Spring 2008

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Portland State University. Student Publications Board

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Pathos Literary Magazine

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Pathos Literary Magazine is a student-run publication under the Portland State University Publications Board. All staff members, writers, and artists are Portland State students. Content is chosen anonymously by a committee of staff members. To submit your work for review, e-mail submissions to pathos@pdx.edu. Pathos has an open staff policy, and welcomes all PSU students who wish to be involved with the publication and/or events sponsored by the organization.

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I started Pathos Literary Magazine my sophomore year in the fall of 2005. It began with a conversation over wine with co-founder Madeline Enos about the lack of an accessible literary community at PSU. Being writers ourselves, we decided to start our own literary magazine through the Student Organization Council. I started this magazine with no knowledge about how to run an organization, how to put out a magazine, or how to convince PSU students to send me their works. I took an InDesign course at PSU and before long was able to design the basic layout of a magazine. Over the years my InDesign skills improved, and so did our number and quality of submissions.

After two years with the SOC and receiving limited funding, we applied to receive SFC funding and were approved. With the support of the SFC we were able to have three paid positions on our staff and could afford to print bigger, better, and more beautiful issues of the magazine.

Recently the PSU Publications Board accepted Pathos as a legitimate, recognized publication of Portland State University putting us in the league of The Vanguard, The Rearguard, The Portland Review, The Spectator, and The Graphic Design Center. It has been a lot of work and a lot of fun building a publication and seeing it flourish.

This is my last issue of Pathos Literary Magazine, as I am graduating PSU and moving on to an uncertain future outside of college. While I am sad to be leaving Pathos, I have every certainty that those who take it over will do even more with it than I have and the publication will continue to grow.

I would like to thank Emma Duncan for her help with InDesign, Josh Gross for his advice and continued support (and his awesome lawyer skills), Saxon Baird for his dedication and contributions, Shannon Timm for her hard work advising and helping us with all that rough paperwork, Madeline Stevens for her perseverance, amazing writing, and for staying with us since the beginning, Madeline Enos for helping get this magazine started, help with funding paperwork, and the awesome events she coordinated, and Nataliya Pirumova for her passion, reliability, and help with the constitution. I would also like to thank Gary Burns for designing and maintaining our website, and everyone who ever made a flier.

I have accomplished a lot during my time at PSU, but I have also messed up some things. Keeping this in mind, I am not sure I am the one to be giving advice to anyone, but all I can say is to follow your dreams— as cheesy as that sounds. Sometimes it will be hard, but you’ll never know what may be accomplished if you don’t try.

Laura Pieroni started Pathos Literary Magazine in 2005. She is graduating PSU this year with a B.A. in English. During her time at PSU she worked not only on Pathos, but was a staff writer for The Rearguard, served time as a Student Organization Council Coordinator, and even did a stint as a personal assistant for the Graduate School of Education-Continuing Education Marketing Department.
Live music is ubiquitous in this town. It’s nearly impossible to escape the bombardment of high-quality touring acts and great local bands of all genres that grace our plentiful Portland venues. There are, by my estimate, at least thirty worthwhile shows going on any given night in P-town proper, not counting house shows and other unpublicized events. With so much music happening all over the place, where do open mics fit into the picture?

In general, open mics are seen as pretty low on the musical totem pole, and in some ways, this is a fair assessment. They are the proving ground for the beginning singer/songwriter, the outlet for so many bad poets, the proverbial fifteen minutes of promised fame. The people and performances are often wobbly and unpolished, and can roguishly straddle the border of painful awkwardness. But while occasionally grating, there is a raw and real quality to even the most atonal Velvet Underground cover. The inexperienced players and artists who come to share at open mics are the emotional barometer by which the rest of the acts will be judged. Their uneasiness on the stage betrays their sincerity, and that sincerity is perhaps what is valued most at these voyeuristic communal gatherings. They are the new blood that infuses creative energy back into the collective musical mind. Their influences have shaped their sounds and words, and by getting up on stage to play some songs of their own, they now shape ours.

This is not to say that only amateurs attend open mics. On the contrary, they are also a favorite haunt of seasoned players, and often the talent that steps to the stage of your neighborhood pub can rival the musicianship of a professional concert, with the added benefit of intimacy. The open mic is simply the most accessible outlet for artistic expression (and impression) in the community, and therefore draws a wide range of talents, tastes, and styles. That is why these humble events serve an invaluable function in the art world. They are a window into individual imagination, a candid glimpse of what drives the creative process in others.

Depending on one’s taste in music, there are plenty of choices for attending open mics in Portland on any given night. Portlandsongwriters.org lists twelve open mics from every quadrant of the city on Monday night alone, and there are at least two every other night of the week. And just as each uniquely characteristic neighborhood in Portland has a distinct feel that sets it apart, each open mic offers up a different slice of the artistic spectrum. Some are all folk and Americana music, while others are filled with slam poetry and stream-of-consciousness run-on sentences. Others offer impromptu performance art and standup routines. Still other open mics are deadly serious, and talking while a performer is onstage will garner steely glares from the audience or a public announcement by the emcee between sets that silence is an important part of respecting the performer. Others offer a far more relaxed environment, and with no such gag order being enforced, there is a more raucous and jovial ambience in the crowd.

Whether good or bad, perfectly tuned or horrendously dissonant, original or cliché, open mics give us something that normal concerts cannot.

I decided to highlight two open mics in this article, choosing one from Southeast and one from Northeast Portland. The Nine Muses Acoustic
Pub at 2715 SE Belmont features open mic on Monday nights starting at 8pm with signup available all week. The Alberta Street Public House at 1036 NE Alberta has open mic on Wednesdays at 8pm with signup starting around 7pm that night.

