitting detective said. "A man named Rafael Nunez was stabbed to death near the Grand Concourse two nights ago. He'd arranged to meet a young lady there. The messages to set it up came from your daughter's email account."

"It's not possible." Arturo felt himself grow faint as his wife let out a wail. "My daughter is attending the University of Pennsylvania."

"Not this term." The other detective leaned on a Chippendale dresser that Arturo had refurbished for Linda to take to school. "She's coming to our squad. And we got a warrant for her hard drive."

Linda had emerged from the bedroom, bleary-eyed from last-night's farewell party. "Que pasa, Papi?"

The sight of her standing there, in her pigtails and college t-shirt, about to lose the promise of a bright future, caused Arturo to feel his heart was being yanked from his chest.

"Take me instead," he pleaded.

"Doesn't work like that, Sir," the detective who'd been standing put handcuffs on Linda. "Your daughter should've known better. This is the modern world."

"Mi corazon!" Arturo waved his arms helplessly.

"That's a nice chair." The detective who'd been sitting said

as he rose and looked back. "They don't make them like that anymore."

Mimosa

ART

BY RACHEL SHIM

Mimosa, 2012, pencil on paper, 9 x 12 inches

Another Diana

FICTION

By Lou Gaglia

Philosophy class, and Professor Stevens was already talking at 8 A.M., shoving the hair away from his eyes, pacing and talking and not looking at anyone. Sartre again. *Being and Nothingness,* like it meant something what he was saying. But his lecture was the nothingness. I sat in back, my head leaned against the wall, and his voice became a hum. There was a wild one-second dream, a whispering voice in my ear. I started awake, and then slept and woke again at the rise and fall of his voice. Finally, sitting up straight, I looked around at the other students who took notes, and I rubbed my eyes, opened my notebook and doodled. Doodled…then wrote, "Sartre knows shit." Scribbled around it.

Diana's look-a-like hadn't been on the train in the morning. She wasn't sitting in the same front corner seat as she had been for the first three weeks of the semester. The conductor coming by for my ticket gave me a look, maybe noticing my stricken face. I stared out the window and watched only the ground when the train moved on. I watched only ground so that it became more blurred the faster the train went.

She'd looked like Diana from a distance the first time I'd seen her on the train — the straight dirty blonde hair, the thin body, the slightly rounded jaw — but when I sat closer or walked closer along the field to campus each morning, she only looked as beautiful, as quiet.

At the station she didn't step off the train from a different car, and she wasn't among the sea of students who passed me, walking swiftly toward the campus buildings ahead, the enormous field around us.

Late July, lost trying to get to the enormous Pinelawn Cemetery, and then lost trying to find the grave, I shivered and knelt and stared at Diana's name and the range of dates on a temporary dull gray cross. All around me a sea of graves, the white crosses rolling along hills. Military cemetery. Her father in the service. Her parents…their seventeen-year-old daughter gone. Drunk driving date flipping the jeep on a turn in Centerport. Diana flung, dying instantly, the paper said. Her drunk date just fine. July 11, the stick said. I stayed at the grave, telling her I didn't know her well but— Told the grave I always liked her very much but— Said I was sorry, but— Tried to cry about her and her parents, but—

Existentialism over, I wandered to the library, beginning my Sartre paper in my mind with, "What the hell does Sartre know?" But after looking at my meager notes at a back table in the stacks, I slept until a passing cackle jolted me, and I moved into the open first floor section and sat in a large cushion chair. I took out not the Sartre book but the other two I'd gotten from the town library and scanned through both. The afterlife, the possibility of it. I turned them over when someone walked by.

For three years in junior high school, and another three in high school, Diana was quietly beautiful — with friends in their circle of talk before school or at recess in junior high — not saying much, only smiling once in a while. And further back, at eleven or twelve years old, she'd always seemed to be around, sitting still on or circling with her

bicycle while I played baseball at Babe Ruth Field. She lived nearby, in one of the courts near the field and the library. Blue bicycle. One blonde braid across her forehead. Green jeans jacket. Me in my cursing stage then.

A bobble, a bad throw from shortstop and I couldn't stop the spew. Cursed at myself for cursing. She circled or sat on the bike and hardly spoke. And now I couldn't remember her voice, not even now, four months after they'd forced us together in senior theater class, because she didn't say much then, either.

In ninth grade art class she sat across from me all year. Table of the same four. Quietly she drew or painted, enjoying it. Talked when she needed to. I planted a red dot of paint on her paper one day in the spring. Took a moment for her to notice. She said nothing, only looked down at it with a little smile. Next class again a red dot. A little laugh this time. An almost imperceptible "I will get you" look. Blue dot on top of my blank brown paper the next class. It's raining? I held my palm up and looked to the ceiling and she grinned.

In theater class a week before graduation. Mr. Coleman's crazy trust exercise. Wouldn't volunteer. We were the last ones left. Put the shy ones together, someone suggested, and they laughed. Stood us back to back and linked our arms. Told us to relax, to close our eyes, to trust and fall into the circle of people, just fall. We did and they caught us and spun us and stood us straight and we fell the other way and they caught us again. Relax, someone said (to me, not to her): her arms linked into mine held no tension, her back warm against mine. Warm. Relax, they said to me again. Warm, no tension. Let go. They spun us, tossed us in a circle. Like a rotating planet circling the sun, someone

said. Laughter. Spinning in space. More laughter. That's it, they said, that's it. And then there was a hum and my jaw released, and for a long time — but only seconds, really before they stopped — it was like our bodies weren't there.

Asleep again, and when I woke there was another Diana across the room, sitting alone, skinny with straight dirty blonde hair and jeans jacket. I blinked and peered and then shook it all away and staggered still sleepy into the spacious lobby, cramming the two books into my bag as I went.

Working in the boss's yard in August, Jeff wanted to know what the hell was up my ass.

"You're up it, mind your business," I said.

"You got a poker up your ass."

"Everything's ass to you. You're the ass."

Rakes dropped and fists flew, and he went around with a black eye for a while, and I went around with a broken tooth, until the dentist fixed it.

Pizza as usual in the cafeteria. I took out one afterlife book and read some of it. A girl sat across from me with her tray. Friendly, introduced herself. I said nothing, didn't say my name back, nodded politely. I turned the book over and she glanced there, so I spun it to face the spine my way. She talked some more. Classes? Major? How was the pizza? Where was I from? Lived there or commuted? One word answers. Polite nods. She shook her head and picked

up her tray and walked off, and I opened the book again and bent over it.

The dentist drilled and fitted and crowned me, then did a root canal on another tooth. The gas had me spinning. The nurse's voice far away, but I felt her hand touch my shoulder. Told her she was nice, said it out loud. And again, louder.

"I am, am I?"

"Yes," I heard my voice insist. "Yes." Mouth propped open, my voice told her I can always tell.

"All right, all right." They settled me back in the chair, and dreams came from many directions. Voices. The drilling was there but I wasn't, the pain there but far away from me.

"All right, relax now."

"I ahm relaxth," I laughed. Bicycles. Blue. Sweet Diana. Sweet girl, I knew her. Small, pretty ears. "I knew her."

"Who?" the nurse's voice sang from far away.

The dentist's voice… "Can I have the…"

Blue bicycle. On her bike watching baseball. Damn it to hell, bad throw. She slowly circled on her bike. Blue dot red dot closed-lipped laugh spinning among the arms her arms lightly pulling me back slightly closer gently back warm back spinning. "Relax," they said. "Relax."

She circled fast on her blue bike.

"Good job you two," she said, looking down at our watercolors. Beautiful.

"How do you like the blue and red dots?"

"Nice touch," she said.

The nurse touched my shoulder and pushed me back gently. "Easy now, almost done." Cheeks wet, I reached. "No, I've got it." She dabbed at my cheeks. I nodded, mouth still propped open. She dabbed again. "Just oxygen now, okay?"

In Italian class, I glared at the professor when he looked my way. Not a chance I'll repeat out loud, so don't even try calling on me, Pisan, don't do it, Professor. I looked down, then up at the clock, thinking of my Sartre paper. "Sartre, like anyone else," began my paper in my mind, "knew nothing about what is and what isn't."

I frowned at the wall while the professor told the class that mezza mezza was a trite expression, not even Italian, really.

Two more Dianas appeared in the distance while I crossed the field in the late afternoon.

The Greenlawn girl was not on the platform for the 4:37. Gone for good, I moped, leaning against the iron fence and watching the westbound turn the corner. Nice girl, so open your mouth next time, stupid. I punched the back of the fence.

Punching Jeff's face, I didn't even feel the contact. That fast I tried to send my fist through him, but he clipped my mouth on the return.

I felt at my new tooth. "Will it fall out?"

"Your regular teeth will fall out first," the dentist said.

The train pulled in and I took one last look along the platform, but no luck. Gone, but not for good; come on, stupid, not for good, just for the day, relax. I stepped into the front car and sat in the middle near the window and looked out. Not for good.

The conductor, a different one, took my ticket without a glance. I pulled out the Sartre book and thumbed through a few pages and shoved it back into the bottom of the bag again. Emphatic shove.

"How does Sartre, just a man, know about God while the rest of us don't?" my paper would say. I took out my notebook to write it down.

My paper will say an F, too, I laughed to myself, writing, the train slowing down into St. James station. I stopped to look outside. The sun splashed on the tarred train platform and on the red wood rails. Thin clouds floated high. I closed my eyes and felt the light warm them.

Later the train stopped at Smithtown, and there was a long wait for the city train to pass. When it glided alongside my train and then stopped, I peered inside. A blonde head was turned the other way. I craned forward, and she swiveled her head and looked directly at me. An older woman, in her thirties with a worn face, looked daggers back, and I

shivered and turned my head and laughed to myself, rubbing my forehead.

The train moved on, and I watched the conductor walk the aisle past me, smiling a general smile. I smiled back and pushed my notebook into the bag. My head settled against the seat, and I blew out a long breath, looking around at the other passengers.

