



# Stylus

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART







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# SPRING 2008

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

First, they said we would never make a *Stylus* that wasn't shaped like a square.

Then, they said we'd never put an octopus on the cover. Just to show them, we made *three different* octopi.

This year, we decided to go with something a little more conservative. Like the best art, we designed this year's *Stylus* not to draw attention to itself. Like me at the eighth-grade dance, this *Stylus* will fade into the background.

With any luck, you'll forget the form itself and find yourself immersed in the works themselves. We've got a diverse and experimental collection of poetry in this issue, including *two* shaped poems. In Art you'll find a Barbie diptych and two roosters. And one of the Prose pieces is a multimedia piece, although you'll have to go online to see the whole thing.

Overall, this is probably one of the crazier issues we've had, and so our journal is spectacularly sane. I hope the pieces in these pages will drive you crazy. Or at least make you raise your eyebrows a bit.

—Steven Yenzer, Editor-in-Chief







POETRY





# BRENDAN EDWARD KENNEDY A MOMENT OF HONESTY

though it is true  
that I will miss  
the chance

to feel your laugh

to shoulder  
your crying eyes

and stroll  
with hands  
entwined,

my greatest regret  
is that we will never  
see each other

naked.





# BRENDAN EDWARD KENNEDY

## LENT ET DOULOUREUX

The grey December bleeds  
through the morning curtains  
like a tea stain.

The clock blinks away my sleep:  
twelve twelve twelve  
and I think it's Sunday  
but I feel apart from  
the mass so  
I don't go to church.

I sit  
still in my bedclothes.  
The wall stares back at me.

No sound but the rustle  
of my roommate's lungs.

He's in a fever.

I try not to wake him  
as my feet feel for the carpet.  
Each step a struggle.

He turns over, grunts.





Something sits dull in my stomach  
and I think it's hunger.  
I breathe for breakfast.

Again I feel  
slumber pooling heavy  
under my eyes,  
until the slit of light under the door is  
interrupted.

A shadow passes, stops.

I sit and stare  
and hope it will stay  
to talk of something other than  
the dust,  
the fever,  
the curtains.

It doesn't.  
It moves.

The shadow is gone.  
I am alone.







# ELAINE SCHLEIFFER MONTANA

In a silo we pile up  
grain and memories,  
roads traveled and  
wheat and bread.

Armageddon is knocking,  
a wind against the door  
that we lean shoulders  
against to keep closed.

In a silo we dig paths,  
trenches to battle from  
and broad walls to  
keep us safe and still.

We struggle in from fields  
to our keep from the wind,  
hurricanes and hatred  
flying after our feet.

In a silo we hold vigil  
and wait for the sound,  
the pounding of ascension  
or of being left behind.

SCHLEIFFER 13





We wrap our coats tight  
around our creaking backs  
to keep the blood close  
and heartbeat closer.

In a silo we make love  
and tell jokes and stories,  
in a silo we keep life  
firmly within its bounds.





# ELAINE SCHLEIFFER

## THE BODY

I.

My feet are very far away from my head.  
Sometimes I get vertigo when I  
bend to pick something up off the floor.

Sometimes my boyfriend gets vertigo from watching  
my hips slide back and forth, a walk to die for, a weight to die of.  
But the body is all chemicals, pheromones that make love  
and hormones that make age and  
neurons that fire intellect.

II.

All I can smell is salt, blinding iron accosting my senses.  
The tang in my nostrils, and I can't get the taste  
out of my mouth.  
Salt injected into every idea and word, changing my self  
into earth and history and nature.  
Everything was born in the ocean; and  
everything, once it crawled out, took the salt into its veins  
and carefully preserved the heritage.





III.

Am I bitter, am I sinful, am I a pillar of turning back for home?  
Am I just one more particle in the deep ocean that a man holier than I  
might walk upon?  
I am impregnated by terra firma, the biblical proportions of self:  
I am a mineral.  
I am mined from darker regions.  
I am evacuated from a worldwide liquid dream, I  
am the taste left in thousands of mouths after violence, or sex.

A chlorine infection in my blood, in my spit and in my eyes,  
a connection to the deep dregs of the earth.  
Dark caves with water dripping through the walls,  
the covert space my bundle of nerves drips through, a limestone spine.  
Dry beaches crusted with oceanic leavings, and when I wake  
there will be evidence in my eyes that time and tide were here.

Even in a dreamscape I am betrayed by physicality,  
that brackish sound-swallowing swamp,  
vocal cords that won't function as bile rises from deeper trenches.  
The salt is a symptom, and it does not keep me from boiling over.





# JASON COHEN DELUGE

And since the day God said, "Let there be rain,"  
we have lived in a world that is constantly drowning  
where we learn to swim then replace rocks for hearts  
and not even that casket will keep us above the water line.  
Stones still hold so much weight, as they continue to sink.





# JOEL SEPHY GLEISER AT TOWN HALL

I sit—  
    my hands match  
My back.

Both broken, the way monk  
taught me to pray.

Silence is fundamental—  
    a perfect contrafact  
to Breath.

I sit—  
praying like monk.

Monk:  
the man who sits at Town Hall,  
his no-match left and right  
spitting out hammers  
meeting wires  
killing silence and  
breathing it back with  
messianic felt falling,  
saving them.





Three devils live in  
Monk's language.  
They aim to trap the hearers'  
ears, fixed in cuffs, with lost keys.

He rallies. He relays.  
Really knowing what it is to speak,

he commands his epistrophic whole steps,

And in the crepuscule  
was what the absence didn't mean.



# ALEXA GREY EVERGREEN

some  
thing  
about  
evergreens  
makes you want  
it to be Christmas  
because it would mean  
snow, and presents  
hide the fact that they  
don't like each other all that  
much, but that's okay, because  
*this tie I got you and oh, what  
a nice dress shirt or steak knives.*  
something about evergreens stirs  
memories of being too young to know  
the truth, back when they slept in the  
same bed and laughed, but not the kind  
when Mommy got that look in her eye  
that makes you wonder why jokes aren't  
always funny. something about evergreens,  
in the morning, with water splashing from a fish  
that has jumped up to catch a sparkle at the surface  
but we didn't hear it from our houses where  
silverware drawers close hard and the baby's crying  
and *why is your secretary calling so late*  
there's  
some  
thing  
about  
ever  
greens  
so I  
invest  
in an  
axe.

20 GREY







# DYLAN BARGTEIL

## YOU ARE COOL AND LONG

You are cool and long  
I come close and  
sinews snap, break  
your bored languor.  
You hiss vicious.

You are a stray.  
Thick odor  
matted in thick hair.  
Under my hand  
you struggle.  
Corded muscles twist over bone.  
Your claws scratch and rake.  
I know you, your name is  
unimportant.

You are hot and long,  
labor laid out.  
Tense, but slow. Staring  
at nothing.  
I press. You still.

I let go  
and go clean my wounds.





# ZACH LYON NINE

We used nine condoms that night.  
Seven of them became balloon animals.

But all we could come up with  
were electric eels and pet rocks.

One of them was useless within  
fifty-five seconds of being unwrapped.

But number nine?  
Number nine had *potential*.





# CHELSEA ELIZABETH FLEETING

once a long time ago there was slick asphalt lapping at my legs, streetlamps raining light and your teeth whirring like crickets in my ear. there were silver kisses, palpable ones; the kind you draw up from the bottom of a well. a rose-colored mask coaxed me into getting my feet wet, and when there was nothing I grasped the air, stiff with wires, between us.

but places called to you in the dark. there was Croagh Patrick to see, the little flowers growing by the creek and the way you clutched the rosary at the summit. there was your father to find, battles to fight. when you cried they just thought it was raining. men to impress, communist china pillows to squeeze, hourglasses that filled up with anxiety, sappy and wet, we tried again and again to hold on to.

now your tongue is encased in aluminum. I try to unwrap it, but can't unlace red ribbons tied with recalcitrance. a small fly struggles in a web at night; without thinking, you swallow it whole. sinking into a bed of poppies, I wade through cranberry quicksand, collect wilting strands of baby's breath as you exhale onto my shoulders. we will never be as we were in our quiet days, cheeks white as flags. free and alone taste the same.





# CHELSEA ELIZABETH BORN AGAIN

happy birthday, he whispered, bruising my neck as I slipped out of consciousness. crushed pills fine as fresh snow, two decades without christ is worth forgetting. it was dark at the concert and chinese rats dressed in blue danced on our hands, our hands that were held. he moved my hips and we touched the backs of other people, amused by their angry faces.

on the train a group of men cheered and clapped, thumbs carved happy arcs up until the lights went out. we walked back quick, jumping in out and out of shadows; we pinky-promised, while he fucked me, not to talk about this again. he lost my lace panties. they turned up in a pew littered with beautiful young women who whispered of abortions; he snatched them up quick, saved me the trouble of mailing them.

three bunnies frozen under streetlights asked me not to eat them for breakfast, I asked for second chances and chocolate in my basket. gravity renders me horizontal, gravity keeps me for you.





# JENNA BRAGER

## YOU CAN NEVER HOLD BACK SPRING

She lays me open with a finger.  
I am unfooted, spread, wondering, where  
does she move when she is dancing?

She says, there is violence even in the making—  
bites my chest where the skin goes soft.

I trace constellations on her skirt,  
see rows of summer corn  
in the patterns on cotton.





# PETER MARIANI

## PEOPLE DO NOT WRITE HERE

People do not \_\_\_\_\_ Write here, never  
even try. They, \_\_\_\_\_ leave these spaces  
always empty, \_\_\_\_\_ blank. Type,  
search for \_\_\_\_\_ worthy phrases of  
compassion, \_\_\_\_\_ high intelligence.  
Or love. Man, \_\_\_\_\_ We should mourn  
everything \_\_\_\_\_ that which we  
could have \_\_\_\_\_ spoke, but was  
not, Gone, \_\_\_\_\_ foolishly wasted.  
As poorly as \_\_\_\_\_ These words make  
this stillness \_\_\_\_\_ sound, a sometimes  
Silence is a \_\_\_\_\_ beautiful remedy to  
dreadful death, \_\_\_\_\_ bland thoughts,  
and a hopeless \_\_\_\_\_ Hunt for words of  
quality, \_\_\_\_\_ power





# LARISA HOHENBOKEN

## NEW MEXICO

In the photograph, a Navajo man  
grins and holds two fingers up  
in the Japanese style: peace.  
Behind him, a line where  
ground meets sky, crisp as  
construction paper cutouts.

I remember looking up  
to the smoke-hole where sun  
pours in, only source of light  
in the dim hogan. Holding  
fresh-grilled tortillas, airy  
and big, brittle domes where  
the bubbles were baked in place.  
I always eat those parts first,  
tearing off the cloud-tops,  
nibbling patterns around  
the edges. I am two years old.

Sheep camp is a grain in the desert,  
a dirt road, a hogan, a corral.  
Here is what I don't remember:  
chasing black widows in the yard,  
bullet holes peppering the kitchen  
door. Kissing lambs and climbing  
boulders, a hundred hot air balloons  
hovering dense above the dust.





# LARISA HOHENBOKEN UNTITLED (MASAKO)

1.

Masako welds metal fans;  
she wants to feel them heavy  
in her hand, hear them close  
with muted click.

Her mouth is a cast-iron lotus,  
says *vent* and *slam*.

Her hair is rippling sand,  
obsidian-lustrous, except for  
that one frayed part near  
the temple, charred short by  
flying sparks and slag.

Standing in the heat of the forge,  
I watch her arms pour liquid fire  
like lines of bronze: her polished-wax  
shoulders, young hands in constant  
flux. My bones have cooled  
and do not flex, these knuckles  
more like granite claws.

28 HOHENBOKEN







2.

Crow perching on a telephone wire;

a cracked green glass orb;

metronomic wingbeats;

the caesura between breath and breath.

Light-polluted midnight's dirty orange glow;

rippling pond film, the sinking stone;

lists of words (chronometric, sestina, insoumise);

footsteps trampling old snow.

Headlights arcing through the night:

darkness, brief glare and darkness again.

Silence that should have been the alarm

warning of my near pre-natal death.





3.

Oh horizontal world,  
your neon-lit decay becomes you.  
The orb has sunk, the iron rusted;  
marble lions gone smooth  
and noseless with age.

When I unfold the whispering lyric  
sheet, the creases are bent white  
and soft, half-torn from a thousand  
foldings and unfoldings.

A boy with dirty fingernails glares back,  
endlessly scowling and seventeen.

*If all this ends, there's nothing more,  
then where do my memories go?*

asks the girl in his locket. She looks  
straight at the camera, clear-eyed  
and confrontational; arm out, one  
finger pointing at me.





# MARK STUBENBERG

## A BRIEF VISIT

My grandfather returns to the table with a raised-relief map; his thick white eyebrows crouch as if in prayer. He pushes an index finger on Maine, craters the hollow plastic and draws a line in the dust. He stops at Vermont. *Lived all over here*, he says, rubbing the grey smudge onto a loose book cover. A few postcard images flash into my thoughts. His yellowing nail moves to Connecticut below a town marked with a red ball-tip pin. He produces the name through his cigarette throat. *Try to see the world*, he continues. I roll over the textured earth. With an arthritic palm he feels the Appalachians, he relaxes then pushes down harder. *Was born on a beach*, he says, *North Carolina, right in the sand*. Raking his fingers further south he taps twice on it, then swipes across the dusty Atlantic. He swipes several times, dissatisfied with the dust. When I look at the clock it's time to go.



# NED PRUTZER

## DAYDREAM

An egg you crack over the pan  
blooms like a German Chamomile—  
sizzling, sighing, dew dripping from its pores.

Watch your masterpiece crackle with the nonchalance  
of sunlight at its climax, expand  
like ripples in a rain-stained brook.  
You marvel—*I'm no different than Stravinsky.*

The hiss, the syncopation—it's like knuckles  
sliding up and down your spine,  
a movement that never satiates, only suggests,

slurring like curtains with the breeze,  
longing for a voice it wasn't born with,

wanting to be pulled back—but gracefully,  
with the back of your hand, as if to rub a cheek.

Then it gains insistence, a pulse,  
and it's no longer a matter of control for you—  
rather, of focus, gaining a backbone  
of tender footsteps, humming  
like your daughter as she tugs at your sweatpants,

until its fire is hushed, cooled, growing silent.

32 PRUTZER





# DEEP MAHAPATRA SENSE

Clowns are scary  
Especially at night  
when they stand in front of your window  
telling you to come outside.  
It was a cold night that night.  
I should have brought a jacket.  
But that would have made  
too much sense.





# LAURENE DAMPARE

## WHERE THE ROACHES WERE

1. The stars still shine bright at night  
Behind these mountains on my town.  
Omitted from any map you'll find  
That's how little my town is

There is no distinction of age here.  
If you know where to find the trigger  
And how to swing a machete,  
You are about old enough

2. Two days ago the boys and I laughed.  
My friend looked into his mother's eyes  
And drained the water out from her limbs.  
Without a twinge or hesitation

And as life fled her  
She beamed at him with understanding.  
Because the eyes that looked back at her,  
Were not his; he was gone

3. But we still wake to the same morning sun.  
Don't be quick to judge,  
If you saw a roach instead of human  
You would have killed it too

34 DAMPARE





# CARLA LAKE

## JANUARY IN MERIDEN, CONNECTICUT

The key was hard to turn in the ignition, although Buicks are old-people cars for people who have frail arthritic fingers like my grandmother's, which is why I was driving her Buick, and really, it wasn't so bad to drive an old-person car because we were going to Hallmark, which I considered another old-person thing, because my grandmother was so diligent about birthdays and First Communions, although now there was no real need because she was dying herself, and anyway, that's what birthday cards mean: kittens in mailboxes and angels remind us that other people want to keep us, and get our nails painted together, like my Aunt Janice, my grandmother's red-headed sister who ballroom dances and breaks her acrylic nails in the kitchen, newly finished for my grandmother because that was her place, and that was the place where my father called in a nun to take care of my grandmother since she was dying after all and the nun asked me was I close to my grandmother and to God, but I was baffled at a nun in the kitchen—that is not where they go—and I was very annoyed with my father for putting her there.





# EMILY DILLON

## THE WOOD

My boot straps drag  
over the amber flecks  
that mingle in the dirt.  
Aspen needles  
flirt with the ground  
and sew catharsis  
into the patterns of the wood.

My lashes and cuticles,  
and the hairs on my fingers  
are fibers too  
that hang from the edge where  
my body stops.