The Nine Muses is a renovated Craftsman house from the early 20th century, situated right in the middle of the scenester bastion that is SE Belmont Street. The atmosphere is open and inviting, and the owner/bartender Mick is gracious and helpful, with a surly sarcasm that lets you know that he is the boss. The host of this particular open mic is an enigmatic character named “Professor Blue,” who walks and talks with a fluidity that implies lots of experience as an emcee and several whiskey sours (by the way, both of the establishments featured in this article are 21 and over… sorry, younglings). Professor Blue starts the night with a few jokes onstage and then introduces the first performer. Each person is given a ten-minute slot to fill with whatever they like, and at the end of the night, a secret panel of judges (composed not-so-secretly of Mick, Blue, the sound dude Buck, and perhaps a regular sitting at the bar) picks their favorite three sets of the night and rewards them with a one-hour gig the following Tuesday.

Of the three people who play the encore Tuesday show, the best is chosen to take part in a special Songwriter Showcase that is held bi-annually at the pub. The winner of that contest takes home $1000 in cash, guaranteed plays on a local radio station, and ten free hours of recording time at Medicine Whistle Studios.

This adds a competitive aspect to this particular open mic, though it certainly does not feel as if there is any ill will in the air. The acts are varied and engaging, mostly musical in nature, and reflect a pop sensibility that seems to fit with the Southeast vibe. About fifteen performers play, filling nearly three hours. At the close of the night, when everyone from the signup sheet has had their turn, Professor Blue returns to the stage and announces the three winners of a Tuesday gig.

He then explains that because of the proximity to the residential houses directly behind it, they are required to turn off the amplifiers at 11pm. However, he invites everyone to come up on stage and participate in an acoustic jam session. Several people grab guitars and begin to play off of each other. Hand drums emerge and start to lay beats to the improvisation.
I cannot help but join in, and the informal party ends up extending well into the early hours of the night. Even Mick comes down from the bar and joins in, adding some wonderfully random lyrics to the collage of sound. The night ends with cheerful goodbyes and compliments, and promises to do it again the following week. But in this town, there’s no need to wait a full week for another chance to share.

On Wednesday, I venture to the Alberta Street Public House to scope the scene in one of Portland’s hottest neighborhoods. You can’t pedal a fixed-gear half a block without hitting a hipster in these parts, and I want to see what kind musical styles are being showcased at this namesake establishment. I show up at 7:30pm, the official signup time, and find that I am 19th on the list of performers. I quickly do the math in my head and realize that since they also stop at 11 pm, I may not get to play.

After talking to some of the regulars lingering around the soundboard, I gather that to get a good spot on the list one needs to show up around 6:30 or 7:00 and stay close by until they put the list out. As 8pm nears, the stage area of the pub is at capacity and there is a lively buzz in the air. Tamara, the emcee, takes to the stage and welcomes everyone to what she lovingly dubs “Suck My Open Mic.”

She is an extremely tall, thin woman with short, radically colored hair. She is a joker behind the microphone, exuding an air of haphazard and humorous authority. She later tells me that she hosted a coffee shop open mic for years in Ithaca, New York, and I can see her jaded East Coast mentality coming through in her wry witticisms. As the night moves through performers’ sets, I begin to get a feeling of how this open mic differs from the other. This one, like the one at Nine Muses, features almost entirely music, but of a slightly different nature.

The tunes here seem more rooted in folk than pop, embodying the spirit of the washboard and banjo bands that have recently come back into fashion. Instead of Jack Johnson, I hear Ani DiFranco. The overall tone is more serious than at the Nine Muses, perhaps even slightly morose, though I would stop short of saying depressing. There are moments of incredible brilliance in the lineup, with one performer completely improvising a fantastic couple of songs using random key words thrown out to her by the audience. The night is packed, and in the end, I’m too far down the list to get to play. There is no jam to close out the night here, and no voting for favorites… just a thank you from Tamara and an invitation to come back the following week. They do record the performances once per month, and are working to release a “best of” compilation. As the night winds down, I am left to contemplate my experience at the two venues.

My final impression is one of warm feelings toward both, and my initial thoughts on the subject are reaffirmed. Each open mic presents a totally unique set of performers and styles, and every session is a tossup. This is what makes going to an open mic so much fun. The only constants are the thrill of the unknown and the spark of raw emotion that permeates the performances. The people who play open mics are here because they want to share their art, and this mindset is what makes the atmosphere a welcoming and communal one. As Professor Blue said to me at the Nine Muses, “At the open mic, we’re doin’ it for the glory, we’re doin’ it for the love, not whether or not they love us.”

Alberta Street Public House 1036 NE Alberta St.
In our Fall ’07 issue, Sean Davis explained how to get your book published if you don’t want to go the route of a traditional publishing company. Often connected with this process is the burgeoning world of print-on-demand books. When I first heard the phrase “print-on-demand”, I imagined walking into a glinting bookstore where a refrigerator-sized machine waits for me to request a book and then presents me with a pressed, steaming copy of my own. In actuality, the term print-on-demand refers to something else entirely. So what is print-on-demand, and how does it relate to the fields publishing, writing and bookselling?

The ostensible purpose of print-on-demand (POD) is fairly straightforward. If a publisher doesn’t want to take the risk of printing a large run of a certain book, they place it in a database and wait for a customer to request a copy, which they then print and distribute. The greatest advantage this has for the publisher is that the costs associated with overprinting are eliminated. This kind of POD process is now the default for the production of certain rare and academic books – things that aren’t flying off the shelves, but for which there is a somewhat stable and specialized market.