There were no Dianas anywhere. I nodded slowly. Not on this train or on that one, not crossing a field or in Greenlawn. And maybe the Greenlawn girl would be back after all.

Next time, maybe, I'd walk past the conductor to the front of the car and sit beside her and say hello and mention her sketchbook. Maybe I'd ask whether she liked to draw or paint.

And if she showed me her art, I'd ask which color was her favorite, red or blue or something else.

True Story

ART

By Brent Steen

True Story, 2009, pencil on panel, 36 x 42 x 1½ inches

Hospital Death

FICTION

BY DAVE SCHOFIELD

"Nurse?" I croak again. When I open my mouth cold air scratches my throat.

"Nurse!" I shout but it doesn't carry far past the metal rail of my bed. A weight more than my own is pulling me, holding me to the bed, I feel my weakness.

"Ted, the nurse is coming, can you hear me?" I call across the small room, there are just two of us in here, there was a Pakistani but he's gone now.

'Ted?' He's not moving now, I see him on the other bed, and hear the horrible sound from his lungs. His breaths seem to be longer and longer apart, eventually they will stop.

I have to move, I've already slid off my mountain of pillows. The girl who had come and moved me was from Sri Lanka and she didn't listen to me – the pillows hurt my back. I have to get off this bed and see if I can do anything for Ted.

"I'm coming over, hold on – hold on, Ted, a nurse is on the way."

I couldn't help thinking about Malaya again last night, my whole life opening before me. Ancient Greeks saw time like a man rowing a boat, with his back to the direction he's going; the future hidden. As he rows, the view behind

opens up and becomes clearer. I remember that from school, shit, now it comes flooding back. I remember Malaya – the time that sniper killed the Scouse lad. I get a sickening feeling, I don't know maybe guilt or shame. The medic couldn't come up while we were under fire, but all I did was sit there and tell him he wasn't even bleeding, that his wound was a pinprick for God's sake. What else can you do when you're being fired at, other than clench your arse and hold onto your Sten?

I'm in the hospital – I have to keep reminding myself – reaching out and touching the metal rail on the bed, so cold it startles me into the present.

I slide against the side of the bed, letting my weight pull me down, my pajamas riding up.

My foot expects the floor long before the touch of it, clammy and rubbery. "Ted I'm nearly there."

I hold my breath and stay still for a second to see if I can still hear him, gasping. I slump from my bed to the chair. I don't know if I can get up onto my feet after, I've been in this bloody bed too long. *Where are the nurses?* They stay away, we're more trouble than they need, they sit in their little office reading *Take-a-Break* and *Woman's Weekly*. They steal our food, too, I know they do. That's why it's cold when we get it and the portions are so small.

I'll get a bollocking for this, for moving out of my stupor. They'll wheel Ted off to the morgue without a thought, and bang me full of crap so I sleep for a week.

That lad in Malaya must have only been eighteen, he looked up at me with wildness in his eyes. I've never seen a stare as desperate since, thank God.

"Ted?" His breathing has paused. At the rate he was going, the noise of it should've fetched the nurses, he sounded like a coffee machine.

The Scouser's breathing had been like Ted's, diminishing. I had panicked; he was slipping, his eyelids flickering. How was I to know about exit wounds? I was fresh out there myself. The medic flipped him over and his back was blood-red, the jungle floor had soaked up his life. I had stared him in the face while that happened.

I push myself up onto my feet again. Soft flesh meets solid floor, I teeter and grasp at the bedside table. The room is cream, a dirty cream like the colour our kitchen was when I smoked.

"Ted I'm here, it's Gerry, how's it going?" I try to sound encouraging. "I thought you were a goner, you didn't breathe for about five minutes; don't shit me up like that."

We'd only lost the Scouser in Malaya, not exactly battle-of-the-effing-Somme, but I felt like it had done me in, enough war for a lifetime. It was his eyes, staring into me. He knew he was dying and he said nothing, he just listened to my crap as I waffled on.

If Ted goes, if I lose him and the doctors don't come and the nurses sit watching TV, it'll be the second time I've been unable to do anything. It's no easier to watch. And it's not less shocking, when two days ago I was playing

cards with him and drinking tea. That's how it is, I guess, always quick, always a shock.

When it happened in the jungle it was so quick that only afterwards, when I woke from bloody nightmares and found an empty bed in the tent, I had to remember where the Scouser was. It used to upset me that I couldn't remember his name, only where he'd come from. We came home to a celebration of fuck-all after Malaya, the Crisis as they called it, for insurance purposes. And then Vietnam kicked off and they realised what we'd been through. I couldn't watch all those bloody American films where young boys got cut down by sniper bullets.

I make it to the door and I push.

'Nurse!' The corridor echoes, all disinfectant smells and cries.

"Oh what's up now?" The fat one with the spiky hair is standing at the desk, she looks like an ugly man. She's the one who puts drugs in my food to make me sleep. If she brings my food I give it to Ted, or else scrape it down the toilet. She's up to no good, I don't trust her. I tell Hilda but she doesn't listen, she never listens.

"It's…Ted…" I pant, feeling the uncomfortable warm ache which always precedes a collapse.

"He's fine," she replied.

"He's not, I thought he was fine but he's dying now, it's come on all of a sudden."

"Oh come on with you, get back in bed." She leads me through the door and into the ward again to the bed. She glances briefly at Ted, then leaves and I lie there in my sweaty pajamas.

I don't want to sleep today, I'll have flashbacks again.

It wasn't the gunfire or the explosions in Malaya that got to me. That's what I worried it would be, shell-shock. The shells were fun when we piled the barrage into some godforsaken jungle and ripped God's earth to pieces, I got a buzz from the noise. It was the silence that got me, the sound of my own breathing as we tramped through the trees on bloody meet-the-locals expeditions.

Crack – it would sound and some bugger would drop like a sack of potatoes. The time the Scouser had been right in front of me, his body crumpled from the bottom up like a factory chimney pulled down. I dove to him straight away, searching his body for signs of injury, only spotting the small rip in his fatigues. "It's alright," I told him, "it's just a scratch."

"You still with me Ted?" I yell but there is no reply, just silence, no loud breathing anymore, just noises echoing from the rest of the hospital.

Hilda came later on.

"They've got to help Ted, will you check him, he's stopped breathing. I don't know how many times I've told them."

She pulled me higher up onto my pillows, roughly by my shoulders. I had shouted myself hoarse and slipped into a

stupor, squashed in the gully between mattress and pillows.

"Hilda go and check him, forget about me, I don't want to lose him."

"Look, Gerry, don't worry about Ted."

I slumped back, people didn't care what happened in this hospital. Maybe they were waiting for me and Ted to piss off, and I was holding them up, taking up a bed that was needed by someone else.

"Gerry, you have to stop thinking about Malaya – that was so long ago, why are you going back over the past?"

"What do you mean ? I haven't been thinking about it."

"The nurses say you're always shouting about it, and you're wandering around and mithering Ted."

"Mithering, what the—"

"I asked if they could give you something to calm you down, Love, and they said there's ones they can use but I'll have to sign something because they're being investigated for giving too many drugs."

"I don't want more drugs, I'm sick to death of the ones I'm on."

"Well, that may be but they say you're up all hours shouting about someone getting shot and the nurses are worried for their safety. And poor Ted's not happy, he

can't sleep with you parading around all night like you're on sentry duty. He's ill too."

"I don't get up in the night…and Ted's dead, he stopped breathing this afternoon."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous." She began opening her sandwiches on my side table. This was her routine, whilst I was confined to gruel, I could smell ham and lettuce and fresh bread.

That night as I lay awake, the Scouser's face stared at me from the darkness. What would I do now if I had the time over? I'd pluck that little enemy fucking bastard out of the tree before he had the chance to take pot shots at us. I'd stick my bayonet clean through him and then let him gargle and choke whilst it all flowed out of him into the earth, into his dirty jungle floor. No Malay would have gone to Liverpool to help beat communism and died lying there on Parliament Street, so why the hell were we in their jungle? I would have beat his Malay head against the floor, smashed his face with the butt of my rifle, if I'd had the chance.

The sound of that rifle crack shivered through me and sent my mind spinning. His eyes looking up at me, red-raw and desperate whilst he felt his life flowing away. I could see his eyes, feel his heat reducing, his movement lessening until his whole existence had drained.

The night was suddenly quiet and I was tired, sitting on the floor of the ward without realising how I'd gotten there, the cold below me chilling my bare bum.

In the morning, they're all around me shouting, "He's killed him, he's killed him!" and I'm not sure what's a dream and what's real. There's chaos and noise and the nurses running around. They're so unused to it they look like people in fat suits from It's-a-Knockout, stumbling.

They've finally noticed Ted, it seems, and he's covered with a sheet and wheeled out.

I'm naked and two male nurses are guarding me.

"Can I have me pants?" I ask and they don't even look at me. They stand with grey eyes and sagging mouths, waiting.

I look at the empty space where Ted's bed had been, and then at my sore knuckles caked in blood.

Blue God

ART

By Christopher Moss

Blue God, 2011, acrylic on masonite, 10 x 10 inches

A Life Better Than Brooklyn

FICTION

BY STEVE DANZIGER

A week into summer vacation, Danny Blatt's mother threw him outside in his underwear. She knocked once on his door, came barreling in without being invited, and announced that from then on, he was going to be locked out of the house every morning and not allowed back in again until five o'clock.

He asked why, and she said to go play or find new friends. "Anything, as long as you're not in your room reading."

She waited barely a minute for Danny to change into a bathing suit like she commanded, then grabbed him just as he took off his pants, walked him downstairs, tossed him outside, and locked both the screen and inside doors. It was only when Danny pounded on the door and screamed, "This isn't a bathing suit!" that she realized her son was standing outside in his underwear. She let him back in just long enough to change, then pulled off his shirt and threw him back outside.