I realize our souls are  
the same—me and the wood—  
but it's difficult to absorb  
the peace here.  
All I inhale, exhales  
out and dissolves back,  
somewhere into the wood.







# TAFISHA EDWARDS IN MOROCCO

the sun is not golden here,  
women are still shrill  
and husbands continue to  
raise drunk and battered  
hands in greeting,  
and nothing is endearing  
about crowded buses  
and ration coupons  
and no hot water.

children will eat, and  
will sometimes starve.  
the language is harsh, littered  
with consonants you  
may or may not choke on,

and when you travel  
you notice that the world  
is not as exotic  
as you thought,

the streets are still as piss-laden  
as your homeland—  
racism is still bitter,  
and you are  
poorer  
in another currency.

EDWARDS 37





nothing is more revolting  
(fascinating) than seeing  
a seven year old prostitute  
at the foot of dilapidated  
    concrete stairs,  
bargaining with a fifty year old man  
for an hour with  
legs splayed as she  
imagines  
what she can buy if she saves  
    *just enough* to  
leave this place  
and run  
    anywhere  
that's not these steps,  
this brothel, this city.

when you were seven  
you wanted to be  
famous. the thought is  
(shameful), so you pull out  
the last of your dollars,  
shoving the old pervert  
out the way.

she palms it, face calm  
as the Virgin  
and takes you by the hand,  
and you think

is this what it's like to  
    be lost in translation?





# SHEIDA MOHAMADI BLOSSOMING OF THE WINDOW IN SPRING

You are so tiny  
you get lost  
inside our home's shoe-rack  
and the heart of our flowerbed is so large  
so large it buries you.

Then next year when the window  
Grows wet with the fragrance of orange blossoms  
You grow back  
A wood-stick!



## " گل کردن پنجره در بهار "

آن قدر کوچکی

ی ما که در جاکفشی خانه

شوی گم می

و آن قدر

دل باغچه ی ما

بزرگ است

که تو را

خاک می کند

و سال بعد

که پنجره

خیس از

عطر

بهار نارنج

می شود

تو گل می کنی

یک چوب خشک !





# SHEIDA MOHAMADI

## RETURN FROM MY BODY'S BLACK AND BLUE

Leeches, kindly leeches suck my blood  
and the crane, heavy-handed crane  
lifts my corpse up from the pit,  
with my skull full of snowy days.

Leeches, kindly leeches  
blacken my body  
you return from my body blues  
hitting your head against your hands!

Save your teardrops for me, love.  
I have run head-on into myself, crashed into myself  
and the road's searchlights have dumped me onto this lake's floor.  
Look at how black I appear in your smoke-colored sunglasses!  
And these women  
look how they hide my breasts under their chadors.

Save your teardrops for me, love.  
Why do you, so pale and fair, arrive so late?  
And why has my son, so little  
swelled so much inside me in the few months of my pregnancy?  
And the leeches – kind leeches  
Look how they suck my blood.





"برگشتن از کبودی تنم"

زالو ها ..زالوهای مهربان خونم را می مکند  
و جرثقیل با دستان سنگینش  
جسدم را از ته گودال بیرون می کشد  
جمجمه ام پر از رزهای برفی است .

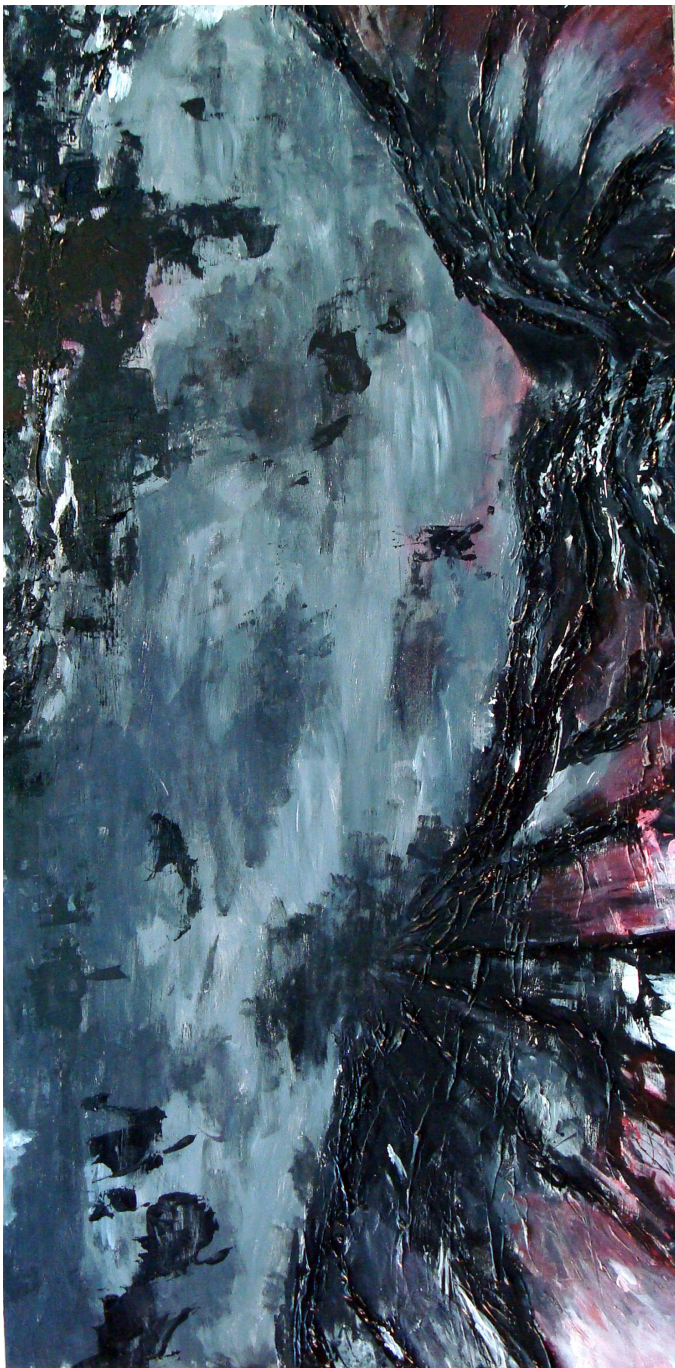
زالو ها..زالوهای مهربان  
تنم را سیاه می کنند  
تو بر می گردی از کبودی تنم  
سر می کوبی بر دستانانت !  
آه ! محبوبم اشکهایت را برایم نگه دار.  
من تنها با خودم ، با خودم تصادف کردم  
و نورافکن های جاده مرا ته این دریاچه پرتاب کردند  
ببین چقدر سیاهم در عینک دودی تو  
واین زنان چگونه پستانهایم را زیر چادرهایشان پنهان می کنند  
آه ! محبوبم اشک هایت را برایم نگه دار  
چرا تو که آنقدر سفیدی دیر می رسی  
و پسر من که آنقدر کوچک است  
در چند ماهگی من باد می کند ؟  
و زالوها ...آه زالوهای مهربان چگونه خون مرا می مکند ...





ART





“Ash”  
Chris Lim







“Untitled (Man with Head Down)”  
Mehdi Ahmadi  
*Acrylic (30”x30”)*





“Untitled (Smoking Girl)”

Laura Cooke

*Ink and gouache on paper (6"x10")*





“Illustrated Angel”

Lucy Reedy

*Acrylic on board (12”x12”)*





“Rooster Kill”  
Lucy Reedy  
*Digital (8.5”x11”)*







**"Braided Iceberg"**  
Larisa Hohenboken  
*Aluminum (9"x9"x6")*





“Living the Dream”

Maggie Rossetti

*Sharpie, charcoal, and pastel on paper (18”x24”)*





“Darmstadt”  
Aislinn Faith Hein  
*Photograph (3000x4000)*







“Venice”

Aislinn Faith Hein

*Photograph (4000x3000)*







4.day



8.day



3.day



7.day



2.day



6.day



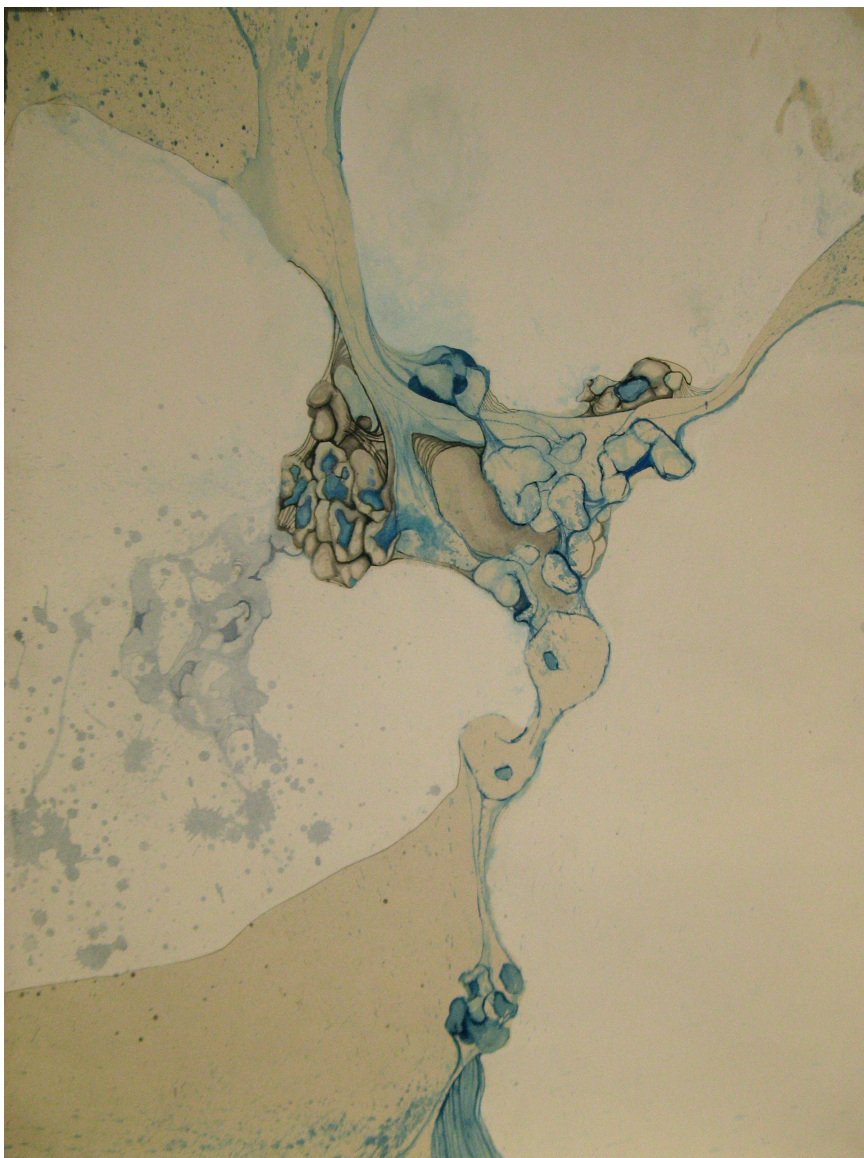
1.day



5.day

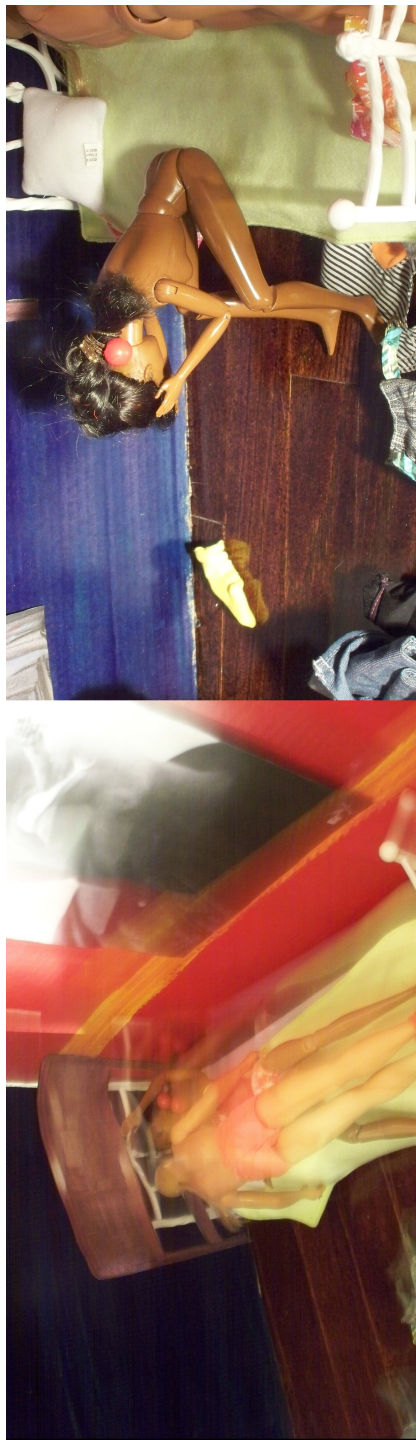
“Scientific Portraits”  
Selin Balci





Untitled  
Kunj Patel  
*Screen print, mixed media (30"x23")*





“Barbie in Parenthesis”  
Ashley McClenon  
*Digital photograph/Diptych (36"x10")*



PROSE





## LARISA HOHENBOKEN | THE FIRE

Last night you dreamed your face was blue.

You were beautiful, alien, electric. You moved like quicksilver, spoke like a lyre; your irises flashed ice-cold, white and arresting. Someone pressed gold sequins at the corners of your eyes.

Waking up, your room feels vague and dull. Even the flowers on your bedside table, freshly changed, are bland. What use are peonies, anyway? You resolve once again to change your life.

After work, you buy face paint at a costume shop. The clerk leers as he rings up the charge, but you pointedly look away. He's five years too young, and gap-toothed.

The paint is the wrong color, but you like it. A bit too turquoise, not quite the indigo you were hoping for. Still, it feels right. Different. New. A real new, not like those times you dyed your hair or shaved it off or moved across the country, hoping for something to finally change.

The next day you try a convenience store and find success. This paint is exactly right: a deep, succulent, magnificent blue. You learn, slowly, how to paint even the most delicate areas around the eyes and nostrils without incident. Your face becomes brilliant and smooth, an even coat of pigment covering freckles and acne scars.

Now you paint yourself every day. You never leave your apartment once it's on, so you make a point to do all conceivable errands before you get home from work. Anything you've forgotten—wine, cat food, paper towels—you do without.

Blue skin, once startling, is now the norm. You shudder when catching sight of your pale, blemished face in bathroom mirrors and window-fronts. How ugly, how plain and sallow. You begin to avoid reflective surfaces outdoors.

You buy sequins and colored contacts. You paint your toenails gold. One day you try painting your entire body blue; elated, you put on a record and dance, entirely naked, for almost two hours. It gets the blue on everything, though, and uses extravagant amounts of paint. You toss the stained carpet and don't try it again.





One night you are reading on the couch when the fire alarm goes off. It doesn't seem real at first. Like in high school, when alarms were just inconvenient spam slowly herding everyone outside. The harsh, insistent sirens clash with an inappropriately calm recorded voice: "Please exit the building as quickly as possible. Remain calm. Please exit the building.."

You are paralyzed. Should you take the computer? The cat? You can't help thinking of those stupid quizzes you used to fill out: "If your house is burning down and you could only save one possession from the fire..." As if you'd really have time to think at a moment like this.

There are people rushing and shouting outside your door. You start to pace, sit down, get up. You can't find the cat. The sliding door is open; she must be outside.

Smoke begins to billow from the floors below and you panic, run. No one recognizes you racing down the stairs, a dark-faced creature leaving a trail of glitter.

The building is definitely on fire. Flames probe the sky from second-story windows; a fire truck wails somewhere, Doppler-free. Must be stuck in traffic. You watch the scene from across the street, behind the crowd of onlookers and residents. Some look dazed. Others cry. A few are frantically searching the crowd for lost family members. It starts to feel like a scene from a movie, melodramatic and unreal. The fire is more interesting; you gaze upwards as it dreamily considers engulfing your side of the building.

The flames remind you of your painted self, gorgeous and bright and effervescent. You stare, unblinking, until your eyes water, making the fire go blurred and sparkling. The view gives you an idea.

Unnoticed, you slip around the crowd and back to the stairs. You are afraid someone will see you and shout, but no one looks. The door is propped open; you go back in.

Back in your apartment, the air smells acidic and thick. You find the lighter, pull the trigger, put the spark to your hair. You smile. This is it, you know. You are perfect now.







# SALA LEVIN | IN THE HOUSE ON MOOSE POND

Annie's father stood on the dock behind the house on Moose Pond, fishing rod in hand, watching the tackle float on the surface of the water. Her brother sat on the other end of the dock, barefoot, his legs dangling.