However, where POD is more visible today is in the realm of self-publishing. Writers who have found difficulty getting their manuscripts accepted at traditional publishing houses are turning to self-publishing as a way to get their work in print, to distribute or sell at will. Often, the authors pitch their work to booksellers directly. On the receiving end of this process are people like Gerry Donaghy, Backlist Inventory Supervisor at Powell’s.

Donaghy has some qualms with the current state of POD. He describes the relationship between Powell’s and print-on-demand as “uncomfortable.” “The problem with print-on-demand is that it’s being used for people to make money off of aspiring authors. The way a lot of print-on-demand companies get their profit is from the author rather than from the book sales.” A typical scenario, he says, plays out somewhat like this: A writer approaches a POD company, wanting them to print their book. The company presents the writer with a selection of packages from $100 to $1000+ (depending on binding and other variables) and prints a certain quantity.

The next step for the author, obviously, is to get the books sold. “But what [the POD companies] don’t tell you,” Donaghy says, “is they don’t create the demand for it.” When a traditional publishing house agrees to print a book, they make an investment in its success. Money is set aside for promotion – ads, book signings, etc. With print-on-demand, writers are left more or less to their own devices – they can try to sell the books to retailers or, as Donaghy describes, buy up many copies of the book themselves and peddle them from truck beds or tote bags.

The first option, which is almost certain to yield more substantial results, can be difficult for a first-time author to manage. The biggest obstacle for self-published books in getting on the shelves, according to Donaghy, is quality. Along with the lack of publicity, a drawback to POD companies as compared to traditional publishing houses is that editing is not an inbuilt process on the way to publication. “I’ve seen print-on-demand books come in with typos on the cover,” he says. Donaghy showed me some of the POD books in his collection – many were comically slapped-together-looking, replete with pixilated cover art and author photos that looked like they were taken at Sears. One book featured a giant (colored pencil?) picture of a weeping clown and nearly-incomprehensible blurb about the dangers of the medical industry.

It’s understandable why this, in addition to the sheer quantity of self-published books they receive, makes book-buyers wary of POD. “Unfor-
Fortunately, by virtue of association there’s a certain marginalization,” says Donaghy. “There have been some good print-on-demand books, but in the ten years of its existence I can count on one hand how many.” Add to this the reduced discount at which POD books are sold to booksellers (as compared to books from publishing companies) and the fact that they are not returnable and a palpably ambivalent atmosphere begins to emerge, where a POD book has to work hard to get noticed. As Donaghy remarked, “It’s really gotta knock our socks off.”

Part of the issue seems to be that POD facilitates a growing tendency in popular culture – that is simply that more and more people are expressing a desire to publish their writing. In the last few years, memoir has taken off as a legitimate (and wildly popular) form. David Sedaris is probably the granddaddy of this trend in its modern incarnation, but authors like Augusten Burroughs and Marc Acito are successful contemporary bearers of the torch. The perceived simplicity and growing popularity of memoir inevitably leads people to think “Hey, I could do that.”

Another probable reason for this spike in self-publishing is the internet. The prevalence of blogs, forums and networking sites allows people who may not consider themselves writers or even linguistically inclined to publish texts. A sense of confidence then emerges about what it takes to be a writer. But of course, another thing the internet is known for is the increasingly short attention span of the average American. These things in combination are likely to account for much of the slapdash nature of many POD books.

As Donaghy puts it, “I read a survey about a year or two ago that said one in four Americans believe they have a novel in them. Which I think would be great… if one in four adults actually read novels.”

But public attitudes toward self-publishing have varied over time. People have been self-publishing, indeed, since publishing itself has been around. Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf and countless others have, at one time or another, printed and circulated their own work. In the early part of the 20th century, self-publishing flourished underground in the Soviet Union as a way for writers whose voices had been suppressed to communicate, share works with each other and build a community of thought. And today, zine culture serves some of the same purposes, as well as granting young people a way to see their lives and their language substantiated in a cohesive whole.

Indeed cohesion may be the key principle when it comes to publishing your own work. Since POD companies approach printing as a simple, straightforward business transaction, a writer must have great confidence in their ability to compile their work into a format readers will want to absorb, and doing so takes great care and attention to detail. It’s not as simple as getting the words on the page. “I think, really, the best bet is if people get into print-on-demand knowing it’s a printer, not a publisher,” Donaghy says. If the editorial direction is firm and if a writer puts enough work into their book, there is a much higher chance that the initial spark that led them to creating it will be enough to separate them from the vast sea of voices that POD companies put out.
Aliens and Casserole: A Conversation with Larry Rosswood

Madeline Stevens

Larry Rosswood probably isn’t your typical professor at Portland State but he is quite possibly the most interesting. Sitting down with Professor Rosswood in his Southeast apartment, I am overcome by the strange contrast of African relics hanging from his walls next to photos of various political figure and B-movie celebrities. The place smells of a casserole, a personal favorite of the professor; that was cooking in the oven when I arrived.

Ending his first year at Portland State, Rosswood has been teaching Finnish. Despite his adamant love for his job at the university, teacher of a foreign language isn’t how Rosswood likes to consider himself. As he explains, “Foreign Languages isn’t exactly my passion.”

A visiting professor originally from the Isle of Man, Professor Rosswood earned his degree at the Isle of Man College in Baltic Languages and received his masters at the University of Nottingham in Eastern European Studies with an emphasis in Latvian. However, born to a Finnish mother, the professor grew up in a household that spoke Finnish and English regularly.

“It’s a bit ironic…” Rosswood explains. “That despite all my fluency in many different Eastern European languages, I end up teaching the language I grew up with. Makes one feel like all that education was for naught.”