He stood on the front lawn and wondered why he needed to be wearing a bathing suit. The Sheldons next door had a pool, but they'd never asked Danny over to swim, and hadn't even opened the pool yet this summer. Some of the other houses on the block were empty still, and the rest of the sold ones didn't have pools. Unable to think of any other possibility, he squinted up at the cloudless sky to see if it was going to rain.

There was a buckle and a hum as his garage door rose. His mother came out with a lawn sprinkler, a yellow metal

thing with huge white treaded wheels, like a miniature monster truck, and a tubular attachment on top that extended out and curled up, perpendicular at the ends, like horns. She attached a garden hose end to the body, placed the sprinkler at the edge of the lawn, and walked to where the hose was wrapped around a reel next to the garage. She grabbed the reel's handle and cranked ferociously, unspooled the entire length of hose, and turned on the spigot that jutted out from the garage wall. The sprinkler sputtered, its horns spun, and water shot out in whipping, curling arcs.

"Get wet!" she yelled, went inside, and the garage door closed behind her.

Danny followed the sprinkler as it slowly rolled across the lawn. He walked beside it, the water hitting him rhythmically across his trunks. As the sprinkler started its wide turn to go in the opposite direction, a window in his father's study upstairs slammed open. His mother stuck her head out, yelled, "Exercise, something!" and went back in.

Danny started running back and forth across the lawn. Then he did somersaults he learned in gym class. A window opened in the living room downstairs. His mother yelled, "Exercise in the water!" and slammed it shut again.

Every time his mother opened a window from someplace different, he jumped, startled. It was like a giant game of Whack-a-Mole, except the mole kept yelling at him.

Dizzy from tumbling, he got up, stood next to the sprinkler, and did jumping jacks as the water sprayed him. When the sprinkler passed, he took a few steps, positioned

himself next to it, and did more jumping jacks. When it passed again, he did the same thing again, for the entire length of the lawn.

As the sprinkler made its wide turn again, Danny followed, and saw a kid sitting on the corner, his bike lying in the street, holding a pen and a notebook. They stared at each other, then the kid wrote something. He looked back at Danny, but when Danny didn't move, the kid checked his watch, made another quick note, then put down the pen and pad and sat hugging his knees, staring at the Sheldons' garage door.

The screen door screeched open and Danny's mother said, "Why aren't you exercising?"

"Is it almost time for lunch?" Danny asked.

"You've been out here twenty minutes."

"Ma–"

"Play!" She slammed the door.

Danny watched the sprinkler throw wild lassos in the air, rolling slowly towards the edge where his lawn met the Sheldons'. Just before it crossed over into the unkempt, withered grass, it turned to come back around again. Danny heard a window open somewhere in his own house, groaned helplessly and ran towards the sprinkler.

At five o'clock, his mother ceremoniously opened the door, smiled warmly, and stepped aside to let him enter. By that time, Danny was sunburned so badly, he had been leaning against the wall next to the front door for an hour,

unable to move without pain, trying to stand in the narrow shadow cast from the far corner of the house. When the door opened, he righted himself and walked towards it. When his mother saw his stiff, lumbering gait, she said, "Move it, Frankenstein," but then saw the sunburn and shifted immediately to mortified concern. "Upstairs!" she screamed. "To the bathroom!"

Danny wobbled back and forth up the stairs, unable to bend his knees. He managed to lift one foot to the edge of each step, then leaned all the way over to lift the other foot to the next. His mother had run to get something from the cabinet in the downstairs bathroom and now came up behind him, making a sound she always made when Danny was cut or scraped or bleeding: a short, sucking hiss between her teeth, which always gave Danny a chill. He knew that when she made it, something was very bad. She put a soft hand gently on his back to comfort him, then withdrew it when he screamed. She hissed again. Danny wanted to tell her to stop hissing but he was afraid to open his mouth because it felt like his lips might burst.

He faced the mirror in the bathroom and his mother stood behind him, taking the cap off a jug of Noxzema. Danny's skin was almost purple. His mother yanked down his bathing suit, and the fabric rubbing against his skin made him wince.

"I know, I know," she said soothingly.

She lifted his feet just enough to pull the trunks free, then threw them into the hamper. "Oy, your tuchus looks like a marshmallow. Why didn't you tell me it was so hot?"

Danny gritted his teeth, trying not to move. He hadn't

really felt the heat because he was being sprayed with water all day, and the breeze felt cool on his wet skin; it wasn't until late that he felt the creeping pain, which soon grew unbearable. All of that was too much to say, so he just said, "It's summer!"

His mother dipped two fingers into the Noxzema. "Hold still." She touched the white glob to his shoulder, and Danny almost started to cry. "I know," she said softly, "I know," and spread the cream over his body as lightly as she could. Danny watched himself in the mirror, his skin pulling taut, striated, every time his mother touched him.

He remembered a Fantastic Four comic book where The Thing, in agony, was bombarded with cosmic rays, and imagined himself strong enough to withstand the pain like The Thing did. This lasted about ten seconds before Danny started to cry.

His mother hissed.

Danny sobbed, "Please stop."

His mother said she was almost done, and kept slathering him. He had meant for her to stop hissing, but it didn't matter, it was over. She slipped him into a soft old sweatshirt and sweatpants, and put him to bed.

Danny couldn't sit up or prop a book on his stomach, or even bend his arms to hold a book, so he lay on his back watching television.

Later, when his father came home, he heard his parents talking. He couldn't make out their conversation, but heard his father raise his voice and say finally, "Then let

him stay up there and read!"

His mother yelled back that they'd moved to New Jersey so Danny would have some place to play that wasn't made out of concrete, where the streets weren't full of traffic, where there were kids who weren't going to grow up to be drug addicts. "After what we went through to bring him here, she said, "he sure as hell isn't going to spend his childhood in his room."

For the next three days, his mother came upstairs to bring him food, help him to the bathroom, wipe him off with a cool washcloth, re-apply the Noxzema, and change the channel on the television. When his skin faded to a lobster red and he could move sufficiently to pick up a book, she told him it was time to go back outside.

Danny wanted to ask, "Are you kidding me?" but his father always threatened to kill him if he ever spoke back to his mother, and anyway, his mother was never kidding.

He said, "I'm not going under that sprinkler again."

She said, "Of course not! I have presents for you!," and gave him a Super Pinky and a bottle of sunscreen.

Danny's mother made him put on a long sleeve shirt, pants, and winter boots, because she thought that sunlight could get through his sneakers. She put the ball in his palm, told him to put sunscreen on his face and hands every time he sweat, and threw him out of the house.

He walked to the driveway and started sweating immediately. He wiped his face on his sleeve, applied the sunscreen, and wiped his hands on his pants. He tossed

the ball from hand to hand, and threw it down hard against the driveway to see how high it would bounce. He was sweating again, so he put on more sunscreen, wiped his hands on his shirt this time, and looked for something he could bounce the ball against.

There was a narrow space between the garage doors, but he was afraid he might miss and accidentally break a window. The only other option was a telephone pole across the street. He stood a short distance from the pole, threw the ball at it but missed, and watched it bounce into the Feldmans' yard. He got the ball, stood a little closer to the pole, threw it again and missed again.

Danny went back to his driveway with another idea. He lobbed the ball in a high arc over the garage. It bounced on the slanted roof a few times, then plopped down on the driveway. He did this a few more times, never knowing where the ball was going to land, and having to chase after it. It was almost fun. Then he threw the ball again and it bounced once before lodging in the rain gutter.

He froze, numb with disbelief, and then stared up at the roof as if his silent begging might make the ball magically come flying down. He stood like that until sweat made sunscreen drip into his eyes, then he wiped his face with his sleeve, put on more sunscreen, and noticed that the kid from the other day was on the same corner again, watching him and taking notes.

Danny turned one more time to the rain gutter, then did a slow 360, desperate to find something he could do until five o'clock. He saw the lawns of dense green sod, his neighbors' houses, the empty street, the telephone poles and the wires slack between them.

Everything silent and still. Then he spun around again, and tried to find something he could just do for a few minutes. When he couldn't think of anything, he sighed and walked over to the kid on the corner, who was staring again at the Sheldons' garage.

Danny said, "Hey."

There was a line of clear mucus peeking from the kid's nostril. He noticed the white streaks on Danny's clothes, made a note, and turned back to the garage. He sniffed mightily and said, "Hey."

"I'm Danny."

"I'm Joey Greenberg."

In Marlboro, all the kids knew all the other kids, or at least had heard of them, so Danny knew who Joey was. He was eleven, a year older than Danny, but had skipped a grade in Brooklyn, where he was born, and was now at Marlboro Middle School. He had a reputation as a genius – Joey had broken into a Marlboro High biology lab with some other kids, taken something from a cooler he brought from home, and made a beaker of water boil and smoke, like in the movies. Supposedly, Joey spent all of his time investigating things and taking notes because he was going to be a scientist, or a detective, or a surgeon, or a newspaper reporter one day; he wasn't sure yet.

Danny asked what he was doing.

Joey said that one day when he was in the library reading *Very Special People*, someone had suggested that if he liked freaks so much, there used to be a kid in Asher Holmes

Elementary who used to pee his pants in class, then once pooped his pants in class, and he was thrown out of school for playing with himself in class. Joey said that he wanted to investigate.

"What kid is that?" Danny asked.

"Paul Sheldon."

"Oh, right."

"Are these allegations true?"

Danny didn't know what *allegations* meant, so he answered, "I heard poop."

Joey flipped open his notebook like a TV detective and said, "Tell me everything you know about this Paul Sheldon."

Danny explained that the Sheldons were considered weird, mainly because they were rarely seen, even in a neighborhood like Danny's, where people only seemed to leave their house if they were opening the front door to pick up *The News Transcript*, or walking to the curb to get the mail or drop off garbage, or driving on or off their driveways to go shopping, or to the bus stop to go to work in New York. No one knew much about them, except that Paul Sheldon didn't go to school any more, and his sister had never gone to a public school, and that Danny's mother said that both of the Sheldon kids had "problems."

"No," Joey said, "I mean about the poop."

"I don't know anything else about that."