"Eric," her father called to him, "anything biting over there?"

Eric shook his head.

"Damn it," her father said. "We should have come out earlier." He looked toward Shawnee Mountain, where the sun was beginning to sink. Shots of orange peeked out from behind the summit. "This is the wrong time to fish." He turned toward Annie. "Where's your mother?"

The water was beginning to turn black. Annie could barely see the tackle at the end of her father's line.

"Why do you always do this?" she said.

He sighed. "Annie," he said, "Don't start with me."

"But you invited her."

"I know." He turned to face the pond again. "I know." He turned the reel of his fishing rod. The hook cut through the water, leaving ripples in its wake.

"I'm going back to the house," Annie said.

"All right."

She walked down the dock, to the dirt path that led to the house. Behind her, she heard the zip of her father's fishing rod as he pulled in the rest of the line. It whirred as he released it again, and then there was silence until the small splash as it landed on the surface of Moose Pond.

Two weeks earlier, they were standing on the driveway of their mother's home in Newton. The heat radiated off the asphalt in waves, distorting the pine trees that grew on the side of the street, turning her mother into a bumpy mass, as if Annie was looking at her through a funhouse mirror.





"So," her mother said, "they'll see you in a couple of weeks."

"Yeah," her father said, pulling out Annie's overnight bag from the back seat. "On the fourteenth." He handed her the bag and they looked at each other. Their bodies danced through the heat mirror.

"You know," he said, "you should come with us. If you can take the week off."

"Oh," she said.

"If you want to. You've never been to Maine."

She blinked several times and turned to look at Annie and Eric. Eric was holding a pebble from the gravel driveway, turning it over in his fingers.

"Well," she said, "Maybe."

"You can think about it. I'm just offering. Check your schedule."

"I'll have to see. But maybe."

"Well, all right." He put his hands on his hips and stared at the ground. "All right." He turned to Annie and Eric. "I'll see you guys later," he said, and gave them a salute. He got into his car and they watched him drive away, back to his house on Waban Avenue, the car flickering and rolling in the rising heat.

"Mom?" Annie called as she came in the back door of the house on Moose Pond. "Where are you?"

She heard a drawer roll open upstairs. A few seconds went by. She imagined her mother taking her clothes out of the drawer. It slammed shut again. Outside, on the deck, the wind chimes swayed in the evening breeze, their echo reverberating in the kitchen.

"Mom," she yelled up the stairs, "What do you want for dinner?"

She didn't answer, and Annie imagined her laying her shirts on the bed, folding their arms in on each other, carefully creasing them halfway. She imagined her tucking them into the suitcase, stacking them with layers of tissue paper, laying her jeans on top.

"Mom, come down."

Annie craned her neck, looked to the top of the stairs. She called to her, but all she heard was the zipper of her suitcase.

He pulled into their driveway at ten on Saturday morning. Annie's mother was waiting for him in the garage.

"We were supposed to leave an hour ago," she said.

"I couldn't find the map."

"The map? How many times have you driven there?"







"Sharon."

"I just didn't think you needed a map."

Annie and Eric were standing in the doorway of the garage. "Can we put our suitcases in the car?" he asked. Eric was sixteen, two years older than Annie, and sullen, speaking in short sentences and shrugs.

"Give them to your father," their mother said.

They rolled their suitcases down the driveway, the wheels sticking on the gravel. "Mom," Annie whispered in her ear, "don't be mean."

She put on her sunglasses. They were black with thick rims. They covered up half her face, and they made her look like a movie star past her prime. She looked at Annie through the dark lenses. "Tell that to your father," she said.

In the house on Moose Pond, Annie's mother lugged her suitcase down the stairs. It landed on each step with a heavy thud. She left it by the front door and went into the den, where Annie heard the television click on. Annie got up from the couch and followed her.

"Mom," she said, "Will you come to dinner with us?"

She looked at Annie. "I'm on a train back to Boston. It leaves at nine. Your father will need to drive me to the station."

"Mom."

She turned back to the television, picked up the remote, and flipped through the channels. "Slim pickings tonight, huh?"

Annie walked back out to the living room. Outside, Eric and her father were sitting on the dock, their fishing rods bent over the surface of the pond. Annie picked up the guestbook on the coffee table and opened it to a page in the middle. She read the inscriptions written by other vacationers who had rented the house on Moose Pond.

*Such a lovely house! We had a marvelous time! Sincerely, Bruce and Judy Stern, Providence, RI.*

*What a beautiful setting! We loved the pond. Thanks, the Rolstons from Concord, NH.*

Annie looked out the window at Eric and her father, on opposite ends of the dock. The television murmured in the den.

"I'd like to buy a vowel, Pat," someone said.

She picked up the pen laying next to the guestbook and uncapped it. The wooden duck on the coffee table stared at her, its black eyes unblinking. *Go on*, it seemed to say. *I dare you.*

*What a terrific week! Annie wrote. We had a great time. From, the Silverbergs, Newton, MA.*





Two days earlier, Annie had woken up to find her mother sitting in the chair by the window, staring at Moose Pond, holding a book called *White Mountain Hikes* on her lap.

"Are we going for a hike?" Annie asked.

"I thought it might be nice."

Downstairs, her father stood over the stove, scraping pancake batter from the frying pan. "How far are the White Mountains?" her mother asked.

"About an hour," he said.

"Oh, that's not too bad. What do you say?"

He looked up from the stove. "What do I say to what?"

Annie looked down at her pancakes, dotted with blueberries. Across from her, Eric was filling in the paper's crossword.

"To going for a hike," she said.

He opened the sports section of the newspaper. "You know I don't hike."

"The kids might like it."

Annie picked a blueberry out of her pancake.

"Kids?"

Eric's pencil scratched against the newspaper.

"Fine," she said. "Do whatever you want." She pushed her plate away from her. "I'm not hungry."

Annie opened the back door, walked down the dirt path. She stepped onto the dock and felt it shift beneath her. The water lapped against the sandy beach and fell back into the pond again. The roots of the birch trees were beginning to show through the eroding soil, clinging to the narrow patch of grass on the shore.

Annie's father laid a worm down on the damp wood of the dock. He took out his pocket knife, sliced the writhing worm down the middle, stabbed one half with his fishing rod's hook. The worm flailed as he tossed the line over his shoulder, then sent it soaring out into the pond.

"Mom has a train in two hours," Annie said.

He nodded. "All right." He heard Annie snuffle and turned to look at her. "God, Annie," he said. "Stop it, all right?"

"I know," Annie said. "I'm sorry."

He tugged on his fishing rod and stared out at the pond.

She couldn't help herself.

"Annie," he said finally, "there's no crying in fishing."





## ERIC SIM | ACE PROULX

In Minneapolis, fifteen pick-up artists met at a street corner donning scarves and flashy jackets. I was new and eighteen. I showed up in a fit of uncharacteristic proactivity. I pushed into their social circles, biting my lip and dodging eye contact. I wanted to fit in, but didn't know how. This wasn't unusual.

The leader gave me a handshake. "The name's Cactuar."

"I'm Carlos."

"Nice to meet you," he said. "Carlos, don't be anxious around us. Most of us've been in your place and we don't judge here, okay? We're all weirdos."

My smile faded when he looked to the others as if to wonder who'd have to chaperone me at the bars that night. He seemed to accept it'd have to be him. "It's okay. You don't have to," I thought. I looked down

"I'll take him," someone else said. His voice hooked the others' attention. They whispered, bewildered. I didn't know how to feel, but then I saw him, and in a way, I understood.

"Greetings. I'm Ace Proulx." He fixed his eyes on me, extending his hardened hand. I hesitated before taking it. He looked like Albert Camus. He was like a caricature: the frail supervillain, the sociopath prodigy, the loner with 25 charisma points. The skin beneath his eyes wrinkled deep and pink, and he dressed his six foot frame immaculately.

Cactuar broke the silence. "Are you sure, Ace?"

He nodded subtly.

Cactuar rocked stiffly in consideration, hands pocketed. He briefly looked me over, then examined Ace's eyes as if to gauge his intention.

"Ace'll take excellent care of you. He's a damn genius."

With that, Ace whisked me away. He traversed the city briskly and deliberately, his body tilted like contemporary art. I trodded behind him, feeling ugly and inadequate. I felt a sort of platonic erection come on, dying to see him





in action. I felt like I had so many questions, but really, I didn't have any—only feelings muddled by his eggbeater of a presence.

In front of a health food grocery store, he turned to me with an urbane smile.

"I don't understand," I said, meekly.

"I'd like to ask you," he said. "how serious are you about being my student?"

"I don't know. I mean, I don't, I'm serious, Ace."

"How serious?"

I looked down, pursing my lips. "I'm really, really serious."

"That's good," he declared. My body relaxed. "Then! From this day forward, you'll eat only what I tell you to, and you'll exercise with me every morning."

I followed him into the store.

"Now, I see your concerns," he said, securing a shopping cart. "You, likely having read a good deal of that pick-up artist trash, believe looks don't matter."

"I—I do believe that."

"I'll grant that looks, isolated from other factors, and examined within the specific time frames when so-called pick-up routines occur, may not matter much. That said! I suggest, for the sake of your own wisdom, that you stop thinking in such structuralist terms and consider the limitations of the words on which you choose to model your experience. I assure you, if you think about looks in a broad enough scope, you'll see they do matter in ways that are both subtle and all encompassing."

I feebly watched him stock the cart with bag after bag of oats. "I see," I thought. "Apparently, I'm going to be eating oats every meal, every day, for the rest of my life." I made a face. He returned a blank, unreadable stare. I don't know why, but I felt ashamed.

So I helped him stock canned tuna next, and my eyes meandered to a pretty hipster girl down the aisle. I lazily returned my gaze to Ace, who was playfully smiling. I didn't get it at first.

"Wait. Here?" My eyes widened.

"Now listen," he whispered. "Stand tall. Appear mentally stable. Roll with the punches. Okay?"

Then, he set off. I wasn't ready. I studied his reflection on the waxed tile floor before remembering to stand tall. I plodded forward, past the sardines and vienna sausages. My legs buckled. I felt dizzy. I'd like to say then, hipster girls scared me like the junkyard scene in *The Little Toaster*. I didn't play music, I played *World of Warcraft*. I'd never cried reading a book, and I didn't know what hummus was.

I didn't know, but it didn't matter. I wasn't entranced with her. I nearly forgot she existed, blinded by Ace's grotesque, aberrant performance. His eggbeater





of a presence went into turbo mode, and it felt like an orgasm. I think he introduced me with a swing of the head. I think he smiled like Joe Biden. I think he recalibrated his posture in accordance with every syllable that left the girl's mouth. I think he formulated an absurd story about me tailored for her, and she believed it. I think she thought I was adorable. I racked my brain for the stuff I'd studied on pick-up art, but only drew blanks. So I focused on breathing, and then, Ace's mantra. Stand tall. Appear mentally stable. Roll with the punches. Then, I watched. Ace invoked quantum mechanics and my reality glitched and snapped as if The Matrix switched its operating system to Windows ME, and I swore to myself, "I just saw Ace's head separate from his body." He hammerpunched his fists into parallel dimensions and spun them like threads into seventeen fabrics that coalesced into a triple-length halberd, which he wielded with the grace of twenty-three ballerinas. I braced my legs. I feigned half-lucidity. I imagined I was Jack Dempsey. Then, I watched. Then, my dick was in a girl's cunt, and I'd lost my virginity, V card, whatever, and then, 'twas morning in a motel room, and I, and I—I was nude and alone. Saturday.

I looked around the room, yawning, to find nothing of interest. I glanced at my disheveled hair in the mirror, then opened a window for fresh air. Then, I took a shower, having long given up hope for understanding exactly what happened last night. I left the motel with lidded eyes, and there, on the curb of the parking lot, Ace Proulx, decked in athletic wear, looked to me candidly.

"Did you sleep well?"

"How long have you been out here?"

He didn't answer. "Take this water bottle." He stood up with a child-like grin. "First, we warm up. Then, at my signal, sprint hard until you can't. Then, stay at a jog for approximately half a minute. Then, sprint again. Today, try three cycles, okay?"

I sprinted with a perpetually pained expression, sweating like a sloth and stumbling about like a penguin, pushing myself in his presence. Who was I to refuse him? I wondered if the women he seduced felt the same way, strangely motivated to play into his hands over and over.

I didn't stop huffing even during the ride back to my apartment. "I moved into my apartment so I wouldn't have to deal with a two hour commute to university," I said. "My first term starts in a few days."

I opened up fully to him. I revisited the memory of my last romantic failure in monotone as he showed me how to turn oats to oatmeal. "But why?" I remembered asking her. "Spare me the bullshit."

"Okay," she said, hesitantly. "It's not that I don't want a boyfriend right





now—of course I want one, but not you. I don't find you sexually attractive." She directed her eyes into mine. "You're overweight, ugly, boring, and probably a virgin. You spend 90% of your time playing World of Warcraft and watching those sick Japanese cartoons. Also, my friends would laugh their asses off if you they saw me with you."

The university term started. I canceled my meal plan, as by then, I could cook many nutritious meals, each of them containing a gratuitous amount of oats. I made a subconscious decision to forgo the development of my social life at university so I could be with Ace, who drilled me in basic conversation and studied me as I clumsily tried to convince homeless people to spare me change, which apparently was part of his plan to desensitize me to the judgment of the others, and in turn, cut at my social anxiety.

Beside Ace, I felt like a celebrity at the next pick-up artist meetup. The others shot glances at us constantly

"Hey Ace," said Cactuar.

"Greetings, Cactuar."

I listened for clues about their relationship and looked at Cactuar's LED jacket. Their low voices were chilling. I briefly averted my eyes, and a short blonde surfer boy grinned at me.

"Hi, I'm Squirrel."

"Carlos."

"Nice to meet ya, Carlos," he said. "I'm Cactuar's student. You're Ace's, right?"

"I believe so," I said, taking steps away for privacy.

"I'm new, too," he whispered, following me. "but in a short time, I've heard rumor after rumor after rumor. There's his legendary talent for starters. I've never seen it."

I stared at Squirrel's Timberland boots.

"I heard he used to rampage the bars like crazy," he said as if he was telling a ghost story. "I never see him these days though, and on the off-chance that I do, he's just drinking with Cactuar. This's the first time I've seen him at two meetings in a row."

"I also heard," his voice nearly inaudible now, "every woman he's dealt with developed a hardcore emotional dependency on him. It's like he breaks them."

I looked to Ace. He was looking back. I averted my eyes, terrified.

"Hey kids," Cactuar said, facing us. "Ace and I've decided the four of us are going together tonight. I'm gonna take y'all to my favorite little bar."

I bit my lip and nodded slowly. I tried to read Ace to no avail. Nonchalance.





His lordly mirth surfaced only when he was alone with me, apparently, as now, he felt distant.

I pushed any troubles to the back of my mind and listened to Squirrel. He liked dodgeball, climbing trees, and parkour. Cactuar texted a girl the whole walk. Ace stayed in close proximity but never faced me. The streets became cobbled.

“Say Carlos, what are your favorite openers?”

“I don’t know.” I scraped my memory. Ace’d never mentioned openers, or any pick up artist lingo for that matter. “I only know a few. The cashmere sweater one, and the ‘Who lies more, men or women?’ one.”

“Classic,” he said, nodding. “I recently came up with a pretty decent one. I tell the girls that my friend flaked on me to go on a date with some nerd, and that I want to show him what he’s missing. So, I ask the girls to pose in a picture with me. Then, I’m in!” he said, with a satisfied smile. “I can talk to them about anything after that.”

Cactuar looked up, chuckling. “I don’t know if I like it or not.”

Ace didn’t say anything.

Upon entering the bar, Squirrel opened his first set like a loose cannon. I wondered how long he’d been at it; he spoke to women overeagerly yet unapologetically, and I thought he’d have better luck if he was taller, maybe. After his first resounding rejection, he returned to me with a bright smile.

“What’s going on, Carlos? Three seconds rule!”

I held my left wrist.

“Oh, Carlos! You don’t know? It’s simple. If you see a girl you like, don’t hesitate for more than three seconds. It’s so you don’t overthink it. Just get into a rhythm. Don’t worry about getting rejected! The first few sets are just to warm up anyways,” he said. “Tell you what, Carlos. Tonight, we’ll be wingmen.”

I looked to Ace. He gazed at me for a few seconds before he settled into a booth in the corner with Cactuar. I started to read disdain in his nonchalance. They ordered drinks.