However, as Rosswood will recognize himself, doing what is not immediately apparent or expected of him, has become almost a normal part of his life. For what Larry (which he prefers to be called by friends and students alike) is most passionate about is writing science fiction.

He has been interested in the genre of science fiction since he was in grammar school. He recalls picking up comic books and being fascinated with the expansive imagination of the stories. “People tend to scoff at comic books…but really…the imagination of the writers is so grand. I mean...have you ever stopped and thought about what exactly is going on in those things? Fascinating and like nothing else.”

Despite his interest in the sci-fi, Rosswood didn’t actually begin writing his own work until after earning his masters. As he asserts, pressure from his parents and a personal obligation to finish school in “something useful” was his most important responsibility. Nevertheless, Rosswood continued to feverishly read science fiction throughout his years in university.

“I never stopped reading while in school. In fact, I don’t think I have stopped reading ever. However, school has always come first. I never
thought of writing myself till I read an essay by Phillip K. Dick and it inspired me to pick up the proverbial pen and do it myself.”

As Rosswood explains, his first endeavors with writing science fiction were terrible experiences and extremely difficult. However, over time Rosswood began to talk with other writers and his craft started to develop. It took Rosswood four years to first become published but eventually he got a short story in a small publication in Scotland under the pseudonym Laurence Rose. Two years later, Rosswood got his first book deal with the same, small Scottish publication. His first science-fiction novel, The European Dog comes out in January of 2009. While still in the preliminary stages of publication, Rosswood is excited and a bit overwhelmed.

“Needless to say, I am extremely excited. However, I don’t think it will really hit me until I have the book in my hand. We still have a lot to do….we don’t even have a cover design yet!”

As the casserole had been eaten and the tape-recorder was on its last minutes, I asked Rosswood to leave aspiring young writers with some words of wisdom.

“Well, I hardly consider myself a writer… but at 41, I will have officially published my first novel. So I guess the best advice would be to persevere….persevere with all your passion.”

Portland has gained a reputation for being a mecca for young creative types. Seems like everyone and their mother is in a band, has a screen printing studio in their basement, or illustrates an obscure webcomic. The theater scene here, however, seems to only recently be gaining legitimacy. So, where are all the young playwrights? After a preliminary investigation, it appears they are hanging out at Portland State University!

I began my inquiry into the scene by checking out the origin of this year’s winners of the Young Playwrights Competition, and was startled to note that PSU totally dominated this year. It is an annual contest in which student playwrights from Portland submit their new works for consideration to a committee of industry professionals. The winners are honored by having their pieces produced as staged readings by professional actors. This year, three out of the four winners were PSU students: Kendra Tuthill, Duncan Sandlin, and Andrew Wardenaar. They were encouraged to apply by Karin Magalidi, a PSU professor in the Theater Department who teaches a year long course called New Play Development. This course offers an opportunity for aspiring playwrights to learn the craft by studying the work of other writers, as well develop their own voice and style by workshoping their plays. This class is immensely helpful for theater majors, and is available to non-majors as well.

Through their work in the class, the PSU contingent of the winners of the competition were able to allow their work to evolve and become pieces worthy of recognition. All three of the winners have decided to take their work to the next level, and are having their works fully produced. The plays are being staged at HipBone theaters under the name “Me, me, me and ewe” on June 12th and 13th at 7:30. To learn more about the upcoming performances, visit their blog at: http://mememeandewe.blogspot.com
Western Hemisphere, on the far left side of the line of Demarcation, big American city in a state of Babel. Fake Suburban neighborhood with those chirpy neighbors dressed in the 50’s attire, that radioactive glow that comes in each household: the nuclear family. The perfect kind of ugly shrubs you can buy for $49.99 with tax, mix or match, added shipping and handling: Multicolored houses that can be found right next to the perfume and sexual enhancement section with Dr. Slowblow and his techniques on seduction in any Cosmopolitan magazine; buttered and burned with an assorted collection of pink to sky purple, green to a weird kind of yellow, the color of Mexican beer without the lime.

Prescription medication, cheating spouses, angst rebellious kids, and the best damn middle-classed Christmas money can buy. This is the kind of decaying society you hear about on Bill O’Reilly if anyone outside the Republican Party took him seriously.

And there is a dark underbelly to this suburbia too.

But the weather is nice. Quite nice really: just 5% humidity in this weather, a warm 74; a bit cloudy for this time of year, though. The gulf wind is coming up with pressure from the NW, the dew point is somewhere near fifty, and the mountain cedar is HIGH. That is all beyond the point. The black sun in the sky would cause ulcers to perforate over every orifice on the body because of the radiation in the sky.

You still got to love the weather though. Somewhere in between a small, rather obscure and if one might call, ‘gimicky’, ice-cream shop and a building that doubles for A) An underground casino and B) A shady baby clothing store for 5 months till 3yrs old, with a 15% discount on all goods this weekend only from 9am till 2:13pm, is where the story takes place.

In-between a soiled diaper and an empty wallet, is a small rectangular building that was built slanted. Everything is slanted because the ground is uneven, so the walls appear bigger on the left side, and everything tilts to the right. Blame it on the imaginary fault line, but never take the middleman’s word for it when given a tour of said such slanted building. It’s bullshit, but people buy it.

The building in question is called Super Electronic Mega Printing Shop! Or just Quik Print for short. It serves custom-made business cards for 1/3 the price of personal-made ones you can find on the internet for a 1000 pack at $9.29 after all the surplus charges. Because business cards is serious business.

Inside all the walls are painted aqua. Because it’s slanted, everything is on the right side of the room. If it was on the left, they would fall and break, which is why if anyone in a wheelchair came in, he would place them on the left side, just to watch them slide and slam into the wall on the right. It’s not because he’s an asshole: it’s just funny, unless you’re in a wheelchair.