Joey wrote for a long time. Danny became increasingly uncomfortable in the silence. He thought he might have said something stupid, so he tried to impress Joey by showing him how the Sheldon house was on the corner, facing Hudson Bay Terrace, but the backyard, lined with pine trees, extended along the street they were on, Manitoba Way, and ended at the property line where the side lawn of Danny's house ended, and how from one of his bedroom windows he could see over the pines and into the Sheldons' back yard, into their pool, and even through the glass back doors and kitchen windows into part of the house.

"Really," Joey said. His nose ran. He sniffed. "And?"

"And…you can sleep over and see?"

Joey brought a sleeping bag and spent an evening with his elbows on Danny's windowsill, holding a pair of binoculars between two bent Venetian blinds, panning over the Sheldons' property and periodically taking notes. The only time he spoke was when he asked how long the cover had been on the pool ("Always," Danny said), if they ever had the lawn mowed ("Never"), and why they didn't take down the rusting, abandoned swing set near the edge of the property line ("I don't know").

Hours later, Joey put away the binoculars and folded the notebook and shoved everything back into his army coat pockets.

"What did you find?" Danny asked.

"Lots of good stuff." Joey yawned. "But it's a shame we can't find out more about his poop. It would tell us so

much."

"Like what?"

"Almost everything."

Joey stuck his legs into his sleeping bag and motioned to the walls. There were pictures of the Brooklyn Dodgers and Sandy Koufax taped to the blue paneling all around the room, a Mets banner over his pillow, a copy of *Greatest Baseball Players of All Time* on the bed. Danny dreamed of being a baseball player, but he was terrible. His mother had signed him up for Little League, and his coach tried him at every position except pitcher (one of the parents always pitched), but it was always the same – grounders made him flinch, fly balls made him freeze, he recoiled from line drives as if he were being shot at – and he became so anxious at bat that he swung at everything, too soon or too late, and struck out every time. The last game he played, he struck out on a ball that landed in the dirt a foot before home plate. One of the guys from his own dugout yelled, "You suck moose cock." Even some of the parents in the stands had laughed. No matter how much Danny's mother nagged him, he refused to go back.

"You play baseball?" Joey asked.

"No," Danny said.

Joey made a final note and fell asleep.

Danny read for a while, then went to the window. Through the slats, he stared at the sky and thought how the world was only as high as the houses on his block, or the trees in the woods, and just above that, not much

higher than his bedroom window, was the universe, space that went on forever. He tried to feel himself float, wishing he could fly into all that quiet vastness that seemed so close. And then he wondered how you could tell almost everything about a person by their poop.

Joey slept over a few nights a week, continuing his surveillance of what he called "The Sheldon Compound," and tried to determine days on which Paul might emerge. Danny had no idea what clues were in the Sheldons' yard that would help Joey figure this out, but at least he could read while Joey was "surveying," and his mother wasn't making him do things anymore that were boring or painful.

Danny's mother was happy that her son had a friend, but also annoyed that Joey was always poking into her cabinets, closets, and cupboards. He never took anything, but made a big show of wiggling his fingers into the yellow dishwashing gloves he pulled from one of his pockets. He touched and peeked under things she'd meticulously arranged, rustling through her collection of elephants with their trunks raised, and her white pill boxes with the fancy designs she'd bought at the Oriental Furniture store on Route 9. When she asked him if he was looking for anything in particular or if he wanted something to eat, Joey would only sniff, finish writing a note, and then politely decline.

Danny explained about Joey and his research.

"Doing research on what?" his mother asked. "Our winter coats? Your father's wheat germ? My Mahjongg tiles? Why doesn't he ever take that army jacket off? Is he planning on going to war? Isn't he shvitzing like crazy under there?

And what's going on with his schnoz? Why doesn't he ever wipe his runny nose?"

Danny said that Joey's nose was always running and that he *did* wipe it, all the time, but the stuff just came dripping back out a second later.

She said, "Why don't his parents take him to a doctor?"

Danny said that Joey's father was a doctor, but he was some kind of butt doctor and maybe couldn't fix a nose, and she said, "Uch," like she always did when she was disgusted, angry, annoyed, or just didn't want to talk any more.

She tolerated Joey, until one day she found him in the downstairs bathroom, gently scraping at the toilet seat with a tongue depressor and wiping the tip on a glass slide.

"That's it," she told Danny, "Dr. Strange is out," and she started what Danny's father called *The Routine*. Danny had heard it many times, how she couldn't stand the fact that all the other kids in the neighborhood were "crazy, every single one of them." She blamed everyone's parents, complained that people in Marlboro were "idiots," how they did nothing but talk on the phone, drive her crazy for gossip, go to the East Brunswick Mall, or just stay in their houses all the time.

She missed Brooklyn, how everyone knew everyone there, how she could just go outside her apartment building and always have someone to talk to; the kids always had a place to play, like Ditmas Park, or the handball courts in Sunset Park, unlike Marlboro, where she didn't even know who was living at the end of her own block, and all she had

now were a couple of yentas and Danny's father, who was always so tired from commuting to work in the city that he spent every night and weekend sleeping in front of the TV.

She sighed, rubbing her eyes.

Danny apologized, though he wasn't sure what for, and she calmed down and kissed the top of his head and said it was all new, Marlboro, they were building new neighborhoods all over the place, that maybe sometime soon, things would change for both of them.

In the meantime, she said that it made her happy that they could give him a better life than they had (which didn't make any sense to him, since her childhood sounded like it was a lot of fun), for him to be safe (from what, he didn't know – he asked once, and all she did was shake her head a little, and mumble, "Dope. Dope ruined everything. All the people we grew up with. I'll tell you when you're older") and it would be nice if every once in a while Danny thanked his father for it.

Danny didn't understand why they had to stay in a place that didn't make any of them happy, or how Marlboro could be better than the place where all of them had been happy, and he figured that he must be missing something.

He waited until she said, "Oy" and sighed again, which meant she'd finished talking. Danny promised to thank his father for everything when he saw him. Then he asked if he could still be friends with Joey. She said that he could, as long as he promised to not let Joey in her house again, and she made Danny promise that he would never touch other people's toilet seats or scrape anything from where people go make.

Danny was relieved that Joey wouldn't be able to sleep over again. He was so used to the pictures on his wall, he didn't notice them anymore; when Joey gestured to them it was embarrassing. Danny was afraid that there was something else in his bedroom that Joey might notice and question or laugh at, like his notebook with the story he made up about Willie Mays coming over for Passover Seder, or the one in which Danny won the MVP award in both leagues in the same year. He had started writing a story about his father taking him to the Baseball Hall of Fame. If Danny had to have a friendship for the rest of the summer, he was glad to could keep it away from his interior life. He groaned to himself when he realized he would be stuck outside again until five o'clock. He asked his mother if he could at least have a watch.

Every day, Danny and Joey sat on the curb opposite the Sheldons' driveway, Joey's bike in the street between them while they waited. They had talks, mostly Joey carrying on about things he read in the library – the Loch Ness monster, Bigfoot, U.F.O.s, articles in old issues of Omni magazine, Isaac Asimov stories, and stuff about penises and vaginas. Joey said he'd found an old book that was full of interesting lists, and asked Danny if he'd ever heard about the guy whose balls weighted a hundred and fifty pounds, or the guy who could tie his dick into a knot, or the pope who used to throw orgies, or this old actress who had sex fourteen times in one night, or all the weird things that older women put into their cha-chas.

Danny didn't know such things existed. He hadn't even heard the word "cha-cha" before. He was often so stunned by what Joey said, he could barely say more than, "What?," if even that. And when he did respond, Joey just sniffed and wiped his nose and didn't say more.

Joey claimed that he got all of his information from the library, but Danny went to the library all the time and couldn't imagine what section to look in to find about the things he'd been told.

One day, the garage door opened suddenly, and Murray Sheldon came out, holding Paul's hand. They went into the garage and Murray opened the back door of the car on the driver's side. He helped Paul onto his seat, buckled his seatbelt for him, then closed the door and got in behind the steering wheel. A door opened and closed in the garage, then the garage door buckled and started to close. Arlene Sheldon came out, carrying Paul's sister Carol. Arlene ducked under the closing garage door, opened the car's passenger side back door, and strapped Carol into a child's car seat. Then she got in the car, and Murray drove away.

Joey watched the car leave, then stared back at the driveway. Then, after a few minutes of complete immobility, he said, "Interesting," and wrote some notes.

Danny panicked. He thought the Sheldons were gone for the summer. A few months ago, he had heard his mother gossiping on the phone and she said the Sheldons were going up to Maine because Murray, who was a high school teacher, got a job up there as a camp counselor for the summer and was taking the whole family. But Danny wondered if he had misheard, if his mother had really said the Feldmans, because, now that he thought about it, Murray wasn't a schoolteacher, he was a lawyer, and Harry Feldman was a schoolteacher.

"Why do you have such a weird look on your face?" Joey said. "What are you thinking about?"

"How, uh, Harry and Murray kind of sound alike."

Joey wrote a note. Then, he stuffed his notebook in his pocket and held out his hand. Confused, Danny reached out too, and Joey shook his hand.

"Why are we shaking hands?" Danny asked.

"My mission here is done."

"Why are we shaking hands?"

"It's time for me to move on. New neighborhoods. New case studies. Ow."

Danny had tightened his grip when Joey said he was leaving. Thinking that the Sheldons would be gone all summer, he thought Joey would be around until school started. Frantically, he tried to think of what he would do every day if Joey left. Unable to picture anything except for the lawn sprinkler, he blurted out, "But there's more!"

Joey yanked his hand away. "Like what?"

Desperate, Danny surrendered. "There's Eli," he sighed.

Joey flipped open his notebook and said, "Tell me about this Eli."

Eli was a year younger than Danny, cursed all the time, and wasn't allowed in Danny's house either. One day soon after Danny first moved in, Eli had come to the door, asked if Danny wanted to play, and Danny's mother told him to come inside. She asked if he'd like something to eat, and Eli said, "Give me a steak."