“Okay,” I said.

I didn’t have a standard to compare our performance to except the image of Ace, so it’s likely I was needlessly harsh on myself. I bred awkwardness. I disturbed the ambiance. I molded conversations into unrecognizable messes that Squirrel valiantly tried to work with, hiding his grimaces. The girls glared at us like we farted in a middle school. I felt improvements from set to set, though. This process was remarkably similar to asking homeless people for chance. I smiled faintly as I started to bounce from set to set, taking a masochistic joy





in our horrendous conversations. Between sets, Squirrel babbled about pick up artist techniques too fast for me to understand: displays of high value, cocky funny, having her qualify herself, the push and the pull.

I was exhausted after set six. I hobbled back to my mentor's booth, ditching my dear wing. Cactuar, seeing me, rose.

"I think I'll try my hand," he said.

Cactuar put on a noise-cancelling headset and closed his eyes for a minute. Ace gripped his glass. His features were slightly sunken. Then, Cactuar took off the headset and took off.

"He's listening to himself," Ace said, stopping to swallow. "He's listening to himself rub his own ego. He hypnotizes himself to build his confidence and meditates to lessen his anxiety."

I lifted a brow and cautiously sat down, never removing my eyes from Ace's. It was the first thing he'd said to me all night. I hid a bashful smile and fiddled with my fingers. He took a long drink.

"I was his student, once."

For a while, we watched Cactuar in silence. He was far more skilled than Squirrel, but compared to Ace, he was thoroughly unspectacular.

"This was a bad idea," Ace said, abruptly. "Let's leave this place."

My brow furrowed.

"I don't identify as a pick-up artist," he said, outside. "Because for one, that's a self-disrespecting, inane term, and also because sex honestly has little to do with it. 90% of so-called pick up art's just feeling comfortable in social situations. The pick-up artist trash on the internet's just a literary placebo, designed to make you feel comfortable by giving you an illusory and generalizing model for social interactions. That's it."

I fell silent.

"They're held back by their black and white thinking," he continued. "They refuse to admit to the cracks in their pet ideologies like they're free market capitalists. That simile fits," he said, matter-of-factly. "as even the way they exchange high fives and sparkle to each other is the way close co-workers at a free market capitalist think tank do, before they shoot rounds at the range or play Left 4 Dead drunk. That's why," he said, "we won't be seeing them again."

I stared at the concrete, resigned.

Time flew. In a month, I'd made significant progress. Ace knocked on my door one afternoon and lumbered in with an anniversary gift of sorts. It was a







wardrobe's worth of expensive-looking clothing and a jet back electric bass. I gasped and thanked him, but was also curious as to where his money was coming from. I didn't ask though. I'd developed a system for interacting with Ace, and that meant no probing questions, which he always blocked himself off to. I listened when he spoke, and didn't bother him when he chose to be quiet. His expertise on social cues made it so he could virtually read my mind, so I never had to verbally express curiosity. If he wasn't going to speak up, then that was that.

"I'd like to take you to a punk show tonight," he said.

I obliged, but first he helped me with the new clothes, buttoning my shirt and ordering me to raise my arms so he could pull a sweater over me. The clothes seemed modest at first, but then I looked in the mirror. I felt like Cinderella. My newly chiseled physique was suddenly blindingly apparent. I suddenly understood what Ace said about looks the night I met him. Looks didn't matter, but the confidence they triggered certainly did.

I swaggered into the venue with an inappropriate smile. I was radiant. The bands played a thick, upbeat, melancholy sound, and they were phenomenal, particularly the last to play, a noise rock band fronted by a girl that heaved screeches from her body's depths in a way I'd never heard.

I talked to her after the show with a swing of the head, with an effervescence I'd bottled up. I didn't worry about that, though, and only pushed on. I noticed that without thinking, I stood tall, appeared mentally stable, and rolled with the punches, each to a moderate extent. This pleased me. Upon discovering that she went to the university too, we arranged a lunch date and exchanged numbers. I peeled my eyes away after saying farewell, and then my bottle cracked, leaving me to my unadulterated ecstasy.

I feared on the date she'd ask about my life, which currently was absurd and unfit for conversation, but luckily, I didn't really have to talk at all. The day came, and she was content imparting her own life, in which she played music, cried reading books, enjoyed hummus, and played World of Warcraft. I listened closely, and she liked that.

When she asked me to meet her friends that night, I froze, thinking of Ace. I'd spend almost every night with him, and had never canceled a session.

I gave him a phone call. I hope'd he'd be happy for me, but I couldn't tell—the bad signal garbled his voice. I got his okay and kept things curt. Then I followed her to the apartment where her friends lived, who were mostly her bandmates. I befriended them with unexpected ease, likely thanks to Ace's work on me. I said I'd recently gotten a bass guitar and they offered to give me free lessons.





Next morning, Ace didn't show up with running clothes.

"We're not running today," he said sternly.

"Oh?"

"Jump in my car. I'd like to show you where I live."

I obliged, uneasily.

Ace's apartment looked expensive. The inside was austere save a garishly large television in the living room. I took off my shoes before stepping on his beige carpet. The walls were white and every light source was the same steel tower.

"Take a seat," he said. "Have you had breakfast?"

I shook my head, sitting on one of his maroon felt couches. Ace fried a mixture of eggs and oats. They ended up resembling crepes, and they were delicious. We ate in silence.

He motioned me to his room, which kept the same aesthetic but was busier. He kept a pet rat in a fairly large cage. More curiously, a fully ornamented Christmas tree stood by his bed. I looked at it hard, hoping Ace'd notice and explain, but he chose not to. Then, after looking stiff for a moment, he opened his closet, where a Realdoll stood.

Frankly, I was stunned more by its (her?) beauty than the fact that it was a Realdoll in Ace's closet, which seemed backwards. I studied it speechlessly, afraid to look at Ace's face. It was fully clothed, for one, albeit lightly, as if it took daily walks on the boardwalk. A light white dress. Humble manilla shoes. Even a straw hat with a blue ribbon. Real flower earrings. Apparently, Ace hadn't run out of backflips for me. Was this the next great exercise that was supposed to take me to the next level? What did this have to do with anything?

And of course, Ace told me. He told me I was going to practice having sex on it. I protested, naturally. I told him that actually being good at sex didn't have anything to do with getting sex in the first place, and midway through the sentence, I knew what he was going to say, and he said it.

"I don't understand why I need to tell you over and over to stop thinking in such limited scope. Likewise! I'm saddened you still believe my directions aren't for your own good. Do you honestly believe having sexual confidence isn't going to affect the way you pursue sex? Don't try to joke with me."

"But, Ace. This is too far."

Deja vu—these worries were the same that I had when he first asked me to ask a homeless person for change. I, quickly becoming resigned, understood my protests were useless as usual.

"Plus!" he continued. "Do you think women don't talk to each other?"





Everyone talks to each other, Carlos. If you're excellent in bed, the word will spread. Perhaps, not every time. But, certainly the word will spread on occasion, and in those cases, sometimes a window will unexpectedly open. Reaching a sense of mastery involves incubating luck."

I obliged, with a flustered sigh. In tandem, Ace and I lifted the doll out of his closet—it was extremely heavy—and onto the bed. I lazily copped a feel. Its breasts were huge, but not unrealistically so. I suppose they could've been grander if Ace wanted it that way. I had Ace's nonchalance. The wonders of hanging out with one person every single day. Frankly, I was mostly happy to notice Ace's mannerisms happened to develop in me by manner of diffusion, but at that moment, I only felt bitter.

"Foreplay first. If you don't forget about foreplay, you're already better than most guys out there. Don't underestimate it. I want to see you go for half an hour."

I sighed, and sensed Ace's irritation at my lack of enthusiasm. I looked back at the doll. It was certainly quite beautiful. Its breasts were huge. I felt my erection push a tent in my pants. I wondered if Ace had ever had sex with it, and concluded that he must have. It was difficult to imagine Ace in the act of sexual intercourse—sex always seemed like a feral activity, and Ace's savagery was encapsulated in his shiny blazer and his jagged posture.

I awkwardly took off her dress.

"Is that how you're going to take off a girl's dress before you have sex with her?"

I scowled, thinking that maybe if he wasn't watching and left me alone, I might be able to enrapture myself in some kind of fantasy, but as of now, with Ace, my mentor and older brother of sorts, looming over me like a vampire, it seemed impossible. I figured, though, that the anxiety that Ace's presence instilled at the moment was anxiety nonetheless, and like anxiety in every other situation, it needed to be eradicated. Okay. I took a deep breath, and did my best to humor him.

I sucked and dribbled on her silicon breasts, feebly trying to avoid taking the occasional glance at Ace, who was seated in his office chair now, cross-legged, his eyes drilling. My erection raged on, and I felt thankful that I'd brought running shorts and not the raw denim jeans that Ace had bought me. He signaled for me to take off her panties, so I did, and I carefully touched her prosthetic vagina, considering the notion that Ace's dick was probably throbbing here once. I knew he'd be the type to keep it squeaky clean, but still. It went on. I started spacing out, my mind trying to distance itself from the situation, but of course, Ace constantly kept me awake and a passionate actor, often giving me directions for





foreplay techniques he knew.

“That’s enough.”

I sighed in relief, thinking it was over.

“Go ahead and penetrate her now.”

“You want me to take off my pants?”

Ace nodded, to my horror.

“But, but...” I didn’t even know why I was trying to go against him.

“It’s just me,” he said. “If you’re afraid of me, you’re going to be more afraid of her.”

That was probably the most stupid thing I’d ever heard. Probably. Defiantly, I removed my shorts and held my erection in my hands, pointing the head at the doll’s vagina.

“You need to lube it first,” he said, leaving momentarily to fetch it.

I considered sneaking out. He returned with a wry smile and put a hand on my shoulder before squatting to rub the lube with his fingers into the doll’s vagina. Then, he stepped out of the way, and I went forth and piledrived his doll in a hampered delight I felt ashamed of. The situation felt too surreal, anyways, so I tried to stop thinking. Frankly, it felt really good. Like, really, really, really good. I couldn’t help but slow down a few times when I felt like I would come because I wanted to prolong the experience, when really, I should’ve gotten it over with. Ace noticed this, and I felt like I’d been thoroughly defeated.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said, boding me farewell.

I grunted, and braced myself for the disquietude that’d inevitably torment me once my mind was back in order. I ended up canceling our session that night. He consented with a low voice. Then, I canceled our session the next morning. I didn’t have plans that night, though, so I hung out with Ace then—though our session was strange. I didn’t know what to make of it. Ace was quiet and seemed uninterested.

The next two weeks, my schedule got heavy, and I was forced to cancel a few more sessions. The advent of midterms had be studying later into the night. I suddenly had a girlfriend that showered me with kisses and attention. Her friends gave me bass lessons twice a week.

Ace, professedly a multi-instrumentalist, had also meant to teach me to play the bass. So, one evening he came into my apartment with a keyboard strapped to his back, and did. He first tried to teach me how to play the major scale. I told him I already knew how.

“I get lessons from my girlfriend’s friends.”





Ace froze.

Then, he gently lurched into my space to show me the blues scale. I held my breath as he corrected my fumbling fingers. He exhaled on my forehead, and I clamped my eyes to the fretboard, knowing my nose would rub over his face if I looked up.

“Do you want me to be vulnerable?” he whispered.

“What?” My voice wavered.

“Do you want me to tell you things?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You can’t keep calling off our meetings,” he said in a monotone voice. “You can’t.”

I didn’t speak. I didn’t look up. I only pushed my sore fingers into the frets, and plucked the blues scale again, and again, and again. I felt a hot hand on my shoulder. I kept plucking.

Then, I slowly took his wrist in my hand, and removed it from my shoulder.

“Ace,” I said, trembling. “I don’t think I can be your student anymore.”

I didn’t feel him exhale. I slowly raised my head, and my nose brushed over his wet lips. I reeled back. He was crying.

“I’m thankful for everything,” I said, nervously.

“No.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“No. You can’t. I—I taped you, Carlos.”

I didn’t understand.

“I have footage of you with my Realdoll, and if you leave me, I’ll show your girlfriend the video.”

It took a moment to sink in.

“Ace. Fuck you,” I said, breathing unevenly. “If you think you can blackmail me into being your student, just try it!”

“Do you want me to be vulnerable? Do you want me to tell you things?”

“It isn’t you, Ace. It isn’t you.”

He ignored me. “Carlos, back when I identified as a pick-up artist, I—I always felt like I was circling what I wanted, and I secretly recorded myself having sex with the various women I picked up, to examine it, as if I’d get a clue.

“Carlos, I was drawn to you immediately. I liked that you listened to me—I liked that you validated me, so I forced smiles for you, practicing them in the mirror so I could liberate myself from the damn sternness. It’s only through you that I feel connected to this joke of a reality. I need you,” he pleaded. “I never,





I never should've gotten attached. I knew you were look—looking for a g-g-girlfriend, and that you'd leave eventually, once you—y-you—”

He cut his speech, clamping his mouth shut, breathing hoarsely through his nose. I looked at the floor. He looked at the floor. Together, for a few heavy minutes, both of us were silent save Ace's attempts to curb any hyperventilation. We listened to the faint noise of college drunks yelling outside. I rubbed my eyes.

Then, Ace breathed deeply and clambered to his feet.

“I have a car,” he said, sternly. “I'll teach you how to drive in manual transmission, and we'll take turns driving. I want to leave this place. I want to leave this place, and never come back.”

I couldn't, of course. There was no way.

But in the end, for a reason I couldn't pin, I couldn't help but, well—

I obliged.





## ZACH LYON | TO-DO LIST

Wake up. Write resignation letter. Do not apologize. Do not apologize.

Shower, at least. Do not put on foundation. Do not put on lipliner. Do not put on eyeliner. Do not put on brow liner. Do not put on mascara. Do not put on lipstick. Do not put on lipgloss. Do not put on top coat. Do not put on shadow. Do not put on lashes. Do not even out smudges. Do not check for blotches. Do not oil hair. Do not press hair. Do not touch hair. Do not look in mirror.

Call Tisha. Ask about—Locks For Love? Locks of Love? No Locks of Love. Set up appointment for full shave. Ask how she's doing. Ask how Ronnie's doing. Ask how Danielle's doing. When she asks how you've been doing, tell her you've been good. Filling up the hours with work, filling up the nights with food, good food, cooked salmon last night. If she asks for the recipe, tell her the water is boiling and you have to go.

Cross items off to-do list. Jeans, one bra, sweatshirt. Breakfast. Take off nails. Drive to bank. Remember nametag. Bring shovel? If early or on time, sit and wait in parking lot. Wipe the sleep from your eyes. Walk in. Hand the letter to Pam. Have this conversation:

Pam: Jasmine, I know it's hard dealing with a loss, but you have to at least look presentable.

Me: I am here to inform you that I no longer work for this establishment.

Hand her old nametag. Remember your name. Remember your name is Jasmine Bell. Your name is Jasmine Bell. Don't make eye contact with anyone on the way out. Drive. Call Tisha again. Ask if any spots have opened up. Go in. When she asks about the recipe, tell her, oh, you forgot it. That recipe is not hers. When she says, have you lost weight? Tell her no. Get the full shave. Pay. Say goodbye, honey. When she gives that warm look of pity to the back of your bald head, don't





mind. Use bathroom. Put purse in trashcan.

Drive back to the apartment. Keep the light off. If they start having sex upstairs, put in your Irma Thomas CD and drown it out. Sit down at the kitchen table. Close your eyes. Do not think about how he would struggle to push the sofa aside by himself. Do not think about how you would tease him for removing his belt before he danced, only to trip on the bottom of his pants. Do not think about dancing with him. Do not think about dancing with him. Think about dancing with him. When the CD starts to skip and their moans begin to drip through the cracks, stop thinking. When hunger sets in, eat. Eat well.

Take off clothes. Shave everything else. Remember eyebrows. Do not put on clothes again. In his drawer, find the pair of socks he hid the ring in. Put it on. Take it off. Place it on the kitchen table, along with the eight thousand from your savings account. Leave a note for whoever may find it. Leave, taking only the key to your car. Do not come back.

Cross items off to-do list. Go to the place. North on 77. Third exit. Past the Waffle House on the left. Two more miles. Another Waffle House on the left. Make a left at the following intersection. Reach the woods. Drive until the sunlight leaks through the trees only in splashes. Keep an eye out for the tree with a safety cone nailed on. Drive slow; there's only one set of eyes to find it now. Stop the car a few yards after. Find and open the gate to the side road. If it's padlocked again, hit it with the shovel. If that doesn't work, drive through it. Two more miles. Watch the speedometer. Reach the little broken-down house on the side. Get out of the car. Put it in neutral. Push it into the woods. Go back to the road and find a splash of sunlight. Lie down.