The man in question who does such said horrible thing is the only employee of said shop. It also happens to be his house. His name is Wenzel Diel Boris Iwazarskoft the VIIIth, or Vincel Dill Boris Iwazaruscoft VIII, depending on if one romanticizes it from whichever language it came from. Or just Bob. Maybe even Susan, but that depends on which internet chatroom he is in and if the FBI is monitoring it. Perhaps even Butter-scotch or Juju. Someone once called him Googoo Babecake but most just call him the Old Guy.

Bob, or the Old Guy, is a lonely man. Very lonely. He had balding brown hair, which he dyed blonde, and a mullet in the back. He is medium height, a tad overweight, and has Coppertone skin caused by an overdose of tanning lotion. By day he works hard printing, pouring hard earned sweat and caffeine all over the cards he gives out. But that’s not his problem: there is no return policy and money is given up front. He is almost all busi-
ness, wearing 3rd hand suits he steals from the GoodWill. By night he runs around his house in a hot yellow latex bodysuit while browsing S&M forum boards on the internet, under the name Super Sonic Lovetoy. As a hobby he collects plush Care Bears toys and Snapple bottle caps. Just don’t tell anybody, especially the neighbors and especially about the bottle caps.

Collecting Snapple bottle caps is a crime punishable by death in these parts.

But that’s what the Old Guy does. He lives dangerously. He lives on the edge. A loner: a rebel who collects Snapple bottle caps.

He was looking outside his window, drinking expired 3 year old maple syrup out of the bottle. Waiting. And Waiting. What was he waiting for? A black car to pull up. And it does, after three and a half hours.

A tall man, wearing an all red suit, a red bandana, long beautiful silky straight black hair, black sunglasses, and a pink rose. He walked in slow motion; the kind of slow motion found in the movies. The wind blew his hair, it waved like many of the panties that get thrown at him on a daily basis. Before he got to the door a million roses came raining down, the man spun around and clapped his feet. The Old Guy heard a thousand clapping of the hands, but it was just a nearby midget with a prerecorded tape on a boombox.

His name is Valentine. Adonis himself: the living embodiment of metrosexual. ‘THE PRETTY BOY’. Valentine was a model. THE best damn model in the world. That is all you need to know about Valentine, just because he is so drop dead sexy.

He rang on the doorbell. The Old Guy opened the door for the Pretty Boy. The Pretty Boy slid in and took off his glasses, revealing the eye shadow on his face, and a sparkle that radiated from his iris and left stars giggling in his wake. He wouldn’t be here under normal circumstances. The Old Man knew this. The Pretty Boy was here responding to a cry for help. A Wanted Ad in the classifieds on the S&M forum board. The Old Guy was desperate. The Pretty Boy knew this.

And all he brought was a lime to solve all the problems in the world.

What was the ad?

Somebody to go back in time with me.

“I’m glad you came,” The Old Man said.

“And you brought a lime. I am in your debt. I finally found someone to go back in time with me. I just hope you know this isn’t a joke.”

Valentine sighed, examined the room, looked at random things. “That’s why I brought the lime.” His voice was so smooth, silky, deep, like Barry White, but better, and without a record contract, instead just good looks.

“I will pay you when we get back. I swear. Uh, did you bring your own weapons?” Valentine told him he wasn’t doing it for the money. As for his weapon, he gave a snide snigger with a piercing gaze. It was so powerful. So intense. So holy. It sent shivers up and down the Old Guy’s spine. The Old Guy’s heart began to race.

Finally the Old Guy found someone who was as dangerous and on the edge as him. He knew Valentine was prepared.

“I can’t guarantee your safety. I’ve only done this once. But it was when I was trippin’ on acid. So, I can’t remember how it went. But my machine does work. I guarantee it.”

Valentine raised his eyebrows and grinned at Bob.

“Want to see my legs?” The Pretty Boy asked, moving them up and down in a rapid motion. Bob blushed and walked to the next room. Inside was a giant time machine, made out of empty cardboard boxes and tin foil. The whole mechanics and wires are too much to explain, but he did have Cliff Notes on building Time Machines to help him.

Valentine slammed his hand into the wall, and then checked his fingers to make sure he didn’t break a nail. He had fire in his eyes. His face was flushed. He was angry. “You aren’t looking at them. To think I brought a lime.” He walked up to Bob and punched him in the stomach.

“Ugh…why you hit me?” Bob fell onto his knees coughing. He had been hit many times before, most of the times below the crotch. Most of those came from girls after the drugs wore off and they woke up in his bed and saw him naked with a
pig mask and a sock on.

“Because you were rude. When someone offers to show you their legs you should look.” Pretty Boy walked towards the time machine and looked. Bob sat on the floor, trying to gain composure he did not have, or the composure he had deep down inside, or at least that’s what he read from one of the many self-help books he owned, ranging on how to deal with his shyness and his odd sexual preferences. Valentine scoffed and looked to the side. “Now you’ll never get to see them.”

He stopped moving. He turned around. He grinned.

“Not at least, not walking towards you anyway.” Bob frowned and looked down.

“I’m just not into legs.” Valentine rolled his eyes. “You made me very upset. You made me hit you and almost break a nail. See what you made me do? That’s how upset I was. You didn’t even glance at them.” Bob got up and bowed before him.

“I’ll look at them now.”

“Too late…” Bob gasped. Sweat came down his face. He couldn’t believe it.