"How about a Pop Tart? And how about you ask me nice?"

"Goddammit," Eli suddenly screamed, "it was your idea! Now I'm in the mood for steak!"

"Hey. Spoiled brat. Maybe acting like an animal is how you get your way in your home, but you better watch your mouth and calm down, right now–"

"This is bullshit!" Eli said, and Danny's mother pulled him into the bathroom.

She wanted to shove a bar of soap in his mouth, but she could only find hand soap, so she squeezed his face until his lips puckered and squirted that into his mouth instead. Eli coughed out bubbles, cried and ran home. Since then, Danny's mother said, "Uch" and sighed every time she heard Eli's name or thought about his parents (who were "criminals" for not teaching Eli to be a mensch, let alone that they didn't seem to care that a woman they barely knew was washing their son's mouth out with Dial).

Danny rarely had contact with Eli. If he happened to pass The Hill, Danny sometimes saw Eli cackling, squatting in the dirt. Otherwise, he avoided him.

Joey asked if there was anything else.

"He curses a lot," Danny said.

"What else?"

"A lot."

"OK. What else?"

"He's kind of hard to talk to. If he doesn't like what you say, he just tells you to shut up, but in a cursing way."

"What else?"

Danny thought for a moment. "He hates bugs."

They walked up the block to Eli's, Joey in his awkward way, sitting on his bike, leaning forward with his arms draped over the handlebars, talking long, loping strides to push the bike forward, swinging his feet away so they wouldn't hit the rotating pedals. It was a slow uphill climb; the street was bowed, cresting just past Eli's house in what everyone called The Hump, then slanting sharply downhill to where it eventually ended at Ottawa Road South.

Danny's sneakers squeaked. Little rocks crunched underfoot. The spokes of Joey's bike clicked. Slowly, on either side, as the houses passed, Danny wondered why the emptiness of the block always made him feel sad.

Joey said, "Do you know what *gay* is?"

"No."

"It's when a guy likes a guy."

Danny thought about this. "What?"

"It's when one guy likes another guy. The way a guy would like a girl, a guy likes another guy."

Danny gave this more thought. "What?"

Joey sniffed and wiped his nose.

They crossed The Hump, then Joey got off his bike and walked it the rest of the way. At the bottom of the street, they made a left on Ottawa Road South, and Danny froze at the sight of The Hill looming in front of them. It looked to Danny like something gargantuan had toppled and died, and the dirt, loose, sandy, speckled with tufts of weeds and scraggly remnants of bush, had settled on top of it. The mound of dirt was enormous, to be leveled and carted away when the developers got around to it, like they were slowly doing everywhere else in the township.

Eli was there, squatting in the dirt, brushing away dead leaves and sticks.

"Hi, Eli," Danny said.

"Fuck off, I'm busy!" Eli said.

They waited. Joey poked the brush with the toe of his sneaker, his notebook open, his pen hovering just above the page. Danny stared at the shack at the top of The Hill, almost perfectly centered on the empty land. The gray wood walls leaned against each other, uneven at the corners like a house of cards. Every plank was charred at the edges and all around the glass-less window frame, as if something black had been inside and squeezed its way out. Joey began taking notes.

"Got one!" Eli yelled. He placed a daddy longlegs spider in his palm and Danny watched as it scurried over Eli's turning hand. Eli twisted his arm to keep the spider from falling, then scooped it in a loose fist, brought it down to the ground, poured dirt over the tiny body, and watched,

laughing, as the buried thing's exposed legs twitched and flailed.

Eli jumped up and said to Danny, "Hey, nerd, where you been?" He contorted his face into a mask of contempt and said, "Stuuuhhhddeeeinnnnnnggggggg?" Then he turned to Joey and said, "Who the fuck are you?"

Joey finished his notes. "Joey Greenberg."

"The genius? Bullshit!"

"Do you have Tourette's?"

"I have a rash on my balls! Wanna see?"

"Actually, yes."

Eli didn't expect that answer. So he asked again, "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Joey Greenberg."

"How did you make that water smoke?"

"Dry ice."

"Now I know you're full of shit! There's no such thing as ice that's dry!"

Joey took more notes.

Eli asked Danny, "What's he doing here?"

"He wanted to see Paul Sheldon," Danny said.

"Why?"

"He heard about Paul pooping his pants."

"Is that why a genius is hanging around with a nerd like you? 'Cause you live next to retard boy?" Eli said to Joey, "Geniuses should want to hang out with me! I'm the real genius!"

"Why's that?"

"'Cause I'll show you real poop! Do you want to see the most unbelievable poop ever?"

"Yes," Joey said.

Eli stuck his middle finger in Danny's face and then led the way for about two blocks, sprinted ahead and stopped abruptly beside an enormous pile of dog shit. Joey dropped his bike in the street and took out his notebook. Danny picked up Joey's bike, put it down near the curb, and sat beside it.

Joey took some notes, then said, "Wow."

"Fuck yeah!" Eli said. He pointed at Danny and said, "That jack-ass only showed you Paul Sheldon! Look what I showed you!"

"Who is responsible for this?"

"Astro."

"Tell me about this Astro."

Eli pointed back to the pile, as if that should explain everything.

Joey came over to Danny and asked about Astro. Danny told him that Astro was owned by the Silvers, whose house they were sitting in front of. Howie Silver, the weird guy in his thirties who still lived with his parents, only came out of his house when he walked Astro in the cul-de-sac. Joey asked why they had never gone there to investigate, and Danny said it was to avoid Old Man Hannegan, who always screamed at anyone that came into the cul-de-sac that they should get off his property. That, and he hated Jews, and Danny's mother didn't want him to hear Hannegan's "stupidity."

Danny didn't mention that he had really kept Astro a secret because he didn't particularly like staring at piles of shit, especially when it was hot out.

Joey looked at Astro's pile again and declared it "unfresh." By his calculations, a creature capable of producing waste in that amount would need to excrete every ten minutes, so Howie should be bringing Astro out any minute.

They sat on the curb and waited. After a few quiet minutes, Joey asked Eli, "You know what *gay* is?"

"Shut up." Eli was staring at the Silvers' house, anxious for Howie to emerge.

"Seriously, do you know what *gay* is?"

"Shut up, Fuckwad."

"So you don't know what it is."

"Yeah, I do."

"So what is it?"

"Shut up, Assface."

"It's when a guy likes a guy," Joey said, "the way a guy likes a girl."

"You're fucking nuts."

"You know when you look at a *Playboy* magazine? There are some guys who look at *Playgirl* magazine for the same reason."

Eli faced Joey. "I look at *Playboy* for tits. There's no tits in *Playgirl*, so now I know you're full of shit!"

"You get a boner looking at *Playboy*. Some guys get boners looking at *Playgirl*."

"Bullshit."

"It's called *gay*."

"Bullshit. My father has the first issue of *Playgirl*."

Joey scribbled in his notebook.

"It's a collector's item," Eli said.

Joey put his notebook away.

"Write that down!" Eli screamed. "Write that it's a collector's item!"

Joey sniffed and hugged his knees. Eli clenched his fists and screamed, "God…dammit!"

The Silvers' garage door opened and Howie and Astro came out. Howie wore a windbreaker, zipped up to his chin. His hair was matted and stuck up everywhere, as if someone just woke him. He wore thick glasses, walked slowly, and stared vacantly at the space in front of his feet. Even from where they were sitting, they could see that he'd missed spots where he'd shaved.

Astro loped next to him. His body was as thick as a barrel. His head, like a salivating pumpkin, came up to Howie's ribs.

The two of them walked the perimeter of the cul-de-sac. Then they walked to the center, where Astro suddenly stopped, curled his back, shuffled his back paws, and released an enormous pile. Then he and Howie went back to the house.

Joey was already writing as they approached the pile. Eli asked, "What the hell are you writing about? You keep taking notes on nothing! What are you writing? 'Big pile of shit?' Who needs notes for that?"

"I need to gather intelligence to figure out what Astro is."

"I think Astro's a kind of elephant."

"Why do you think that?"

"Look at that pile! I've been to the circus and I haven't seen shit like that! I'm telling you, that Astro's like a…fucking elephant!"

"I have another theory," Joey said. "As a potentially burgeoning paleontologist–"

"What the fuck is that?"

"A dinosaur scientist."

Danny was relieved that he wasn't the only one who didn't know the word. He hoped Eli would ask what *burgeoning* meant next.

Joey said that he'd studied all the dinosaur books in the library. Considering Astro's girth, bone structure, and abnormally lumpy forebrow, he had to conclude that Astro was a descendant of the triceratops.

"Bullshit!" Eli said.

"What's so unbelievable about that?"

"Everything! Astro's a dinosaur? You're fucking nuts!"

"Not a dinosaur. A descendant."

"What's the difference?"

"A few million years."

"So a dinosaur descendant is living in Marlboro?"

"That's why Howie is rarely seen. He's protecting Astro from the prying eyes of the media. He's devoted his life to keeping the secret."

Danny was confused. He'd asked his mother once about

Astro, and she'd told him he was a bull mastiff.

Across the street, Old Man Hannegan threw open his screen door. He was stooped over so far, he practically jackknifed. His glasses were the thickest Danny had ever seen. Old Man Hannegan raised his face in their general direction, as if sensing their presence more than actually seeing them, and screamed, "Get off my property!"

Eli screamed back, "You're all the way across the cul-de-sac, you crazy old dickbeater! This isn't your property! We're ballooning dinosaur scientists! We're investigators! Get used to seeing us, you turd juggler!"

"I was here when all this was cornfields and farm land!"

"Nobody gives a shit!"

"I was here before you people came here, and I'll be here when you're gone!"

"We're not going anywhere, you old spunk guzzler!"

"I'm calling the police!" He went back inside.

Joey stopped writing. "Is he really calling the police?"

"I don't even think Marlboro has police," Eli said. "I never saw a cop, the whole time we've lived here."