Lay. Press every possible moment of your body into the black pavement. It will singe your backside. Let it. Mosquitoes will bite your naked body. Do not scratch. Let them. The abandoned tops of acorns will nudge into your sides. Let them. Your breasts will fall to your sides and pull at the skin of your cleavage. Let them. Lay. Let your bare scalp feel the breeze wading into it. Curl the tips of your fingers over the soft craters of the asphalt. Keep your eyes straight ahead, set on the single singing bird in the lanky tree above you. It will be a cardinal. Listen to the soft rustle, like falling sand, in the spaces between breezes. As it gets darker and the sun cools and the road cools, close your eyes. Let your heaviness sink into the leathery asphalt and tumble into the nightfall. Think of dancing.







# ZACH LYON | TRAVELOGUES

*These are excerpts from a longer multimedia piece that can be found at:  
[www.seattletravelogues.tumblr.com](http://www.seattletravelogues.tumblr.com)*

## LISTEN:

From August fifteen to August twenty-five I took a Greyhound bus 3000 miles to Seattle and 3000 miles back, to visit two people I love very much. Nothing extraordinary happened, but Sam told me once that it's my job to take the ordinary and blow it up, and I tend to do whatever she tells me to, whether I want to or not. So I'm gonna pump these oranges until their rinds are flying flecks of dust because life is minuscule. Henry Thoreau said something great, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live." I lived, if only a little, so I'm sitting down to write; I genuinely didn't foresee that I would have the urge to write everything about it, but here I am, purging.

## BALTIMORE

The Baltimore Greyhound station is actually how a Greyhound station should be, exactly how the image has always existed in my mind. My bus leaves at 2 AM, and I sit for a while with my dad, who drove me. Everything is golden beige. The three televisions hanging from the ceiling is showing the news, which we struggle to hear over the obscenely loud air conditioning. There doesn't appear to be a single person working. When I was washing my hands in the bathroom, a guy asked me where I'm going: I said Seattle, and he said "Damn, that's a trip." I forgot to ask him where he was going.

## SPRAWLING LATINO FAMILY

They never ended. I don't know if they were a family, I don't know anything really, but I'll make assumptions in the hope that they never read this. There was





the cute girl around my age who I noticed first in the Baltimore station; I thought she was alone until the two twin toddlers ran up to her (my dad gave me a look of pity before leaving), and then she appeared to know the parents of the twins, except I have no idea if they were the parents, and then there were more. The thing is, they kept shifting: at different bus stops, they would lose family members and add others, but there were never more than five at a time. By Chicago, the toddlers were in the care of two completely different people. I had no idea what was happening, and as an ignorant white American I'll try to quit the conjecture. The kids didn't bother me as much as I thought they would.

## **PITTSBURGH**

When I open my eyes my life is Pittsburgh; I'm surrounded on all sides and the sky is seven-in-the-morning and downcast, a battle of navy blue and gray. Pittsburgh is a beautiful city, my dad always said, and it is. It looks like it was planned all at once, with every individual piece in perfect place with the rest. The skyscraper district is bookended with green, suburbanized mountains, rivers, Roberto Clemente, holy shit, bridges, and it's all part of the same city and it knows it and basks in it. Pittsburgh is a cute girl with nice glasses. Someone should get an award for Pittsburgh.

I would later tell Kate that I wouldn't mind living there, to which she said, yeah, I know some people there you could talk to. And then my desire deserted me (she knew it would, I think).

## **CLEVELAND IN THE AFTERNOON**

Cleveland was as unattractive as it was the last time I visited, but it's more pitiful than anything else. Cleveland is Theodore Roosevelt towards the end of his life when he wakes up in a sweat and realizes that it was a sham, all of it, every single moment. The Rock 'N' Roll Hall of Fame isn't worth it. Jacobs Field is now called Progressive Field but the Indians are still called the Indians. I get the same feeling leaving Cleveland as I do leaving a Wal-Mart.

The Cleveland Greyhound terminal, though, seems a perfect replica of an old train station, with everything but the necessary clock. It's all shades of brown. There are rows of lights hanging from the high, high ceiling, but none of them are turned on: the sun pours in from every window like an abandoned cathedral with the stained glass all smashed out.

## **CHICAGO**

78 LYON





We entered Chicago at eight in the evening when the sky's twilight was wilting, a steely, steely, blue that should eventually turn black entirely because that's what it's like in Chicago: it follows a different color spectrum. I thought to myself, very distinctly—I was just waking up—"Chicago is God's loneliest soldier." The first thing I noticed was the Sears Tower standing over the South Wacker building, and together they resemble a knight leaning on his sword, genuflecting not out of respect but out of exhaustion, necessity. Chicago is exhausted. It's a biting black all year round. Chicago isn't Barack Obama, Chicago is Barack Obama's peacoat.

And I wonder how so many choose it. Chicago has become the city people move to because New York is just so *typical*. That's it, really. Chicago is alternative NYC. "Yeah, I'd like living in Chicago." I've never heard anyone say anything else about Chicago.

Two of Kate's best friends from Baltimore moved to Chicago.

David wants to go to school in Chicago soon, for music.

The Chicago Greyhound station is, in case you were wondering, just like the city itself: overly crowded with miserable overcoats all short of breath, every surface covered in a silver or black glaze, unnecessarily cumbersome, a junkyard womb filled with lost, floating body parts. The food was terrible and overpriced; it's like that at all Greyhound stations, but especially here.

A whirlwind of black clouds belongs over the city at all times: it's where the souls end up. Do people here look at each other? Let's forget Chicago.

## THE ITALIANS

It was at the Minneapolis terminal where I became aware of the large group of Italians, at least fifteen of them, none of which seemed to speak any English; I assumed they were tourists. I switched buses in Minny. When this happens and you're waiting for your next bus, you secure a spot in line by putting down your luggage. I hurried into the terminal and was only behind one of the Italian tourists, glad that I'll get second dibs at a seat. And then, fourteen other Italian tourists dropped their luggage right next to their friends' suitcase. FML.

And I wondered, for a while, what the hell a bunch of middle-aged, seemingly-angry Italian tourists were doing taking a bus from Wisconsin to Wyoming.

## SIoux FALLS

"in sioux falls listening to siouxsie sioux. im precious. i like the midwest. all the street signs have birdhouses on the back."





I found out how to update Facebook with my phone.

I had a thirty minute layover in South Dakota in the tingly warm of the mid-day. I'm pretty certain the Sioux Falls Greyhound station is a renovated one-story house. In the waiting area—which used to be a living room—there were three televisions in a space the size of a hamster.

## ANTHONY BOURDAIN

And then I saw the Domino Sugars sign that hangs above Baltimore, fixed in olde black and white, the point being that Baltimore used to be a lot better than it is, even though the Domino Sugars sign is still in the same damn place. And my eyes were glued to a television in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, because any mention of Baltimore is shocking and significant, even though the show was just some asshole called Anthony Bourdain calling it a “piece of \*%%n town” via closed captioning before giving backhanded compliments to John Waters and *The Wire* (big stretches, those), and lamenting “urban decay” and one day I’ll kick him in his stupid face. I hated the bus for leaving before the show finished.

Things went downhill from there.

## THE BOTHERS

In Sioux Falls, we switched to a Jefferson Lines bus; in case you ever ride the Greyhound, “Jefferson Lines” just means “don’t get on this bus.” The seats are about half as wide, it smells like sweat and corpses, and the whole damn machine is falling apart, which drills into you a nascent fear that the wheels will fall off at any point and pretty it much guarantees you’ll never get any sleep worth a damn, due to the useless, broken ceiling tiling slapping around like garbage lids.

With additional boarders and with the Italians taking up half the bus, I knew I’d no longer have two seats to myself. And like a stupid person, I was sort of hoping that a new group of girls-my-age would sit near me, because one of them was cute and as we all know, the bus is an ideal place to meet girls. And there they sat. I don’t think any of them knew each other before they got on the bus; led by some satanic force, they all just met each other, and then they met me, and then Satan made it their mission to make Sioux Falls to Wyoming an experience so obnoxious that I texted David that I’m probably going to ask if it’s possible to take a later bus, and potentially lose a day in Seattle. With my schedule as it was, I was already going to spend more time on the bus than in the city.





## CAST OF CHARACTERS

The ringleader of the group was a large banshee of a woman who never once faced forward, instead lifting up the armrest and directing her underlings face-forward for the eight hours we spent together. She sat on me. There was never a point in our trip where a portion of her ass was not resting on my right leg, save for the few points where I'd ask her to just move forward, please, which would last for a few seconds. Also worth mentioning: she spent most of her time bouncing on her seat. She was thirty-one years old, about ten years older than she looked and thirty-one years older than she acted, and, if she is to be believed, a mother of seven. With another one on the way. At one point she tells one of the girls—aged seventeen—"Damn, I got a kid older than you!" Nineteen years old, she said, which means, according to math, that she had a kid at twelve, which I'm not sure is possible. I'm not sure if any of it is true, but in a fit of frustration—I *just wanted to read*—I wondered if this was some Peter Pan complex, if she didn't have a childhood and saw her chance to be a teenager with a bunch of teenagers. It's cruel to remove people from their context, and hers was obviously a less affluent and less Jewish and more southern context than mine, but perhaps people lose their right to context when they spend eight hours bouncing on you against your will.

She spent the trip in a fit of hollers; she was the center of the bus. South Dakota has brilliant hills. It's mostly made of farms, but between them are the pastel-green hills, canvasses for cloud shadows. Whenever we would pass a particularly beautiful set of hills, she would screech: "SEE!? THE HILLS HAVE EYES! THE HILLS HAVE EYES!" I couldn't figure out why.

There was a black guy in his twenties who seemed like he would be perfectly enjoyable to be around in any other context—though as soon as I thought this I had to footnote it with *that might just be my white guilt speaking*. He enjoyed them and seemed to know how annoying they were, but he was an enabler. He would sing songs they'd bring up, and the Banshee would spend the entire duration *dancing*—on a Greyhound bus—and clapping like a seal. As soon as he finished the song, she would immediately groan and say, "See, I *hate* that song."

And then there was anal girl. She was the cute one. At a bus stop in Wyoming, over the phone, her boyfriend was trying to convince her to try it. "No, *who told you* that it'd feel as good for me as it would for you?" Her birthday was next week, and he wanted that to be her present.

And they talked about sex. Though my body spent those hours slowly filling with lava, I felt much, much worse for the teen-aged girl and her mother sitting in the row in front of me, both dressed in the most innocent of fleece L.L. Bean





jackets. They obviously had a healthy, loving relationship, but hadn't gotten to the point where they can speak freely about the carnal. At one point, the banshee says, in some difficult-to-parse context, "She fucks niggers;" and through the pursuing discussion about how it's not cool to say that, okay, the girl and her mother stared straight ahead, unbreathing. I have no idea who it was more embarrassing for.

## RUSSIAN FELLOW

A teenager in a green-and-white striped hoodie, he was, as beautiful foreign men tend to be, the plaything of the girls in the back. All of his statements began with a thick "IN RUSSIA..." He said that a friend recommended Greyhound to him, because taking a bus across America was "the American dream." The girls laughed instinctually and told him "your friend hates you."

## OLD MAN

In Gillette, Wyoming, for some reason, the Italians finally got off. I quickly shuffled to the front of the bus; the banshee asked me, "Oh, you're getting off?" I mumbled, "No, I'm moving." I was joined by the romance novel enthusiast who said about them something like "Well, I *never*..." as well as the teenager and her mother, who just looked glad to be alive. A stop or two later, a heavy, heavily-tattooed man in a sleeveless Harley Davidson shirt helps on an antique of a man and then leaves him there, alone.

He sits across the aisle from me when it gets dark. We're still going through badlands. He wears a bright red baseball cap with a gas station logo on it, something a much younger person will have found at a thrift store. The girl up front, the one I thought was the banshee's sister, humors him, asks him questions, talks to him like she's his kindergarten teacher, which he doesn't seem to mind. He suffers from Alzheimers or dementia or something like it; I don't know anything about those things. He doesn't know where he's going. The girl tells him about how excited she is about Spokane(!!!), repeatedly. In a moment, he releases one clear-as-hell thought, that the man who helped him on was the son of a roommate in the hospital, and I think to myself, shit, maybe this guy isn't crazy and the girl up front has been unknowingly condescending the daylights out of him. Later he would ask me if this gas station has a "pee room," and that worry was quelled.

On the bus, he needed to use the bathroom, and she wasn't strong enough to lift him up. This is going to sound silly: I took a lot of time deliberating whether to break from my book and become a part of this, because the girl didn't even seem entirely in control of her own faculties and if I stood up, he would be primarily





in my care, and I'm scared of old, helpless people, and I'm still a little boy, and I'm weak as hell, too, I think. I finally forced myself to ask the struggling girl, "What are we doing?" and I stand up and start to lift him by the arm. Old people are surprisingly heavy, I think because I naturally assume they're made of dust. By the end of it, I was sore all over. The romance novel enthusiast told me "That was a very nice thing you did," and I didn't look her in the eyes.

### EXISTENTIAL CRISIS #1

Now this is fucking silly, but I had an existential crisis, as is often my wont. This happened, I think, for several reasons all at once:

I was in a bus in the middle of Wyoming with nothing around me but desert and a mostly-black sky. I was a body in a metal tube going seventy miles an hour through space.

I had just finished reading a particularly bone-shattering section of *Howards End*—Leonard Bast in the forest!—and it made me cry, as any decent book does. I realized that this might actually have been the first moment in my life in which I ever made a choice on my own, entirely alone. That every point of self-improvement I've made since being the second-most-unpopular kid in middle school set absolutely no precedent in doing something as obvious as helping an old man get up to pee, and that everything I know about myself is probably wrong etc.

Nothing breaks me like the old and helpless, nothing.

Why wasn't anyone with him? Why couldn't he find his ticket? Why did the fucking busdriver just roll his eyes every time the bus came to a rest stop and we had to help him up? Why didn't he help?

I stared out the window with my eyes fixed on a mass of matter off in the distance, wondering if it was either a collection of high-standing trees or low-hanging clouds. As the highway curved around, the mass disappeared into separate, unnoticeable parts; this doesn't mean anything at all. In the moment after a crisis of existence you notice these things.

I helped him up at least three more times, and he did become my responsibility, and twice I had to use my booklight to search the bus toilet for his wallet. It was in his back pocket both times. Every time I helped him up, his pants would fall down; after using the toilet, he didn't buckle up his belt. He said "thank you" and you could tell in his voice that he was trembling with embarrassment.





## MONTANA

When I woke up next to Grace I woke up in Montana, glorious Montana, holy shit Montana, half the state is covered in mountains and all of those mountains are covered entirely in the trees that come in a size that doesn't exist on the east coast, and at eight in the morning every mountain is covered in miles of mist. Before I left, my dad said to me, "You're seeing a lot of states I've never been to. I'm actually pretty jealous." Montana is what he was talking about. A Very Nice Gentleman would later perk his eyes open wide and tell me, "Oh, that's God's country."

## WASHINGTON STATE, BY AND BY

Half of Washington state is pretty and the other half is boring and that's that. I arrived in Seattle at five PM. The Seattle Greyhound station looks like the locker room of a waterpark. Grace and I both got out there but we somehow lost each other, I didn't say goodbye or get her number and I thought pursuing either would be a bit silly. I later regretted this. "Gotta get them digits," the Very Nice Gentleman would later say to me. Kate would laugh at Grace when I shared my trip. I was in a complete daze, which happens to you after you're in a bus for three thousand miles. I meet David like old times, he calls Kate, Kate asks me if I want to get a beer with her—she just turned 21, and she's been abusing this one bar, he says—and I tell her, "Kate, I will drink a beer with you. I will drink a beer with Barack Obama. I will drink a beer with a Pegasus." I stepped out of the terminal, and I meet Seattle, who isn't so big.







## ZACH LYON | AT MAYA ANGELOU

This is the fourth time Robert has asked me to call Roberto. Roberto is his iPhone. Robert is shorter than me, a mess of black hair and a face of patchy stubble and every inch of his body loudly admitting that he hasn't showered in four, five days. He is sitting six rows ahead of me with Roberto's thin, white power cord protruding from his pocket and into the socket to his right. The immense banquet hall is still filling up for Maya, strangers pouring in around us in pairs and triplets or more, filling the air between them with knowing jokes and adulations. There's nothing in the air between Robert and I except white noise and light from vanilla chandeliers.