Valentine wouldn’t let him look at his legs. It was almost as bad as finding out he couldn’t ever have kids and his ex wife was 7 months pregnant at the time. “I’m never showing them to you again. Unless you ask them nicely,” he moved his hair back and played with the lime. “So feel free to ask me…”

Bob didn’t say anything. Valentine scowled. Bob started messing with his machine. Valentine stopped playing with the lime.

“Why aren’t you asking me?”

Deep down inside Bob wasn’t sure if he was worthy or strong enough to handle Valentine’s legs. That’s the effect Valentine had on people. He didn’t know if he would be obsessed.

“May I see them?”

“No, you can’t.” Valentine smiled, jumping up and down, pointing at the Old Guy. “See? It doesn’t feel good getting rejected now does it?”

“But I didn’t mean to offend you,” Bob began crying.

“Well you did, Jackass.” Valentine put his hands on his chest and held the lime upwards. “I am a model. All I have are my legs. They make me who I am. This is all I have to offer in this world.

To be denied a chance to show them, would me make me sad, for a full two minutes.” Tears came down his face. “I have come all this way and you spit in my face by not looking at my legs. I believe in your time machine when no one else did. All I ask is you believe in my legs. But no…you have to turn this place into a house of lies!”

Bob fell to his knees and began crawling to Valentine, begging for forgiveness. Valentine put the lime back in his pocket. He stood there, with Susan on his knees in front of him. Bob told him he would do anything for his forgiveness.

The Pretty Boy smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

Bob walked next door with his wallet in his hand. It wasn’t far away, but walking down the street was a horrible experience. The streets curved and went into twister shapes. The concrete went into waves. The asphalt always was shifting and turning. He couldn’t step on the grass. The garden worms would come up and eat him.

It was a harsh jungle in this Martian world called Suburbia.

CRACK!

He got hit in the back of the head with a hardboiled egg. The kids across the street hit him. He grumbled and kept walking.

SPLOOSH!

He got hit in the back with a water balloon. The kids across the street hit him, this time they were closer. A group of Prozac hyena’s, they pointed and laughed. He grumbled some more and kept walking.

TWACK!

“AGH!” Bob screamed. He got hit in the back of the leg with a pogo stick.

He cursed at them. Their eyes were zombie-like and they laughed a slow, stoned laugh that would give a crack-whore a run for their high. They scared him but he was filled with hatred. He wanted to chop their heads off with a chainsaw.
But he couldn’t. Because their parents would want it: they would enjoy the demise of their unholy satanic spawn. And he wouldn’t give them that courtesy. They would rule the day they crushed him.

This is why he needed the time machine. He was a lonely man. He needed to get away. Maybe go to Ancient Greece. Maybe go back to the future. Or maybe a few years ago, so he could put in his numbers to the lottery and get his past self rich. The possibilities were endless.

“For Pete’s sake,” Bob cried out. The thoughts were too much for his fragile mind. He couldn’t wait. But he had to get this done first. He sighed and slouched over as he walked to the place he was meant to go to: the ice-cream shop. It wasn’t so much a shop as it was a wheel-less minivan converted into an ice-cream shop: hence the gimmicky feel to it. Everything was served through a broken windshield, and the freezer was kept close to the carburetor. God only knows what kind of things can be found by the health inspectors should they ever find out about this little operation.

One day a lot of ice-cream would be sold from places like this. Because wheel-less ice-cream shops are serious business. And something told Bob that this operation would be big: the next BIG thing.

This is what Bob had to do for Valentine’s forgiveness. Chocolate sundae, with sprinkles and lots of fudge. The cherry on top, Valentine emphasized the cherry on top, otherwise, no legs, and no time machine. Bob didn’t know which one he wanted more.

As he leaned up, waiting for the dirty cashier/ice-cream maker to make his sundae, something happened he didn’t expect, besides a clean sundae. A woman passed him by and glanced. She was tall. Taller than him. She was wearing a black trench coat. She had a black cowboy hat on. Black sunglasses. Beautiful and fair milky white skin. The reddest of plush lips. He began getting dirty thoughts. He wanted to invite her back and play Peek-A-Boo with his yellow latex suit on. No, he couldn’t give into temptation. He was a loner. He had no time for women. He had to resist. He needed forgiveness. She ordered a strawberry milkshake. “Oh you dirty whore.” He whispered. “Excuse me?” She said. Her voice was soft. He purred under his breath. Meow.

“A good choice. Say you’re not from around here? At least I’ve never seen you around here.” She shook her head. She told him she was looking for someone. He wanted to show her his basement, equipped with whips and chains. The ice-cream cashier gave him his fudge sundae with the emphasized cherry on top. He smiled and purred again under his breath as he walked back home.

The woman rolled up her left arm’s sleeve to reveal a black scorpion tattoo. She scratched it. She had itched. Her head started throbbing. She was enraged. She needed to calm herself down but she didn’t have her medication. Her hands began trembling. The ice-cream man gave her the strawberry milkshake and asked for money.

“One moment.” She reached into her jacket, pulling out her wallet. She gave him all the money. She took in a few deep breaths and attempted to calm down, before taking the milkshake and began walking away. “Oh wait, I need gas.” She walked back, pulled out a silenced pistol from behind her back, and put two bullets into Mr. Ice-Cream man’s head. She slid through the windshield and took all the money on the dead man. She opened the freezer and made herself a rocky-road mocha daiquiri, with M&M sprinkles. “My ass is gonna jiggle for a week,” she mumbled while making it. Her name is Merry Millions. Lady Vengeance: the world’s fastest assassin. Ruthless, beautiful, a bit violent, rather insecure, but always loving: at least when she’s on her medicine. She is also known as the QUICK GIRL.