"Never?"

Eli asked Danny, "Have you?"

Danny hadn't either.

Joey made a note.

He tucked away his notebook and put on the yellow kitchen gloves. He pulled a jar and a tongue depressor from his pockets, squatted down, reached out cautiously, and scratched off a sample from the mound. He put the depressor in the jar and sealed the lid tight. Then he said he had to go home, there was a lot of work to do, but they should meet the next day for the results.

As they were all leaving, Old Man Hannegan came out and yelled, "I said, get off my property!"

"I've had it with you!" Eli screamed. "We're in the street! You don't own the street!"

"They used to grow tomatoes on this land–"

"We hate tomatoes! Get back in your house now, or else!"

"Or else what?"

Eli pointed to Astro's pile and said, "I did that! If you don't shut up, next time I'll do it on your head!"

It did shut Old Man Hannegan up, at least for the few seconds that he considered the possibility that Eli was the one leaving those piles in the street. Then he smiled thinly and said, "No, you didn't."

Eli, lacking any comeback, swung his fists in the air and said, "God…dammit!"

Old Man Hannegan went back into his house and Eli swore that the next time they were serving Sloppy Joes at

school, he was going to buy double-lunch, perch above Old Man Hannegan's front door, and poop on the old Nazi's head when he came out.

Joey said, "Please make sure I'm there when that happens," and pedaled away.

The next day, Joey came back with an enormous binder that he said contained the results of a detailed analysis. He said the main ingredient in Astro's poop was corn, that there were traces of chocolate, which proved that Astro was not a dog, and while some of the tests were inconclusive, there did appear to be remnants of undigested human flesh.

"Bullshit!" Eli said. "You don't even know how to check poop!"

"My father is a doctor and he has a place where he sends stool for analysis. I called, spoke to the person there, and they told me how to do it."

"At home? Who would tell a kid how to do that? And what the fuck is 'stool?' God dammit, I'm so sick of your bullshit!"

Just then, Old Man Hannegan came out of his house. Before he could say anything, Eli screamed, "Hey, you wrinkly scrotum! I went home yesterday and told my dad about your bullshit and he says you act this way because you sold your land too cheap to developers and now you blame Jewish people like everyone else does and your pecker doesn't work and you can only shit if you shove big pills up your ass!"

Old Man Hannegan was stunned. "Stay…"

"What?"

"Stay…"

"What? Look at him! Look how white he is! He's having a heart attack!"

Joey wrote feverishly.

"Stay off my property!" Old Man Hannegan finally blurted out.

Eli ran and stopped short on the sidewalk, windmilling his arms, leaning over Old Man Hannegan's lawn as if teetering on the edge of a precipice. "Oh, no! I'm going to fall on your property!"

"I'll call the police!"

Eli stood up straight and said, "Go ahead and call the cops, you crazy old dickbeater! What are you going to tell them? There are three kids talking about dinosaurs on public property? You don't know anything about the law! Howie Silver owns a triceratops, and you didn't even know that! You tell the cops that I'm on your property and they're going to tell you that you don't own this street! You want to report something? I'll give you something to report. Tell them I'm eating your grass!" He grabbed a fistful from the lawn and chewed, opening and closing his mouth as wide as it would go, blades and green juice dripping over his lip.

Eli then picked up a few rocks from the street and popped

one in his mouth. "Tell them I'm chewing your rocks!" He curled back his lips and emphasized his teeth. "Tell them! Grass and rocks! Grass and rocks! Protein and vitamins! Protein and vitamins!" He popped another rock into his mouth, bit all the way down, and then spit it out forcefully. Caught up in his frenzy, he'd inadvertently picked up and chewed one of Astro's stray turds. Eli was now bent over, heaving, coughing, and wiping his tongue with his sleeve.

Old Man Hannegan wheezed with laughter. Danny gagged and almost threw up in the street. Joey took so many notes that he ran out of paper and continued writing on his forearm.

After what Joey referred to as "The Protein Incident," Eli wouldn't go to the cul-de-sac anymore. Joey, wanting to explore the neighborhood further, said it was a hard decision, choosing between Astro and Eli, but he chose Eli because you never knew what was going to come out of him next, whereas you always knew what was going to come out of Astro.

"Get it?" he asked Danny. Danny didn't, but told Joey that he did. He was glad that he wasn't going to spend the rest of summer looking at dog shit.

Eli said that he wouldn't let Joey hang out with him anymore if he mentioned The Protein Incident again, so Joey kept quiet as Eli took him all over the neighborhood. First, Eli led them to the old cornfield on Gordon's Corner Road. They were there every day for a week. Danny wandered the parched land, pushing aside withered husks and old, gnarled cobs, looking for arrowheads in the dirt, while Eli and Joey tortured insects.

The grasshoppers were huge, thick in the body and four or five inches long. Eli and Joey would catch them and tear off their legs, or other pieces of their green bodies, Eli cackling when they twitched or when fluids oozed. Joey asked him to go slower while he took notes. One day, Joey took a magnifying glass and some crayons from his pockets, and had Eli hold a grasshopper while he melted a crayon over its head. At the end of the week, it rained. Joey took a grasshopper, broke its legs, and brought it to the street. The rainwater flowed along the curbs, down to the sewer grating on the corner; Joey put the grasshopper on a leaf, and set it sailing. The three boys followed, watching the twitching grasshopper rock gently on the water until it reached the grate. The leaf was too wide to slip through, so Joey pressed on one end until it folded and the leaf and the grasshopper fell together into the sewer.

They went to the woods behind St. Laurence Way. Eli and Joey stuck an ice pick into caterpillars. They went to the new house foundations on Alberta Terrace and Eli peed on anthills. They found frogs. Eli lobbed some like hand grenades. Joey stepped on one slowly, until its guts came out of its mouth.

Danny couldn't watch any more. He had gotten used to all the sweating and sunscreen and finally found the bravery to sneak a book out of his house, so he found some shade, pulled off his boots, scratched at his athlete's foot and read while Eli and Joey did whatever they did.

It rained an entire day, and when it stopped, there were worms everywhere – in the street, on the sidewalk, at the edges of the driveways. Danny didn't bring his book out because he didn't want it to get wet, so he loped along as

Joey and Eli collected worms and put them in a jar. When the jar was almost full, Danny looked through the glass. The worms were entwined like pink spaghetti, sliding between each other. Danny asked if he could have them. Eli screamed that they were their worms, but Joey said to give them to Danny, they could get fresh ones the next time. When they said goodbye for the day, Danny took out the worms and placed them, one by one, in the lawns leading home.

And, when there was nothing else to do, they returned to The Hill.

For a few days, it was the same routine. Eli would find and bury a daddy longlegs, taunt it and laugh, Joey would wander and take notes on rocks, weeds, and whatever garbage he found on The Hill, and Danny would read. Then Joey asked Eli to be quiet when he was "searching for new species." He said that Eli's laughing was scaring off other bugs.

Eli told Joey that he was completely full of shit, that bugs couldn't see or communicate like humans, and if he wanted to be a scientist so badly, why didn't he fix his bike's kickstand, or figure out how to make his goddamn nose stop running all the time?

Joey said he didn't understand the point of Eli just doing the same thing with the spiders, over and over. Eli said that Joey's experiments were much worse than what he did, since the spider's legs were sticking out, so they still had a chance to escape after he poured the dirt on them. Joey said that what Eli did was worse, since it gave the bugs false hope, and anyway, Eli had done a lot of things worse than Joey's experiments. Eli said that his father said

Joey was like Mengele. Joey took out his notebook and asked him to spell it. Back and forth it went, and, unable to read with all the arguing, Danny stared hopelessly at the shack on top of The Hill.

There was something about Paul Sheldon that Danny hadn't told Joey. There had been times, at night, while he was staring out his window, that he'd see Paul. Danny didn't know where he came from – the front of his house, or a side entrance, or who knows, maybe he climbed out a window or jumped off the roof – but he would come bolting out from behind the pool, dash across the backyard, through the dense pines, and out onto Manitoba Way.

Danny would run from his room to his father's study and press his cheek against the window that faced the front of their house as Paul, arms flailing, branches and pine needles stuck in his hair, ran by in the center of the empty street on skinny, uncoordinated legs, all the way up and over The Hump.

Danny would stay like that, with his face against the cool glass, the sounds coming from the TV downstairs, staring at the crest of The Hump. He pictured Paul on the other side, running to The Hill, clawing his way up the loose mound of dirt and crawling into the shack, sitting alone, everything finally quiet, close to the sky and stars.

Danny imagined him sitting there, peacefully alone, and this made Danny smile every time he heard his mother's pitying "tsk" sound when she gossiped on the phone and Paul's name was mentioned.

"Why are you always looking up there?" Joey asked.

Danny didn't want to tell him the truth. He liked knowing something that Joey didn't know. So he said, "I was wondering if it's haunted."

Eli said, "That's the only smart thing you've ever said."

"You think it's haunted?" Joey asked.

"Of course it's haunted! Why do you think no one ever goes up there?" Eli said.

This surprised Joey. "You guys have never gone up there?"

"I'm not allowed," Danny said.

"You're a pussy!" Eli said.

Joey asked Eli, "Have you gone up there?"

"I just told you, it's haunted!"

"So why is Danny a pussy for not going and you're not?"

"He doesn't go because he's afraid of his mom. I don't go because of the ghosts."

"Someone must have gone up there."

"Well, yeah, to build it. Dur!"

"No, others. Investigators, like me."

"I thought you were a dinosaur doctor."

"Scientist."

"If anyone went up there, you'd never hear about it. You know why? 'Cause they're dead! You know why? 'Cause it's haunted!"

Joey shook his head. "That is a very unscientific assumption."

"Bullshit. Why don't you go up there?"

"I've been saving it."

"For what?"

"My last investigation of the summer."

"Bullshit! You're not going up there! You're scared!"

"I'm saving it. I've seen everything else this neighborhood has to offer and wanted to finish summer with a coup de grace. That's French."