At precisely 7:28 PM, I am going to call Roberto, and together we are going to interrupt the oration of Maya Angelou. 7:28, he reminds me, in case Maya is looking at her watch when it happens, sees a round number, and gets suspicious. An hour ago, he asked me: Are you going to Maya Angelou? It wasn't a question. At this point, I've accepted it. I think I'm beginning to understand it. And there's nowhere to go but forward. Previously:

1. Eight months ago; Robert and I had been roommates for a day. Knowing no one at this school, I agreed to go with him to a show at the student union. Once the music started, he immediately ditched me to go dancing. I stood on the outskirts, silent, occasionally catching sight of him darting around like a pinball. He took great pains to apologize to a girl after he accidentally touched her boob, twice. Eventually he ran up to me, drenched in sweat, yelling over the music: HEY. I HAVE AN IDEA. WHEN THEY FINISH THIS SONG, CALL ROBERTO. He ran back to the center of the turmoil. No one in the band heard his phone ring, but no matter, he said. This was just an experiment, just phase one.





2. The second time, it was calculated. A comedian on campus: there'll be space between the laughter, he said. If we time it right, it'll work, and we'll see what happens. It'll be great. I had little to do, and I could see something swirling behind his eyes that told me I have to help him, I just have to. The comedian was Vietnamese, and it was all he talked about, but his biggest laugh came when he jerked his entire body toward Robert's vicinity and, still doing a perfect impression of his verbally abusive Vietnamese grandmother, wiggled his finger and yelled, "Tut tut tut! No deenah tonight! Put on vibrate!" When we got back to the room, Robert was bouncing around, and he asked out a girl and didn't even care when he was rejected.

3. The third time, Robert cried. That's how he convinced me to wake up at five and go to Obama. He sobbed: oh! oh! oh! I need this I need this! This is everything I've been building towards! And when he hugged me and dug his face into my shoulder-blade, I felt the tears linger into the fabric of my shirt, and I agreed to do it. I won't tell you about the icy hours of waiting or the sound Robert made when he learned we were to be seated in the mezzanine, or the fact that no one heard Roberto's singing but us. I'll tell you that on the way back, he didn't open his mouth, and I could hear his stomach ripping open in frustration. The next day he triumphantly tells me over his video game: you know what? You can't beat level ten before you beat level two. Obama just wasn't ready.

And so, Maya begins. The ballroom is silent as milk. She's an 81 year-old Nubian queen, he said to me. "What'll she say! Probably 'I know why the caged bird rings.' Yes!" Given the opportunity, Robert sees her as his crown jewel, ripe for plucking, perfect for the instant, nothing can go wrong: even if she only skips a single word, twitches her little neck, raises a single eyebrow, it'll be worth it. You don't have to say anything, Maya. Just let him know he exists. She sings an African chant, I think. And she tells us about Stamps, Arkansas, and Uncle Willie, and stories of trains and multiplication tables, and poetry and womanhood and blackness, in a voice filled with earth and air.

I'm staring at Robert and he's staring at Maya, his leg trembling. I know what he's thinking, I think. He's imagining it happen. He imagines his body rising up from the seat, the gears in his kneecaps pivoting slow and bold, until he stands upright like the statue of an army general. He towers, so still that his heart and his pulse refuse to even twitch. Maya is speechless as she gazes into the cloudy lakes of his eyes. The entire audience turns to face him but he doesn't notice. And





with his right hand he lifts up Roberto, immaculate and lustrous, as high as he can reach. And Roberto booms his ring, with a force that throbs throughout the entire ballroom. And Maya Angelou thinks about everything, about Robert's bar mitzvah, about Robert's first step-father's funeral, about the sight of his neighbor's dog getting hit. Her eyes would get smaller and smaller and smaller as she begins to cry.

It's 7:28 now, and Robert is stone-still, staring directly into the eyes of the grandfather clock of a woman, gripping onto Roberto—he made sure to change the ring to a generic bring-bringing, out of respect—and I force my thumb to hit "Send." And so it happens. Robert takes three seconds to remove his gaze from Maya's eyes, before he slowly looks down at the machine in his hand and hits "End." And in a moment I feel the crowd think to itself, all at once: What an asshole. Who the hell leaves their ring on during Maya Angelou? Is she gonna say something? She doesn't. I don't think she even heard.





# JENNA BRAGER | VARIATIONS ON TWO HANDS HOLDING

I. When Laura Mae gets home, Daniel is still on the sofa in his gray wool slacks and shirtsleeves, his jacket pulled over him like a blanket. There is a small collection of empty beers on the coffee table. Laura sets her purse down on the mantle and starts to take her coat off. She can see the soft bottom of Daniel's foot through the hole in his sock. Laura's throat seizes up inexplicably. Her arm moves like a reflex—involuntary, violent. It catches the collection of beer bottles and knocks them over. They clink together and then against the glass of the coffee table, then land with a dull clatter on the floor. They do not break. A small trail of flat beer dribbles out of one onto the carpet. Daniel does not wake up.

Laura picks up the bottles one by one and sets them back on the coffee table. She goes into the kitchen, rips a section of paper towel off the roll next to the microwave and goes back into the living room. She kneels down, her bare knees pressing into the fiber of the carpet, and dabs at the spilled liquid. Daniel's sleeping breath makes a slight whistling noise when he exhales. She looks at his face, unshaven and chapped. The side is pressed into the cushion of the sofa.

His mouth is open and he looks ugly and dead. Laura Mae stands up from the beer stain on the carpet and sets the paper towel on the coffee table so that Daniel will know she has been there when he wakes up. She takes her purse off the mantle and leaves by the laundry room door.

II. Laura Mae's lover is skinny and from Chicago. Her voice sounds like tires spinning on gravel. They meet at the Bel-Loc Diner, which sounds fancy but isn't. The filter of Laura's cigarette is stained red from her lipstick. For the most part, there is none left on her mouth, just a line around the edges. Anne puts another cigarette between her lips. Her hands shake striking the match and it takes her two tries. Anne smokes Pall Malls like Laura's dead grandmother, who always told Laura that she didn't inhale the smoke. She died of emphysema anyway.





Anne's teeth overlap a little in the front. They push out her upper lip so it peels up when she smiles and shows her pink gums. Laura kisses Anne in the hollow of her temple and feels it in her hips. She sucks in the last of her cigarette. The flame hits filter and the last breath is a little more acrid. Anne wraps her arms around Laura and pulls her close. It's starting to get cold. The waitress sticks her head out and tells them their food is on the table. Anne's lips are smooth and dry. Her nose presses into Laura Mae's cheek and her tongue pushes into Laura Mae's mouth.

III. Once Laura Mae had a sleepover with a girlfriend of hers from school, Emily Redfield, when she was maybe fifteen. She only had the one bed that she slept in, so the both of them were lying in that small bed, sharing a blanket. After a while of lying there together, Emily rolled over so that her stomach was pressed against Laura Mae's back. She didn't move a muscle. Then Emily threw an arm over her, kind of wrapped around her waist. Laura figured she was asleep and didn't say anything, didn't move a muscle. Then Emily started pressing herself real hard against Laura's backside, moving a little bit and making these quiet sounds from deep in her throat. Laura kept her eyes shut real tight and stayed real still. Then Emily stopped moving for a minute and whispered to her, "Psst, Laura Mae, you asleep?" but she didn't answer. She could feel Emily's eyes scrutinizing her face. After a while more of pressing up against her, Emily moved her hand from Laura's stomach and stuck it down between her legs. Laura made some small noise and moved like shifting in sleep. Emily took her hand away and rolled over so that her back was to Laura's again, and neither of them mentioned a thing about it after that.

IV. The last of Laura Mae's lipstick is left on the white ceramic rim of her coffee mug. The coffee is weak but hot. Anne cuts hers with a packet of Sweet'N Low, another habit she shares with Laura's dead grandmother. It's warm in the diner and Laura's hair is starting to frizz. Anne reaches into her pocket and pulls out a handful of change. "Your pick," she says to Laura, and sticks a few quarters into the miniature jukebox mounted on the wall of their booth.

"I want to listen to Mellencamp," Laura says.

Anne scans the jukebox. "They only have 'Jack and Diane.'"

"That's the one."

She shakes her head. "You have shit taste in music." She flips through the listings and pushes some buttons on the jukebox. Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely" comes on.

"I thought you said it was my pick." Laura pulls the top off a creamer and





pours it into her mug. She likes to watch the white cream hit the oily black surface of the coffee and bloom before she stirs it in. She doesn't really mind that Anne is playing Roy Orbison instead of John Mellencamp, but she feels sheepish in the face of Anne's criticism.

"I'll play your song next. Promise." Anne takes a bite of her eggs. "When the waitress comes, can you see if she can get me some hot sauce?"

"Get it yourself."

Laura picks up her knife and fork and cuts into her pancakes. She isn't hungry. She wishes she had something to tie her hair up with, and instead twists it in one fist and holds it at the back of her head. Anne glances up from her eggs. Her eyes linger on Laura Mae's chest, thrust forward by her raised arm held behind her head. Laura Mae lowers her arm. The Mellencamp song plays and then "Brown Sugar" by the Stones. Laura puts her knife and fork down. She isn't very hungry. Her phone is vibrating in her purse. She can hear it buzzing against the fabric lining. Anne can hear it too.

"Don't pick it up," she says.

"It's probably Daniel," Laura mutters, rummaging through her purse. "I should see what he wants."

"No, you shouldn't." Anne leans across the table. "He doesn't need anything."

Laura Mae looks at her. The phone buzzes in her purse and she lets it ring.

V. The waitress is sitting at the long Formica-topped and gum-bottomed counter eating a slice of cherry pie. She looks up and croaks, "Take it easy hon!" as Laura Mae opens the door to the outside. The cold licks her neck and she pulls the collar of her coat tighter around her. She walks to her car, heels clattering on the concrete, gets inside, and turns the key in the ignition to warm up the engine. The windshield fogs up. She touches the St. Christopher medal hanging from the rearview mirror. As the fog clears from the windows, Laura sees Anne's skinny frame, braced against the cold in her Carhartt jacket, leaving the Bel-Loc and hurrying to her car. Her hand hovers over the window crank. She starts to roll the window down, but then thinks better of it.

VI. Laura Mae's husband Daniel sits in the living room. He is still wearing his gray wool suit from work. The jacket is off and the sleeves are rolled up, but his black oxfords are still on. Laura comes into the living room. Her hair is still wet from the shower. Daniel is staring blankly at an old picture of Laura's dead grand-





mother on the mantle and holding a half drank bottle of Sam Adams. Laura gets her purse and car keys off the coffee table in front of Daniel's knees and heads for the laundry room door. She pauses.

"Where are you going?" Daniel asks.

"Just meeting a friend."

"Put some gas in the car, will you?"

"Okay," Laura says. She leans down and kisses Daniel on the cheek. The stubble of his beard catches on her chapped lips. "Take your shoes off the carpet."

Daniel looks down at his shoes for a moment. "Sorry," he says, and leans forward to unlace them. There is a hole in his dress socks, under the ball of his foot. Laura follows his gaze down to the carpet, which is a sort of non-color. Maybe it was off-white at one point. Once, right after they were married, Daniel had pushed her face down into the carpet in the living room and she had sneezed from the cigarette ash and dust. The fibers burned her knees and made them bleed and scab up afterwards.

Daniel squeezes Laura's thigh and takes a swig from his beer. "We should have a baby soon," he says, and kisses Laura on the belly. She can already feel her pantyhose sliding down under the roll of her stomach beneath her dress and decides she will take them off in the car. She can hear her phone buzzing against the fabric lining of her purse. "Is that your friend calling?" Daniel asks.

"Most likely," Laura says. "I have to go. Don't wait up."

Laura Mae kisses her husband again, this time high on his temple, and leaves by the laundry room door.





# JOHNNIE SIMPSON | SPARKS FLY UPWARD

The dust hung in the light like stars, and I stood holding my arms and shaking. Shaking like Beau, his white face staring hard at the ceiling, taking long, wheezing breaths. His momma was kneeling at the edge of the bed, stroking his quivering hand and humming as the doctor put a cold stethoscope to his chest and listened. The doctor scratched his beard and glanced up at me, but diverted his eyes away when they met mine, and I felt a tingling go all through my body, like someone had run their fingertips along my neck. Cora was leaning against the door jamb and I really wanted to leave, but I'd have to ask her to excuse me so I could pass. She looked so strange standing there in her nightgown, middle of the afternoon. Beau's eyes scanned the room and found me, and they didn't move, like maybe the secret was in me somewhere. And I knew it.

I slunk to the door and Cora shifted over and let me pass. The hall was longer than I remember it being when I'd trudged in a couple weeks ago, expecting nothing but his momma to raise hell for what I'd done. We'd come back soaking wet and me with my arm around him. She took him inside, then came back and started wailing on me. Smacking me across the face with those long nails and calling me a bastard. The stairway was low and narrow and I folded my arms and scrunched my shoulders. I made the final stair and collapsed against the wall. This pressure started to build behind my eyes and my throat felt tight, and I hated myself for not being able to. I looked at my hands, the dirt under the nails and the little cracks from last summer, shoveling horse manure. These same hands did it. I wondered how they could be the same. I noticed his pa was sitting at the kitchen table, running his thumb back and forth along the lip of his coffee mug and looking out the back screen door to the whistling trees lining the street. He hadn't shaved and his face was dark and looked like it was sagging. I'd never seen his hair all mussed up the way it was. I guess I'd always assumed it was neat and combed without his doing much to it, except running some pomade through it.







But it was scraggly and oily and stiff, like he hadn't washed. I thought he probably stunk and scolded myself for being disrespectful. I wanted to say something to him, but I was afraid, so I cracked the front door open just wide enough for me to slide through without making a sound. That's when I started running, raising dust as my legs swept under me. When my thighs started burning I stopped running and dragged my feet the rest of the way.

Ann was sitting under the shade of a tree by the lake when I got there, lying back in the grass, gazing up through the branches and the leaves. I sat down beside her. We didn't talk. I watched the water with her for a while. The light reclined on the surface, then flared up like fire when you moved your head, striking your eyes like it was mad at you, then laying back again. It was so quiet. Like the whole world, all the people and bugs and trees, were listening. Waiting for a sound. I was thinking then about how sometimes when the wind blows through the trees it sounds a lot like the ocean. I've never been to the ocean before but I think that's what it would sound like. Then she spoke and it was forward and made me feel red. "They give you hell for pushing Beau in the privy?" she said.

"Not so bad." I wasn't sure what to do with my hands, so I started yanking out grass and making a little pile beside my leg. "No one will say a damn thing to me now."

"Guess not," she said. Felt like only yesterday Beau and I grabbed our fishing poles and swiped a handle from his pa's liquor cabinet and run down here around eleven when it was real dark. By the time we'd got through drinking till our stomachs started kicking some of it back up and talking about Ann and being seniors next term it was getting around dawn. The grass was still warm from the sun, warm as any blanket I had at home. He pulled out this old rusty brass ring and said he was gonna ask Ann if she'd like to get married after next term. I told him it was probably for the best. He nodded and observed the ring real close, seeing it with his hands like he was blind, rubbing it between his fingers, studying it. We didn't catch anything that day. But I remember walking back and Beau was smiling. First time in a while. He was still fidgeting with that ring when he waved goodbye and hurried up the steps to his house.

Ann sat up and brushed the hair behind her ear. The sun was agitated and I swiped my hand across my forehead, but I still felt cold and all the hairs on my arms stood at attention and my leg was bouncing up and down.

"I didn't mean it, Ann. I swear to God."

"I know."





"Shit I hope he don't die." Her eyes were obsessed with the lake, the light glittering on the surface like music, and though she was courteous enough to speak to me I wished she'd look at me. I wanted someone to look in my eyes and see I was lying in that bed there with him.

"Did he say anything to you?" she said.

"Like what?"

"I dunno. Nothing?"

"We didn't really talk about it."

I wondered if I should ask it. And I figured I was dead anyhow so I might as well. I felt sick about it, like just before you tell a girl you love her and you get that giant lead ball in the bottom of your guts and your breath gets light and quick. But I said it. "You forgive me? For what I done?"

"No," she said. "I reckon God will. But I ain't God."

"Yeah," I said. I felt my eyes getting heavy. "It was an accident, Ann. I swear to God I didn't mean it."