She’s here, in suburban hell, acting as an avenging angel wired on impulse. When she noticed some kids across the street they noticed her. She smiles. They frown. She pulls out her gun, and begins to whistle. As bullets fly and hit their targets with the carefulness that is precision, she wonders if the preservatives in the deserts will put more weight on her than she planned on. Merry Millions asked the kids if they wanted her milkshake and daiquiri’s, but since they were dead no answer came, she apologized, then tossed the ice cream to the side.

continued on pg. 15
Merry was on a mission. She had to find him and make him pay. And there were a lot of houses for her to go to. “I’ve got a lot of work,” she said, skipping along to the first house she sees, whistling, and licking her lips.

Now inside the house, Vic Valentine is peaking around the corner, eating his sundae, watching Bob put on his yellow latex suit and gas mask. Bob had to be prepared. He knew his safety wasn’t guaranteed. He did this before. He needed a weapon. A mop would suffice. In a drunk frenzy the night before he proposed to the mop, which would be a reason to take it with him.

But someone had to stay there and operate the time machine.

A tear shed from his eye as he chose the mop to send them off: his one and only true love. Besides Valentine’s legs of course. Would the mop be jealous?

Bob began playing with the dials on the time machine’s cardboard panel; some of them from the stove, others just written on with a sharpie. “How much longer?” Valentine asked.

Bob had to discuss it with mop first. He whispered. Mop said nothing. Bob began pondering. The mop had that look; it knew what Bob was thinking: Bob concurred, Mop concurred.


“I’m missing a key component; it’s in my room but don’t worry. Other than that, about ten minutes.” He flipped the dial around to 8 minutes, because the 10-minute marker was broken. He would just add two minutes when the buzzer sounded. Bob’s ears perched up and he looked around. “Do you hear that?” Valentine shook his head. “It sounds like screaming. And the sound of explosions.”

“As long as vampires on steamrollers aren’t dropping from the sky, we are safe. God knows everything has gone to hell when that happens.”

Valentine finished his sundae. The doorbell rang. “Could you get that?” Valentine shook his head. “Can’t you see I’m eating?”

“You finished your sundae.” “I need to lick up the leftovers. You’re not going to see my legs with that attitude, Jackass.” Bob slapped his knee and admitted defeat. Besides it was his house. He walked to the door and turned the only lock. The door swung open and Merry Millions stood before him. He was shocked. She raised an eyebrow and laughed. He looked down; it must have been his hot yellow latex suit and gas mask.

“Ah you came here for the sex,” is what he meant, but the muffle of the mask it made it sound like “Are you a Jehovah Witness?” She shook her head. She opened her jacket and took out a picture. Her fingers rubbed the picture. “Oh, I like the way you rub the nipples.” Then she crumpled the picture up. “So, you like it rough?” “Excuse me?” Quick Girl asked. “Uh, nothing,” the Old Guy took the crumpled picture and straightened it. He had to take the mask off to get a better look. He recognized the person. But something else caught his attention. A fowl stench; the first thought was he needed to wash the suit. But it smelled like burnt rubber.

“I’m looking for him, have you seen him. I’m his girlfriend.” He looked over at the corner and saw Valentine modeling in front of a mirror that was not there before. He looked back at the picture. He looked at Valentine flex his quads.

Bob shivered. The power of Valentine’s legs made his life complete. He could die a happy man.

She walked away. He looked at her but his eyes strayed and as he looked around, he could see all the houses across the street on fire, in unison a single color of yellow, orange, and burning wood. On the street he saw dead bodies that filled the pavement and the grass. He didn’t want to feel sad, he wanted to run around and start kicking the corpses in the faces and yell, “take that you mother bitches!”

Then his eyes focused on Merry as she
went to his trashcan and opened it. She dug in. After a few seconds where she disappeared she appeared wielding a good old fashion shotgun.

“What the…I didn’t throw that away.” Bob’s mask fell down on his face. She put shells inside the shotgun, pumped the handle, and started walking towards him. She pointed the shotgun and grinned. Bob jumped to the side after closing the door. BOOM! Pieces of buckshot tore through his door. Bob crawled as more pellets tore open his front door. Valentine ducked. “Some crazy lady is killing my door!”

“Oh, I don’t think she is trying to kill your door.” Valentine panted. Bob got up trembling, handing Valentine the crumpled picture of himself. He screamed. “How dare she ruin a picture of my beautiful face?”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Ex. She also happens to be a professional killer. Apparently, the best in the world according to the FBI’s Most Wanted List.” Valentine stopped. He looked at Bob hard. “I think you’re on the list too…” Bob shook his head. Valentine cursed under his breath. “I can’t believe this shit…to think I was gonna give you my lime.”

“No! It’s not true! It’s not rape! It’s surprise sex!”

“I hope Merry kills you…I’m glad I didn’t show my legs to you. Pervert.” Valentine rolled off and ran into the other room. The Quick Girl shattered the front door into tiny pieces of its former self with a swift kick. Bob screamed and ran upstairs to his apartment. She follows close behind, taking one quick step after another, peaking around the corners, making sure she isn’t walking into a trap. She began to walk upstairs.

Then she stopped in her tracks.

“Holy shit…” she whispered, kneeling down. “It can’t be? Snapple bottle caps?” She pressed against the wall, her body tightened up, and she began to sweat. “Who is this guy? KGB? CIA? A-Team? Gotta be careful.” She peaked her head around the corner. “Baby? Did he hurt you?”

Her face frowned.

Valentine popped out from the corner.

“Pumpkin? Why are you trying to kill me?” Valentine asks.

Merry looks at the shotgun. She tosses it to the side.

“Oh baby, you know I was just playing. You know how I get…when I don’t take my meds.” He laughed. “But you know. This wouldn’t have happened if your legs didn’t get in the way.”