"Bullshit!"

"I've seen everything. The flora, the fauna, I've catalogued every indigenous creature–"

"Stop talking French already."

"I've seen you eat dog shit–"

"No you didn't!"

Joey held out his open notebook. "See? It's right here."

"You lied in your notebook!"

"It's documented. That makes it official."

"I never ate poop!"

"Well, you chewed some."

"I've had it with you! Everyone thinks you're a genius and I'm just a kid who ate poop! You never even heard of Astro before me! It was my idea to melt the crayon on the grasshopper! It was my dad's ice pick we brought to the woods!" Eli started to cry. "And now all you do is make fun of me!"

"I'm not making fun of you."

"You said I ate poop!"

"That's just a statement of fact."

"I want to go to the shack!"

"So go."

"I can't."

"Because of the ghosts?"

"That's right!"

Joey took notes.

"Stop writing already!" Eli shrieked. His voice cracked, and he coughed painfully. He tried to make himself stop crying, but he couldn't. He kept coughing out sobs, and a long string of mucus hung from his nose in a clear,

wavering string.

He finally calmed enough to speak. He blubbered, "Are you going to the shack?"

"Yeah."

"And you're going to write that I didn't go?"

"Yeah."

Eli's eyes watered and his chin trembled. Then, quietly, he said to Joey, "I'm going to the shack and I'm going to burn it down so you can't explore it." Then he turned and started to run home. Over his shoulder, he screamed, "Write that down!"

They watched him leave, and when he disappeared over The Hump, Danny squatted to where Eli had just been playing. He reached down, pinched one of the buried spider's legs, and tried to pull it out from beneath the dirt. The leg came away. The other legs still twitched. Joey slammed his heel on top of the spider, gazed down at his imprint in the dirt, and made a few notes.

That night, Danny was in bed reading when his mother opened his door. "Come," she said.

They walked down the stairs. Danny's father was holding open the screen door, looking up the street. He had been sleeping in his chair. He was wearing one of his white undershirts and his sweatpants and his hair had been pushed up at the back of his head. He asked Danny's mother, "You have your keys?" and he motioned them out the door before she could answer.

They walked up the block. Danny was shocked to see people, whole families, coming out of the houses, walking together across their lawns or down their driveways, then turning to walk up the street.

No one said anything. Danny listened to the footsteps and stared at their backs.

They wore sweat pants and robes, their clothes wrinkled, their hair matted. Then, at The Hump, as they walked over the crest, Danny saw the high, shimmering glow just past the houses. On top of The Hill, the shack was on fire.

They all went downhill and made the left on Ottawa Road South and everyone stood there, heads lifted, watching. Danny's father tried to move forward, said, "Come on, it's OK," but Danny wouldn't go. His father sighed, mumbled, "Afraid of everything," and stood back with Danny and his mother.

Danny wasn't afraid, he just wanted to see as much of it as possible.

He saw The Hill as the head of a giant, reared back, the slope they always played on the giant's throat, the gurgling fire a death rattle, and somewhere behind the flames, the giant's enormous eyes, opened wide and in horror, staring up at the stars.

He felt hypnotized by the feeling of warmth, not from the fire itself, which was too far away to feel, but from the colors, alive and comforting, the glimmering yellow, the soothing brown orange, in that empty black background, throbbing with smoke, that took up the entirety of his vision.

Bits of burning wood floated woozily in the air, flamed and dimmed like fireflies.

Danny watched the embers and reached up for them as they drifted down and turned to ash. He followed one that refused to burn out, and when it finally fell to the street, he saw, in the rusty, shuddering light, Joey sitting on the curb, his bicycle lying in the street.

Joey watched the fire, and he watched the people watching the fire, and he took notes.

Going back over The Hump, Danny and his parents stopped at Eli's house. Eli's father Stan was on their side lawn, holding a hose, spraying the roof. He leaned back, the streetlight reflecting off his glasses as he moved his arm slowly back and forth, the falling water trailing behind the sideways movement of the arcing spray.

Danny's mother said, "Uch."

Danny asked his father why Stan was hosing his house.

His father said, "He's afraid his house will catch fire."

Danny's mother said, "Very good."

"What?"

"Is our house going to catch fire?" Danny asked.

Danny's mother said, "That's what. No, our house is not going to catch fire. The fire is much too far away for anyone to worry about it making their house catch fire."

"So why is he watering his house?"

"Because he's an idiot."

"Everyone's an idiot," Danny's father mumbled.

"You wanted to leave Brooklyn," his mother said.

Danny remembered his promise to his mother. So he said, "Yeah, thanks, Dad," and couldn't understand why this seemed to make him mad.

The next day, Danny walked to Eli's, and they went to The Hill. Joey was already sifting through the dirt. He had brought a large garbage bag and dragged it behind him, shards of burnt wood having ripped through in several places.

Eli asked, "Why didn't you come get us, Dicklick?"

"Too much work to do." He dropped the bag, flipped through some pages of a notebook, and said, "Where were you last night?"

"Home with my family."

"Why didn't you come to the fire?"

"I was being punished."

"For what?"

"For starting the fire! I started it!"

Joey looked up. "Really?"

"That's right, Shitbird!"

"How did you do it?"

"Matches, Jackass."

"What else? Gasoline?"

"Lighter fluid! From our barbeque!"

Joey wrote. "Matches, lighter fluid…"

"And kinder!" Eli yelled. "From our fireplace."

"Tinder, you mean."

"Fuck you!"

"And why did you start it?"

"Because I'm sick of your bullshit!"

Joey wrote. "And why was your father hosing your house?"

"He was afraid it might catch fire."

"Your dad was afraid your house would catch fire so he kept you all in the house?"

"And he hosed the house."

"But he was afraid the house would catch fire."

"So he hosed the house!"

"Yeah," Joey said, "but if he was afraid the house would catch fire, why did he keep you in the house?"

"To keep us safe! Did your dad hose your house?"

"I live two miles from here."

"Did he hose the house or not?"

"Why would he?"

"Did he hose the goddamn house!"

"No."

"Then now we know whose dad cares about their family more!"

"Maybe your dad was just worried his *Playgirl* magazines would go up in flames."

"He only has the first issue! It's a collector's item!"

"So," Joey checked his notes, "you burned down the shack because you're 'sick of my bullshit.'"

"That's right!" Eli held up his middle finger. "Explore this!"

"Actually, I burned it down."

There was a long silence. Then Danny managed to ask Joey, "Why?"

"To see what would happen. And how Eli would react."

Eli was silent.

Joey waited, then took notes. "But now, no one else can explore it. It's a legend. The shack is now like Atlantis." He said to Eli, "You know what Atlantis was?"

"God…dammit!" Eli screamed.

Joey wrote. "That's better."

"You only burned it down so I couldn't burn it down! I've had enough of your bullshit! I'm going to tell!"

"Go ahead. I'll tell everyone you ate dog shit."

"I did not!"

"I'll call in Old Man Hannegan as a character witness. Then I'll report you for cruelty to daddy longlegs. Es. Daddy longlegses?" He made a note. "I have to look it up."

"That's not illegal!"

"Do you really want to take that chance? There are no spiders in prison. Or steak."

"God…dammit!" Eli stomped his feet a few times then said, "Where are those fucking spiders?"

"Don't bother," Joey said.

"Why not?"

"There won't be anything. After a fire like that, bugs tend

to migrate."

Eli ignored him and squatted in the dirt.

Danny looked up The Hill and tried to imagine the shack on top of it.

Joey put the tip of his tongue to a charred piece of wood, then said, "You know that all the streets around here are named after places in Canada?"

Eli swatted away some sooty branches. "Is that why all the names are so stupid?"

"And New Brunswick? East Brunswick? Same thing, Canada."

"What the fuck is that all about?"

"I have to conclude that everyone in New Jersey really wants to live in Canada."

Danny checked his watch. It was too early to go home.

Joey asked him, "What are you thinking?"

Danny was thinking that he couldn't wait until school started, so he could stay in his room and read all the time and his mother wouldn't make him stop. Instead, he said, "I was wondering why everyone doesn't just move to Canada then."

"Because they all work in New York, stupid," Eli said. "How the hell do you get straight A's?"

They heard something. A police car came down Ottawa Road South. All three watched as it turned onto Manitoba Way and disappeared over The Hump.

"Holy shit," Eli said.

Joey checked his watch and made a note.

There was still a month left of summer. Danny watched where the police car disappeared, as if it had been a mirage.

Eli said, "Ah-*hah*!" He held up pinched fingers. A spider dangled, its legs flailed. Then Eli squatted, and soon started to laugh.

The police car reappeared and headed towards them. About halfway down the street, its flashing lights turned on.

Joey closed his notebook and wiped his nose.

Contributor Bios

Lynn Bey has had short stories and flash fiction published in *The Literarian* (nominated for a Pushcart award), Birmingham Arts Journal, Two Hawks Quarterly, *Rhapsodia, Conquista & Rebellion, Broken Pencil*, and a few other magazines.

Peter Blauner is the author of six novels, including Slow Motion Riot - winner of an Edgar Allan Poe award for best first novel - and the *New York Times* best-seller, The Intruder. His most recent novel is Slipping Into Darkness. His short fiction has appeared in Houghton Mifflin Best American Mystery Stories and on NPR's Selected Shorts from Symphony Space. Currently, he is a writer/producer for the television show, Law & Order: SVU. Peter lives in Brooklyn with his family. He can be reached through his website, peterblauner.com.