"I know, Sam." She was fixated on the lake, and I wanted so bad to jump in it and wash myself clean and go running through the whole damn town like I was crazy, shaking the forgiveness out of them. By the gnarled trunk of the tree we were laying under I saw a clear molted dry fly shell, and somewhere in the trees you could hear him whistling to his kin, and it was a comfort. I wondered what a dry fly makes of its body once it's sprung forth like that from the other one. I reckoned it was like giving birth to yourself. I was there when my cousin Lonnie gave birth to Ezra and it looked like hell to go through. And I wondered if death was like that. The pain, anyway. "You afraid of giving birth? The pain, I mean?"

"Not so much. It is what it is. I'll take it as it comes and if it hurts, then it'll hurt and I'll deal with it. It's a burden. But pain ain't for nothing."

"Yeah," I said, but I couldn't conceive it. That kind of pain. One time I threw a baseball at Beau and he whipped that Louisville around and the ball ground my nose to sand. I think that's the worst I ever got. Still crooked as hell. The worst of it was knowing I'd have to show momma and I knew she'd damn near have a heart attack over it. I didn't want to show her, but when she saw my face glistening and me clutching my nose with the blood coming all vigorous, she said boy move your hand. When I did, and there being really no nose left, she was about ready to faint, clutching her heart and backing up against the wall, her eyes all wide and scared and her breath going in and out like a train.

I got up and brushed the dirt off my jeans and said, "Well, I'd better be going." I lingered for a moment, hoping she'd say something, but she just kept staring into





the lake. She seemed to breathe deep the cool air coming off the lake, and I could tell she was tired and needed to sleep. So I walked away, down the lakeside, not knowing where I was headed. Well, I did know.

I reached the Haynsworth place after walking about an hour. I went around back until I hit the overturned privy, long on its side though you didn't think it was all that tall when it was upright. I stood over the pit, one wide reservoir, and though the smell had gone, the black swirling muck of whatever it'd become since the Haynsworths had left town made me rub my stomach and feel all tight in my muscles, same as before. I went round to the outhouse and sat on what was the wall. I pulled some rolling papers and tobacco and rolled myself a cigarette. It was still now, the pit. Like the door to hell. We were over by the house tossing rocks through the windows and running up and down the stairs and just being stupid. And we saw the outhouse upturned and we went to check it out and I was just fooling so I pushed him and he pushed me back. So I pushed him a little harder. That was it. He went in and it was thick as hell, not wet or sloppy like I thought it'd be, but more like pudding that'd been sitting out for a couple hours. And I couldn't believe what I'd done, seeing him swinging his arms above the surface and crying like that and screaming. When I pulled him out he laid out on the grass crying, on his hands and knees, and he spat some of it up. Then he started to hurl and I told him we gotta get him cleaned up and I was so sorry. We ran over to the house and I started to unroll the hose, Beau standing behind me, covered in it and shivering and crying like I'd never seen. He looked so stiff with his arms locked at his sides, like he didn't want to move so he didn't have to feel it. I turned the hose on and washed him down and he said it was cold as all fuck. I don't know if it was the fall or the hose that put him down. I don't know.

I twisted the lit end of my cigarette into the dry, cracked wood and headed back to the house. When I got close I lingered at the corner, pacing back and forth and kicking the dust. Cora must've taken a walk somewhere because she was coming the other way back to the house. She was wearing this yellow summer dress and it made me feel better. But I still didn't want to face her so I picked up my pace and went back inside. His pa wasn't at the kitchen table so I went into the living room. He was laid out on the gray sofa with the rough pile, his arm across his forehead, without a sound.

"You see Ann?" he asked, moving not his arm nor his face to regard mine.

"Yessir."





"How she doing?" he asked.

"Good as she can, given the circumstances."

"Yeah," he said, and rolled over on his side, toward the back of the couch. I wanted to ask him about Ann, if she was still gonna stay at the house. But the way his back was turned against me, silent and frozen like that, told me the way it would all turn out.

I walked up the stairs slow, like I was going to meet God, and I guess in a way I was. And the doctor came around the corner and down the stairs quick so that before he even looked up he was in front of me. Our eyes met again, but this time they stayed fixed in mine. He scratched his beard and went on by without saying a word to me, just looked at me with his eyes still, like winter, and I saw myself shoving him against the wall and screaming in his face, but I knew I couldn't do it. I passed him and went up the stairs and down the dark hall to Beau's room. He was by himself there, his eyes closed but the blanket rising and falling, only just.

I pulled the chair in the corner close to the bed and sat down, leaning my elbows on my legs and rubbing my hands together. I started to say something, but no words came natural. The room was bright, the midday sun coming in through the big window opposite the bed so that his whole pale, thin body was illuminated. And outside the dry flies were prophesying from one tree to the next. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the old rusty ring and felt it with my thumb and forefinger, and I put my head in my hands, and I cried. The clock on the wall kept ticking. His pa was downstairs lying on the couch, waiting for his son to die and knowing there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Somewhere Ann was walking around not knowing Beau'd enlisted his buddy to send her one final token. Then I heard a hard breath, and a cloud must've crossed the sun because the whole room went dark, so dark it smothered my heart, and a cold breeze seemed to sweep through that place. There was a hand on my shoulder when I looked up, and I knew.





# KAT SMALL | THE REHEARSAL

They *banged*. In the morning when he woke up, the other half of the bed was empty. He got out of bed and saw that the rest of the apartment was empty too. He went to the kitchen and made eggs for when she came back. When the eggs were done, she still wasn't back. He put them in the fridge.

Then he cleaned the apartment because it is nice to surprise the people you love sometimes. And, anyway, everyone likes a clean house.



# STELLA DONOVAN | WHILE MY LOVER SLEPT

While my lover slept, I switched his heart with mine. I made the incision with my index finger, carefully peeling back the layers of his chest. I lifted the heart gently, encountering more resistance than expected. Thick arteries clung it, stretching from his chest like strings of melted cheese. I tugged firmly until they snapped and broke against his sternum. My own heart slid cleanly through my breast, and for a moment I balanced a beating organ in each hand. His pulse was steadier and slower than mine. I squeezed my heart to calm its pace. When our rhythms matched in perfect synchronicity, I made the exchange. Stretching his skin tautly over the incision, I stitched his wound closed with my hair and tongued away the lingering blood. The scar was imperceptible.

I took his heart, and I should have taken his eyes as well. Both were inconstant. Switching eyes was a simpler procedure, and would remove the fascination of other women. But with his eyes, I would see the allure of my rivals. I much preferred making paper dolls of them, bending their flimsy frames and counting the ways they were unremarkable. And the one pair of tweezers I owned had rusted, so I sharpened my nail and let him keep his pupils.

Time had corroded the novelty of our association, and I sensed his waning interest. I cared for him more deeply than the others, but he was blind to this. I was his plaything, easily accessible and easily discarded. My emotions irritated him, tiresome burdens in his otherwise charming puppet. He washed me off, and I trickled down drains. He buried my traces in the wastebasket. He erased me. No matter how prettily I arranged myself, he saw nothing, heard nothing, and understood nothing of my worth. He triggered a sickly paralysis in me, and though he chewed on me with disinterest, I swallowed him again and again.

We woke up entangled the morning after the switch occurred. During the night our limbs had coiled tightly around each other, pressing our chests together. We boiled in our mixed blood as the chasms between us crumbled. *You enslave me*, he whispered. *To think I was going to leave you forever.*





During the following weeks he couldn't part with me. Distance was painful. The farther away he was, the less he could remember about himself. Though in a new body, my heart recognized its owner and quickened in my presence. Away from me he felt dead, colder. Once I possessed him entirely, I set about correcting him, adjusting his ambitions, and monitoring his desires. Nightly I kneaded his heart in my hands, evening out its creases and correcting the inconsistencies. I molded him, reveling in his constant proximity and new affection.

One evening, months later, I rested my head against his chest and detected something odd. Something was strange about the sound I heard. I pressed two fingers against the underside of my wrist and listened. Our rhythms were mismatched. My stomach tightened and I cut into his torso again. This time my hands were unsteady. I made the incision clumsily, and because I had to break the scar tissue, my nail did not slice cleanly through the skin. I parted his flesh until I saw a pulsing organ. I leaned in closely through the darkness until I could distinguish its shape. My fists came down hard on his stomach. His eyes opened. My hands clawed at his face. His arms snapped up to restrain me. Where is my heart, I demanded. *You took what didn't belong to you*, he responded coolly. Where is my heart, I insisted. *You are a thief*, he replied. My ear flew back to his body, moving over his stomach and down his legs before I finally located a faint, anemic beat in his right heel.

I tore at his foot, ripping it open, tearing the tendons and digging until I touched the source of the weak pulse. My heart came out in blackened, bloodless pieces. I tried to fit it together, but when it began to crumble I screamed and squeezed until it turned to ash. He sighed, as if I had become predictable. He motioned to leave, but I buried my face in his lap. He ran his hands over my head. I thought he was comforting me until he pulled out a clump of hair and told me to stitch him up. I submitted immediately, cleaning and sewing his heel and his chest. I begged him to finish the night with me, to stay until the morning and to let me explain. He lay down again and faced away from me. I studied his back, wondering what other woman had opened his chest and told him of my deception.

In the morning I awoke covered in blood. While I slept, my lover had retrieved his heart and hadn't closed the wound. In this emptiness, I lay where he left me for months, until the blood in my chest clotted and anger made it throb. From this coiled knot I grew a new heart, and think only of ways to rectify the murder of my first one. I sit here quietly waiting for him, biding my time, knowing that his return is inevitable. He may have taken back his heart that night, but not





# EMILY ZIDO | THE VIEW FROM THE STEPS

So I'm standing on the corner of the Ponte Garibaldi on a hot day sometime mid-April when the electric streetcar named *Argentina* comes sliding down the middle of the boulevard. The red poppies growing in the sidewalk start their little shiver-dance under the sun. Looking around, I think maybe I should tell my American buddies to hop on the tram because all of the sudden I have this gut instinct it'll take us where we need to go, which is to the Spanish Steps. We've been listening to her since late last night but Holly Mac will not shut up about how great these so-called Spanish Steps are, and of course we're thinking, you know, stop *talking* already they're just *steps*, but she goes on and on about how we absolutely cannot leave Rome without seeing them.

Last night, she's sitting at the table while the rest of us are all getting wasted off this Moscato so cheap it fizzles, so cheap it's given to us for free, but the only thing Holly Mac can talk about is how magnificent these steps are. All she can manage to say is how she read about them and everyone says they're a real sight to behold, and O Brother she just cannot wait for tomorrow and the moment she finds them and climbs them and gets to wiggle her ass in the bright sun at the top.

Only *I* know that right now we've been looking for them all morning and it feels like we haven't come within a mile. We ask the shoe vendor and he shakes his heavy beard; we ask a few Italian mothers with their children and it's like they've never even heard of them; we ask a confused-looking street urchin and he looks even more confused. So by now I'm getting to think the whole thing is a myth, either that or a bust, some tourist-trap on the edge of the city.

The tram doors open; we don't have tickets but it's easy enough to sneak on. The only problem now is that my sense of direction is quite lacking and last time I told everyone to follow me we ended up in the Jewish Ghetto near a guy shucking a burlap sack full of artichokes down to the heart with a switchblade.

The tram doors ding. The sun amplifies the sound on strings of light drawn







across the Ponte: in another life it might've been notes from Vivaldi. I remember the artichokes and decide to keep my mouth shut.

In the water off to the right of the bridge, men are sunbathing barebacked on the concrete, slanted banks of a tiny, built island. The island itself comes off looking like some three-cornered hat smothered with vegetation and red-roofed villas. I'd love to join in the sunbathing, but notice rather poignantly that the sun is making me crazy: I get to thinking that maybe if I jump, I'll end up landing soft-bottomed and giddy in the tree canopy. Or I'll slink right through the baking red tiles and plop down on some widowed Contessa's stiff Milanese couch.

To put it simply, I am not feeling like myself.

Also, I'm in a dress that's making me nervous because all the Italians are throwing me an 'Oo baby' kind of grin, and the pink's high on my cheeks because I *thought* the dress was a good idea back at my friend-of-a-friend's apartment in the morning, when the sun was already high and we were all getting dressed beneath bath towels in the living room where we'd slept on cots and dirty mattresses. But I liked the dress because it was red and making me feel like a real Mediterranean honey, looking up at me from inside the traveler's pack small enough to fly our dirt-cheap transcontinental airline. But now I'm in Rome wearing the short-hemmed dress that's getting me absolutely stared at on the Via Giannicolese, and I no longer consider myself its biggest fan. The men are cawing and tightly pursing their lips; you can't see past most the shop windows because it's that time of morning when the sun's revealing nothing but dark rooms, but I'm imagining these old Tuscan ladies with black-crocheted head-netting and turquoise rosaries rolled-up in their palms whispering something like an excommunication because my tits are hanging out for all of Italy to see. And what's really funny is that Palm Sunday is right around the corner, so in terms of that whole Mother Mary, cover-your-head-and-douse-your-feet-with-perfume thing, I'm a real disgrace. And I was *raised* Catholic, so I'm feeling it.

Back to where I'm standing on the Ponte Garibaldi. I'm an American studying-abroad at a less-than-mediocre university in London, and now I'm on the last leg of my two-week spring vacation trying to figure out how to get to the so-called Piazza di Spagni, which by now I'm convinced is nonexistent. I'm stuck tracing the roads on the map with my fingertips trying to find the best route from the Via Giannicolese without ending up on some dumpy side-road or floating in the river in my underwear. Also, there's been an earthquake three days ago within a fifty-mile radius of the city. Holly Mac, Alex and I are all in Venice at the time, sleeping in a decent hotel for the thirty-Euro-a-night rate, one with lion paws for chair legs and





gold-colored paint on the windowsill that looks a little briny in the wrong light. The whole thing is like Las Vegas' idea of Venice, in the town outside of Venice. In the morning we're eating free breakfast off of party plates and melting hazelnut spread in our coffees. Then we take the eight AM bus across the long low bridge that gets you from Mestre to the main island.

To set the scene, I'm on a bus full of locals plus a few gypsies with purple headscarves, gripping a metal passenger pole next to a tall guy who's balancing his leather briefcase between his knees. I'm feeling groggy and rubbing my eyes because of the plane ride and the late night bus dash from Marco Polo airport, when all of the sudden this stream of light hits me, and I mean really *hits* me, from out of nowhere it comes pounding through the bus windows. I look around at the still faces to see if anyone notices the panoply of light and breaking glass, if people can feel how the water goes on for miles and the sky is a mess of pink, bright and raging and enveloped in delirious contours pure as lengths of royal velvet, like the sensation of rose petals drawn across parted lips behind the silken veil of the wondering odalisque's chamber bed. And next thing you know, there's a city growing out of the water. I see the miraculous walls. On the horizon, I witness it gleaming orange. And I feel like, in the morning, when the light is incredible and the world is the shivering sensation of poppies dancing in the limelight and the sun is even out-pouring itself, that Holly Mac, Alex and I are discovering something like the lost city of Atlantis.

Me, I'm only nineteen, but I have the eerie sense that this moment will be eternally sweet. I feel my body lighten; my whole life I've never felt so damn weightless. For a brief, unimaginable second, light parts my lips and forces its way to the depths of my vocal chords where it strikes a hum, making its way to the empty darkness of my lungs, sinking its teeth into the current of blood as it fills stomach, liver, thighs, hands, feet with the luminous desperation of living ravenously on nothing but particles of ancient traveling light and the secret that there is such a thing as people dying of happiness. It's so pretty I want to hug somebody, only my briefcased friend is too busy dicking around with his phone to notice and I'm not quite sure my friends are feeling the same kind of triumph. But I feel wide-eyed and pretty as the day. So when this earthquake happens two days later, it seems unreal. You pick one week to get to Italy and the whole country goes up in flames. People die; the buildings in the towns are so old they crumble because they're not up to code. We spend the whole train ride to Rome worrying about aftershocks. I'm staring up at the tacky recreation of some Renaissance wall-painting on the hotel ceiling, when all the sudden I'm imagining it falling down and squeezing my guts out.