Matthew Brandt (b. 1982, Los Angeles) received his BFA from Cooper Union in 2004 and MFA from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2008. Brandt's precocious talent has landed him in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the Armand Hammer Museum (Los Angeles) and the Elton John Collection. Interested in physicality, process and landscape, Brandt's ability to stretch the readings of an image, multiplying them both physically and conceptually, speaks directly to his interest in how images loom and meanings shift within a shared visual history. Taste Tests and Lakes and Reservoirs reflect the artist's engagement with the great American landscape photographers, but with an ease, humor and youthful energy. Whether silkscreening his own photograph of Half Dome in Yosemite—an iconic image of the American West—with Cheez Whiz, Mint Jelly and other pedestrian condiments, or leaving photographs of lakes soaking in the water of their source, his subject matter visually and physically informs the work. It is all part of the Brandt's continual investigation into the charge that imbues meaning within an image. His work is the clever manifestation of a photographic alchemist, satisfying the urge for the tangible, and grounding us in the present. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles. Visit Matthew Brandt.

Heather Cantrell is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, California. Her artistic practice continuously looks to her immediate circle of artists, curators, gallerists, musicians, and writers as subjects

for her photographic exploration of community and subcultures. Through performance and photography, her main bodies of work – *A Study in Portraiture* (2008-present), *Dead Mannerists* (2007), *Century's End* (2006), *Altered States* (2005), *Extended Family* (2006), and *Corpus Battaglia* (2004) – have theatrically challenged and subverted identity while simultaneously documenting her own creative tribe. These series have been internationally exhibited in Los Angeles, New York, Copenhagen, and London. Upcoming exhibitions include *Eros & Civilization* at Human Resources in Los Angeles (September 2011) and a project with Land of Tomorrow Gallery in Louisville, Kentucky (November 2011). Visit Heather. Brooklyner images presented are courtesy of the artist and Carter & Citizen.

Steve Danziger is managing editor of Fiction magazine, teacher at City College, volunteer at the Housing Works Bookstore, and loiterer at the Hungarian Pastry Shop. Recent fiction credits include Word Riot, *Fiction*, The Coffin Factory, Up The Staircase Quarterly, Locust Magazine, *Anemone Sidecar*, and his reviews and essays can be read at Open Letters Monthly and *The Coffin Factory O-Bits Blog*. Follow him @sadanziger.

Sam Edsill received his MA in creative writing from the University of Northern Iowa in 2010. Born and raised in Iowa, Sam now lives in Brooklyn with his fiancé and their two cats. His work has appeared in Subtle Fiction.

B.G. Firmani has published fiction in the Bellevue Literary Review, BOMB, and the Kenyon Review, and is currently working on a novel, *Time's A-Wastin'*. Her short story "To the Garden" was chosen as winner of the Marguerite McGlinn National Fiction Prize from Philadelphia Stories in 2011. She has been a resident at the MacDowell Colony and Yaddo, and is a 2012 Fellow in Fiction from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Visit B.G. Firmani's website.

Lou Gaglia's short story collection, Poor Advice, will be published by Aqueous Books in early 2014. His work has appeared recently in Eclectica, The Cortland Review, and Prick of the Spindle, and is forthcoming in *The Oklahoma Review, Hawai'i Review,* and *2 Bridges Review*. A long time New York City resident, he now teaches in upstate New York.

Bart Gulley studied with Helen Frankenthaler, Bill Jensen, Robert Pincus- Witten, Philip Pearlstein, Lawrence Gowing, Richard Artschwager, Judy Pfaff, Agnes Martin and Berenice Abbott. Bart has exhibited throughout the United States. He has received grants from Skowhegan, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and The Millay Colony for the Arts. Bart has a MFA from CUNY Queens College and BFA from Pratt Institute. He taught at Parsons The New School from 1989- 90 and 1993- 94, and independently for several years. In 2011 Bart showed 40 new works at the Anderson Center for the Arts in Oneonta, NY, along with the sculpture of Stanley Boxer. He was also represented in Artists of the Mohawk- Hudson Region at the Albany Institute of History and Art. He had a two- person show at Architecture for Art in Hillsdale, NY, and was in the group show *Black and White: Extreme Value* at the New York Institute of Technology in New York City. From November 2011 through May 2012 he had a solo exhibition of work, From Image to Object: Painting to Collage at DHR International, One Newark Center in Newark, NJ. Other shows in 2011- 12 included *Miniatures* at Art 101 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and *Big Ideas / Small Spaces* with the Joyce Goldstein Gallery in Hudson, NY. The artist image gallery bartgulley.com is a repository of Bart's paintings and works on paper. His work is directed by a life- long interest in three traditions: fine art, classic American commercial graphics and industrial design, and architecture. Find Bart on Facebook.

Josephine Halvorson was born in Brewster, MA and now lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She has a BFA from The Cooper Union and an MFA from Columbia University. She earned a US Fulbright Fellowship to Vienna, Austria. Visit Josephine's website to view information about solo and group exhibitions, and awards. Reviews of Halvorson's work appear in *The New York Times, The New Yorker, New York Magazine,* and *The Brooklyn Rail. Halvorson's* Artist Pension Trust Curatorial Statement: In her practice, Josephine Halvorson engages objects that are often over-looked and reveal traces of human activity, such as tools, writing, and fragments. Painting directly from life and in a single session, Halvorson's practice allows for a prolonged closeness with a single thing. The patience of perception in her work reflects this collaboration between her, her materials and object, in which each painting becomes a record of the artist's conversation with the world, and a material testament to time.

Karen Heagle was born in Tomah, Wisconsin. She was educated at the University of Wisconsin and received her MFA at the Pratt Institute in New York. She lives and works in Brooklyn. She has had three solo shows at I-20 Gallery in New York, most recently *Let Nature Take Its Course and Hope it Passes*, this fall. Recent group shows include *Vivid*, curated by Janet Phelps, Schroeder, Romero and Shredder Gallery, New York; Lush Life 3: First Bird (A Few Butterflies), the Lower East Side show based on a Richard Price novel that was curated by Franklin Evans and Omar Lopez-Chahoud, Invisible Exports, New York; and BAM 2010 Next Wave, curated by Dan Cameron, Brooklyn Academy of Music. Her work appeared in *the Men Show*, curated by Ellen Altfest, at I-20 in 2006; and *Panic Room* at the Deste Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece. Heagle has been reviewed in publications such as the The New York Times, Artforum, Art in America and The New Yorker. Her works are in numerous collections. These include Saatchi Gallery, London, and the *Judith Rothschild Contemporary Drawing Collection* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Tadzio Koelb's work has appeared most recently in the valedictory issue of >kill author. He also reviews fiction for a number of publications, including the New York Times Book Review, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the New Statesman, the guardian, and the Jewish Quarterly. Tadzio is represented by AM Heath, London. Visit him at tadziokoelb.com.

Christopher Moss is an artist living and working in Flatbush, Brooklyn. His work has been included in important and prestigious exhibitions in Cleveland, Ohio and Scranton, Pennsylvania. He wears his fame lightly however, and is a regular reader of *Artforum, October, Art in America*, and *Frieze*. He graduated with a BFA from Marywood University in 2000 and he received an MFA from CUNY Brooklyn College in 2006. Visit Christopher's website.

Charles Lamar Phillips's stories appear in Raritan, Massachusetts Review, New England Review, Cincinnati Review, Fifth Wednesday, and *Chaffin Journal*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, Phillips has been a writer, columnist, and editor at *Congressional Quarterly*, the *Washington Star, Higher Education and National Affairs*, and *American History*. Now Managing Editor for the American Journal of Play, he has just completed a novel.

Wally Rudolph is the pen name of Los Angeles based actor and writer, Walter Wong. In 2007, he was recognized by The Ford Theatre Foundation in Los Angeles as part of its New and Emerging Voices Reading Series for his collection of short stories, *The World's Princess*. More of his work can be found in the literary journals Milk Money, Lines+Stars, Slush Pile, Palooka, and in the 2013 fiction anthology Literary:Pasadena, published by Prospect Park Books. When he's not writing, you can see him killing and getting killed in many different TV shows and films including Heroes, Street Kings, Bang Bang, and most recently, Sons of Anarchy. Hell, you might even hear him reading an incredible story by Benjamin Hale on some site called The Brooklyner. Please send all curses and concerns @wallyrudolph.

Dave Schofield has just finished an MA in Creative Writing. He lives in Manchester, England, where he works with people who have disabilities and is one half of the UK's Cutaway Magazine. The things he loves most are cake, film-photography and poetry. Visit Manchester's Artistic Son, or follow @daveschoie.

Rachel Shim was born in Queens, NY. She received her BFA from Cornell University in 2011, and studied art in New York City and abroad in Rome, Italy. In high school she attended the New Jersey Governor's School of the Arts and was a recipient of The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. She recently completed the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers Residency Program supported by arts>Brookfield and participated in the recent graduate program at Brooklyn Art Space (Brooklyn, NY) where she also exhibited her works. She explores the visual connections that exist between bodies within architectural and experiential space. By applying abstraction through omission, she creates intimate moments that carry an emotional weight of acceptance and refusal inherent to the body. Emphasizing the body's physical engagement with its surrounding environment and within itself, her works play between the private and public shared spaces we exist within, wander through, and contain in our consciousness. Visit her at rachelshim.com.

Brent Steen was born in 1974 in Dallas, TX. He studied at the University of North Texas, Denton (B.F.A., 1998) and the University of Houston (M.F.A., 2001). From 2001 – 2003 he was a Core Artist-in-Residence at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), and in 2003 was the recipient of an Artadia Individual Artist Grant. His work

was recently included in the group exhibitions TXT, James Harris Gallery, Seattle WA (2010), *The Exquisite Line* at the Sherman Gallery, Boston University, Boston, MA (2008); *Please Love Me*, Walker's Point Center for the Arts, Milwaukee, WI (2006); and *Belief and Doubt*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO (2006). He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and is represented by Inman Gallery. Visit Brent.

Patrick Whalen is an artist whose work has been shown around the world. He creates many types of images, but they all share a common theme of elevating the banal. After growing up in Vermont and 9 years in California, he currently resides in Brooklyn. Visit patrickwhalenart.com.

Roger White is a painter and writer based in Middlebury, Vermont and Brooklyn, New York. He is represented by Rachel Uffner Gallery in New York, and is a founding editor of Paper Monument, the print journal of contemporary art published in association with n+1. Visit Roger White's website.