In the morning we run up and down the Via Miranese to burn off the steam, as well as the gelati from the day before. Alex, she tries this funky thing with anchovy, egg and radicchio in a *Trattoria*. Holly is content with her *stracciatella*. Me, I'm sadly in love, or at least believe myself to be, and therefore nothing can satisfy me, not even the *bufala mozzarella* we buy fresh from the grocery store that makes you want to swim in its milky sumptuousness. But what's worse than me thinking I'm in love is that in exactly two weeks from the day, I will learn in the form of a letter that the boy who I think I'm in love with does not love me, and is one-hundred-percent sure of it. He doesn't bow his head. He feels no guilt. Hell, he has no reason to. My chest is aching in Venice, and the dullness of it will eventually teach me something. I learn to grow up. I learn it was not love. But for the time being I'm anxious in only the kind of way you could imagine being at nineteen, out of the country for the first time in your life, with a red dress in your backpack you bought out of pure loneliness. And you wear it out of this terrible fear you harbor in your empty chest of never, ever coming back. Because you see the light in the kitchen of the Roman apartment as you slip into your clothes beneath a damp towel and the newness of it makes you feel like Venus stepping out of a clam shell. You wiggle your toes a little, and feel the gulping desire of that morning on the bus when the light could not contain you. When you step out onto the balcony and see the clotheslines strung from building to building, it feels like you've already lived a thousand lives *here*, so what's the *point* in going back? It murders you to know you cannot be wholly in two places; it kills you to see the world and lose it at once. You're at the beginning of an exploit and stuck on coming to terms with the end. It's a human dilemma, and in Rome it's burning the skyline; in Venice it's ruining the fresh salt smell that rolls off the Aegean. You think of being in love. You stand in the miraculous sunlight and feel eaten alive. You dream of fulfillment. You are anxious with delay. You dream of jumping from the Ponte Garibaldi and landing in the tree canopy, or dying in a crush of bones when you fall hard and dumb on the surface. You feel swift as the dirty Tiber. You are torn and raised by sunlight. You are, as Romeo puts it to himself, sick and pale with grief.

The three of us get to Rome and stay at a friend-of-a-friend's apartment. In the mornings we drink coffee and in the evenings we sup on red wine that gives us dull headaches. We go to the Coliseum; we climb shattered walls on the Palatine; we get ripped-off by t-shirt vendors; we get ripped-off at the ATM; we learn not to give out our phone numbers when drunk to equally drunk Italians, especially ones with pony-tails. We walk along the Tiber under spring leaves. And now we cannot find the so-called Spanish Steps for the life of us. You stand amongst friends and wonder





what they feel, if they would know the mix of sensations. Their eyes are vague. It is something you would like to put into words but find near impossible. Their heads spin wondrously in the daylight, and you hear the inspired whispering of the old Tuscan women who have sped up the verses of their excommunication behind closed doors as they grasp wickedly the beautiful beads of their rosaries, fondled so tightly they are cutting into flesh.

They curse you, though you are anxious with delay.

Though you are in the tree canopy.

Though you are torn and raised by sunlight.

And though you tell them how it is killing you, the verses spit with venom.

So maybe all that's left to do is suck out the venom and say *follow me*.

"Where are you *going*?!" Holly Mac shouts from beside the fountain in the Piazza Navona.

"I'm going to find these goddamn *steps*," I shout back. It's taken another hour of plodding through the Campo de Fiori and the Palazzo Farnese and around Trajan's Column and the sun is high in the sky and still nothing. So now I'm off. And I'm really gearing up. I'm running around corners. I'm beating away the bodies in my path. I'm going to find the thing even if I could care less, and feel myself racing against time in the drowning sensation of never being in two places at once. Holly Mac and Alex are following me around bends. I'm hopping across streets, not even waiting for traffic. They're yelling at me to quit it but I can't. I get to the Pantheon and turn left. I hit the Trevi Fountain and want to throw up my hands, weep. When I get to the Via Condotti, I stop and wait for my friends, but by now I've lost them. I put my head down and walk, trying to cut my losses, because now I'm lost without company in a foreign country and giving up on searching for a thing that doesn't exist.

I think about how I think I'm in love.

I think about being consumed by sunlight.

I imagine a certain illness.

And what about death-by-happiness?

I see a few steps in a doorway and take a seat. Then I wrap my hands around the back of my knees and wait. The street is all light and shadow dances; the cobble road is sparkling. A man walks by whistling a song like there's nothing sweeter or more important, and all I think is, well, how often do you see that? But there's something else I'm hearing, a kind of soft humming noise that seems to be coming from right out of the buildings. I look down and see the red poppies that grow everywhere, and hear them humming it too. The sound is stronger at the end of the street, and just then I don't feel like sitting on another empty doorstep ever again





in my life. I go to find where the sound is coming from, and when I turn the corner to look I see a crowd, and not just any crowd, because it happens to be the biggest crowd I've seen in Europe. People everywhere, and what's more, they're all sitting. Everybody on a staircase that climbs right up out of the Piazza, where men and women are selling cut-flowers from woven baskets. I see Holly Mac at the bottom. The people around us are glistening in the sun. It's like they've all gathered at some ancient Roman watering hole, only instead of drinking they're soaking up the heat they've been dying to feel their entire lives.

Holly Mac waves and calls out. I grin wildly. And then I yell, "I told you, it's just a fucking staircase!"

And now Holly Mac is absolutely racing up the steps. Alex and I are behind her, tripping over everybody's feet, laughing madly, making a mess of everything because the people have really packed themselves in. We get halfway up and keel over with stupid, fat belts of laughter. Then it's off to the races.

When we get to the top, Holly Mac just stands there, looking pretty in the sun. I look out and see the world gleaming orange in every direction. We smile and think of aftershocks. I daydream of dancing in a canopy. The earth could split open right now and consume us. I taste the sun and think, well, it would be alright.





# THE JIMÉNEZ-PORTER LITERARY PRIZE

The Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize is an annual writing contest open to all University of Maryland undergraduates. The Prize is in its eighth year and is administered by staff at the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. To preserve anonymity, judges read the manuscripts after names of authors have been removed.

## POETRY JUDGE

Terese Svoboda is the author of 14 books, six of them novels—two forthcoming. This fall it's *Pirate Talk or Mermalade*, a story in voices, and next spring, it's *Bohemian Girl*, her answer to Willa Cather. Praised as a “fabulous fabulist” by *Publishers Weekly* for her fourth, *Tin God*, *Vogue* lauded her first, *Cannibal*, as a female *Heart of Darkness*. She teaches at Columbia.

## PROSE JUDGE

Fady Joudah has been a field member of Doctors Without Borders since 2001. He spent two six-month missions—the first in Zambia and most recently in Darfur-Sudan. He is also the translator of Mahmoud Darwish's *The Butterfly's Burden* and *If I Were Another*. His poetry has appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Crab Orchard*, among many. Joudah is the first Arab-American to receive the Yale Series of Younger Poets award for his book *The Earth in the Attic* (2008).





# THE JIMÉNEZ-PORTER LITERARY PRIZE

## PROSE AWARDS

1st Place: “In the House on Moose Pond” by Sala Levin

2nd Place: “While My Lover Slept” by Stella Donovan

3rd Place: “Variation on Two Hands Holding” by Jenna Brager

Honorable Mentions:

“Asclepeion” by Sam Cooper

“Spine” by Stella Donovan

“Velvet Reminds Me of Ravens (or, Meditations on Disease)” and

“The Fire” by Larisa Hohenboken

“DaoYa - Sprout” by Bingjie Leng

“Luciferase” by Ned Prutzer

“Shisha” by Caitlan Mitchell

## POETRY AWARDS

1st Place: “At Town Hall” by Joel Sephy Gleiser

2nd Place: “Untitled (Masako)” by Larisa Hohenboken

3rd Place: “In Morocco” by Tafisha Edwards

Honorable Mention:

“You Can Never Hold Back Spring” by Jenna Brager

“The Dust of Your Piano Keys” by Larisa Hohenboken

“Sepia” by Sonia Silinsky Krupnikova

“People Do Not Write Here” by Peter Mariani

“Daydream” by Ned Prutzer

“My Father’s Hands” by Johnnie Simpson

“Flutter-Bomb” by Kenton Stalder

“November Nights” and “A Brief Visit” by Mark Stubenberg





# SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submit all work at [www.styluslit.org/submissions](http://www.styluslit.org/submissions)

Stylus accepts high-quality submissions of poetry, prose, and art from all currently enrolled University of Maryland students. Our reading period is from September to March, and our final deadline is February 15th. Submitters will be notified of their status by April 1st. We accept up to five pieces per genre, though some students may be invited to submit more. The work is put through a rigorous, anonymous review process. A two sentence biography of the author or artist must accompany each submission. Please also include your UID with each submission. We maintain flexibility in the layout process; no work is guaranteed acceptance until publication. If interested in serving on our staff, please email our account or visit our website for more information: [www.styluslit.org](http://www.styluslit.org).

Poetry and prose should be submitted in both the body of the email and as a Word document. Our prose limit is 2,500 words. Students interested in submitting longer pieces of exceptional quality are invited to email an excerpt of their piece, along with an abstract.

Multilingual work should be accompanied by an English translation when possible, or with expressed permission to be translated by our staff.

Art submissions may be emailed in TIFF or JPEG format at greater than 600 dpi. Submitters should also include information about the medium and dimensions of each piece. Students unable to send their pieces electronically should email the account to contact our art director.

Stylus is a project undertaken solely by students of the University of Maryland at College Park; the University of Maryland is not responsible for any of the statements, opinions, or printing errors contained herein. Furthermore, while the Stylus staff has done its utmost to prevent any printing errors, if an error should occur, the journal will print a correction on the website.







# STYLUS AND THE JIMÉNEZ- PORTER WRITERS' HOUSE

*Stylus* is funded and supported in large part by the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House, a Living and Learning Program at the University of Maryland, College Park. Many of the journal's staff members belong to our program (though any UMD student can be involved with *Stylus*). Located within Dorchester Hall, the Writers' House is a campus-wide literary center for the study of creative writing across cultures and languages. Students hone their skills through workshops, colloquia, and lectures led by Writers' House faculty and visiting writers. The two-year program is open to all majors and all years. For more information about joining the Writers' House, visit our website at [writershouse.umd.edu](http://writershouse.umd.edu) or call the director at 301-405-0671.





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The Student Government Association  
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# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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DYLAN BARGTEIL is a math and physics double major and member of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. In addition to writing poetry, he is a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter. His music is self-recorded and self-distributed at cost or for free.

JENNA BRAGER is a cartoonist and writer who has been published in *Stylus*, the *Little Patuxent Review*, and the *Oregon Literary Review*. Jenna makes the zines *Sassyfrass Circus* and *Femme a Barbe*, and is simultaneously excited and crap-my-pants terrified to be graduating from college this year.

LAURA COOKE is a senior studio art major, a 2009/2010 CAPA scholarship recipient, and a member of the Department of Art's Honors program. Her work is an outlet for her to explore her relationship with the past, the importance of craft, and the meaningfulness of the handmade. Laura runs an online shop to sell her crafts and prints at [awapplesauce.etsy.com](http://awapplesauce.etsy.com).

JASON COHEN is a graduating senior and a second year Writers' House student. He is an angry New Yorker who enjoys engaging in existential despair, reading Shakespeare, reading comic books and admiring his vast mahogany-shelved library. One day he hopes to become a cliché and move to Manhattan to publish a novel. He is trying to develop a series of semi-autobiographical poems focusing on his relationship with his family.

LAURENE DAMPARE is a graduating Neurobiology and Physiology major. She plans to spend the next year travelling the world before moving on to a non existential life in Medical school.

EMILY DILLON is an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland majoring in English and minoring in International Development and Conflict Management. She spent her first semester of college at Boston University and began her studies of poetry in an informal, small seminar. She is glad to have settled at Maryland after transferring and now takes poetry in the English Department.





Her first poetry publication was in 2004—a self-made poetry/photography book for an eighth grade media project. Clearly, she has come a long way and is honored to be published in Stylus.

TAFISHA EDWARDS is a Guyanese Canadian army brat, who now resides in College Park, Maryland. She never knew that she wanted to write poetry, and was quite content to write fiction until she accidentally discovered that poems were more than rhyme schemes and structure. Now, in addition to her aspirations to become a journalist, she harbors a quiet passion to publish her first book of poems in the next five years. If there was a favorite subject she writes about (which she denies) it would be her Guyanese heritage. Among her other talents, Tafisha is a radio show host, music lover, and compulsive shopper.

JOEL SEPHY GLEISER studies in the University of Maryland Jazz Studies and Creative Writing programs. He lives in Williamsburg, Virginia. Joel would like to use this space to shamelessly promote his current musical endeavor by telling you to visit joelsephy.com.

LARISA HOHENBOKEN is a small land marsupial commonly found in the deserts of New Mexico. However, she has been forced out of her natural habitat by man-made environmental influences. She may now be found covered in rosin and charcoal dust, which forms a protective camouflage in the dank, dark caverns of her new home, the ArtSoc building. If you encounter a Larisiues Hohenbokius, proceed with caution, as she carries a highly communicable, terminal disease commonly known as “hipster.” Symptoms include building metal paraphernalia, collecting literary journals, and obsessively humming classical music.

You are BRENDAN EDWARD KENNEDY. You are three hay-bales high, give or take. A glorified middle-child, your favorite pastime is making your parents worry. You collect many things, like bottlecaps, knit-scarves, dashing hats, and cuss-words. You believe in a nice God. You believe in a confusing God. Your many majors include Singing Sweetly, Amateur Prophecy, Funny Accents, and English. You are a Junior. You would love to read me everything.

CARLA LAKE is a sophomore English major in her first year of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. When she's not working as a tutor in the Writing Center or as a student blogger for CSPAC, she enjoys training rescued draft horses and her betta fish, Fausto.

ZACH LYON is a junior English major and a second-year member of the Jimenez-Porter Writer's House. He can often be found in the basement of





Dorchester, instigating arguments about Taylor Swift's grammar and failing all his classes in the name of writing.

PETER MARIANI is a Freshman Physics and Electrical Engineering major at the University of Maryland. He is originally from the Philadelphia area, and he has two younger siblings, Anthony-Joseph Mariani and Ting Mariani.

DEEP MAHAPATRA has no imagination, and tries too hard to focus on grammar, but seems to never succeed. Inspirations: Robert Downey Jr., Louis Ck, and his girlfriend, Abby.

ASHLEY MCCLENON is a senior and an art studio major. Throughout her student career here at College Park her artwork took a surprising transition as she began making Barbie stop-animations. She is a bit obsessed with Barbie within her artwork; mainly because it has allowed her to push boundaries in film and photography that she would hesitantly approach (or completely back away from) using actual people.

NETTIE MORGAN is a senior, participated in the Honors art program last year, and is working on finishing up a double major in art history and studio art. She is still not sure what she wants to be when she grows up.

NED PRUTZER is currently a junior at the University of Maryland who is studying English and American Studies. He is a Lannan Fellow with the Folger Shakespeare Library and a 2nd year student of the Jimenez-Porter Writers' House. His poem "Daydream" was a finalist for the 2010 Jimenez-Porter Literary Prize for Poetry, and his short story "Luciferase" was a finalist for the 2010 Jimenez-Porter Literary Prize for Prose. He would like to thank his family, friends, teachers, and most importantly, Maja Vlajnic.

LUCY REEDY is a Senior Studio Art Major. She enjoys collecting things and storing them for future use. Occasionally, these items will show up in her artwork.

ELAINE SCHLEIFFER is a senior English major with a longstanding interest in poetry, both as reader and writer. Her literary influences range from Walt Whitman to ee cummings to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She also enjoys playing tuba, eating hummus, and reinventing slang.

KAT SMALL is an English and Latin double major. This is her second year in the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. She is currently working on a novel about a girl who is slowly going insane. It is not at all based on fact.





ERIC SIM is Junior English and Philosophy major. He likes to play Super Smash Brothers.

JOHNNIE SIMPSON is a junior English major and currently a resident of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. He enjoys American literature, country music, and gardening. He lives in Eldersburg, Maryland.

MARK STUBENBERG is a 20 year old English major currently participating in the Jimenez-Porter Writers' House. He first took a strong interest in poetry and prose during his time at Robert Frost Middle school, and continued pursuing his interest through high school and into college.

SARAH WALKO was born in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. She has her BA from University of Maryland and her MFA from Savannah College of Art and Design. She is a sculptor, installation artist, writer, musician, and filmmaker. She is currently the Executive Director of Triangle Arts Association, and is Art Director with the independent film collective Santasombra which shows at International Film Festivals around the world. She is currently working on new sculptures and her next film *El Cadaver Exquisito* will come out this fall. She has just completed several exhibitions in New York.

EMILY ZIDO is a junior English and History major at the University of Maryland. She would like to thank Jude and Wes for the feedback, as well as Steph, Lex, D, and the Hollys for the trip of a lifetime. Ladies, meet me in Italy. As always, thanks and love to Mom, Pop, Anj, and the mighty Zoester.