“But you insulted them, crazy bitch!” Valentine yelled.

“Crazy bitch? I’m a crazy bitch?” She pulled the silenced pistol from behind her back and shot Valentine in the arm. Valentine screamed out in pain, grabbing his arm. He fell to the ground, trying to back away.

“Why you shoot me?” She looked at the gun then she looked at him. “Oh my god! Baby I’m so sorry!” She tossed the gun to the side and slid on her knees over to Valentine. He’s crying, she’s crying. She’s trying to stop the blood. “You know how I get! I’m not crazy am I?” She asked him again, pressing her finger hard into his wound. He grinded his teeth and began nodding. “I just want us to be together! You know! Be one! Our two souls as a whole being! Can’t you see I’m in love? All the people I killed just to see you? It’s all for you, baby!”

Bob tiptoed around them. Both haven’t noticed him. He was so close. He had the final piece. It was a shame that he would be going alone. It didn’t matter to him. He now had to get the hell out of there.

The cooking timer went off.

Valentine and Merry noticed Bob as they turned towards the sound. Bob squinted and froze, throwing his hands up in the air. Merry let go of Valentine, who fell back on his wounded arm, and screamed out in pain. She scrambled towards the silenced pistol and pointed it at Bob.

“Freeze!” She yelled.

“I am!” Bob yelled.

“Why are you pointing the gun at him?” Valentine yelled, “He’s harmless!”

“Did you see the Snapple bottle caps? He’s dangerous!”

Valentine’s mouth opened wide and he
looked at Bob with a pale stare of disbelief. “Is…that true, Susan?” Bob began walking for the time machine room. “I can’t believe I survived. He’s crazier than you, baby.” She growls and fire a bullet at him, missing him. Valentine screamed and Bob ran into the room and locked the door. Bob could hear Valentine yell from the next room, “I didn’t mean it like that!”

Bob was panicking. He only had a minute left. But he had the key component, which was important. He grabbed Mop from the ground and places it near the command board. He opened the bag and took out the key component.

It was do or die time.

He opened the package containing the key component: a vial of eye drops.

He dropped seven drops in each eye. Just to be safe, an extra four.

The Old Guy got into the time machine. He spun around the invisible knobs and shifted around a lever made out of duct tapped toilet paper roles. Something caught his ears: it was the sound of the thruster boosters kicking into overdrive. Which in reality was Merry Millions kicking the door.

Major Tom, this is Mission Control. Do you copy?

Bob turned his head. It was Mop, saluting him. Bob tightened his gasmask and adjusted the knobs and pressure readings on his space suit. Bob saluted him back.

“Mission Control, this is Major Tom, over?” Bob’s voice boomed across the room as the thruster rockets began reaching their maximum output.

We have permission to launch. Godspeed, Googoo Babecake. In 5….

Merry kicked open the door.

4….

A kaleidoscope engulfed the room, changed the shape and colors of everything the sun touches.

3….

Merry carefully aimed the gun at Bob’s head, which was moving so sporadically she was hesitant to take a shot.

2….

“Mission Control, I’m out of Earth’s orbit! Ready to travel back in time!” The whole universe was stretching and collapsing on itself. Everything was going white, yet going dark. He was about to travel through time. He was at peace.

1….

“I can see the Earth from here! Ancient Greece, here I come!” Bob gasped in awe.

We have Ignition!

Merry cracked her neck, pointed at Bob’s head, closed her eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Merry Millions helped Vic Valentine out to a car belonging to a dead neighbor. “Where are we off to?” Valentine asked.

“Mexico. You know, the cops are gonna be here in a bit, so gotta get out for awhile.” Vic looked back at the house. “Wanna see some Mariachi’s while we are down there?”

“Nah, let’s just go and start over.” She started jumping up and down. Valentine knew he would be fine. As long as she was medicated. And he wasn’t calling her crazy.
A small cup of water rests in my hands, as tired as I am.
I squat on the cold cement of the sidewalk like the lowest character on the totem.
My pal the garbage can squats next to me. Cars roll past,
smears of moonlight sliding across hoods and fenders like butter across toast.
Slowly.
It’s been a long night. An anonymous night.
This night stands among all the others like a blade of grass in a soccer field.
Four more minutes. I didn’t bring a watch but somehow I don’t need one.
I beg for timelessness.
I let these four minutes simmer in the back of my brain. Four minutes.
Something to savor. Four minutes of cool night air before I return to that sauna of sweat, grill stink, and
bleach vapors.
Here the air is thick with purity, emptiness. So I fill it with exhale after exhale.
If I had a cigarette I’d fill the void with scrolls of smoke. A cleaner smoke than that produced by the
churning vats of grease.
Three more minutes.
I commune with my water cup, my steadfast little friend, soon to be yielded to the maw of the Wendy’s
garbage can.
The second ten minute break offers more respite than the first or even the half. It hints at hope.
Only two more hours perhaps, and then I can head home.

I use these spare ten minutes to think about
anything but what I’m about to go back to.
I use these spare ten minutes to appreciate the prick of the cool night air and
it’s skinny middle finger jammed eloquently, daintily into the faces of the hot hot sun,
the heat lamps wet and yellow with electricity,
the snapping of the grill like a hot night in the Beatnik club,
the red faces of heartily dissatisfied customers.
I like the cool night air. It aids meditation.
The exhausted heart sizzles upon entering the frigid parking lot;
my exhausted heart after seven hours of blank white routine, scorching boredom, and burning bubbling
tedium.
This ten soothes me.
This ten reminds me that somewhere babies are being born, babies who have no knowledge yet of the
crisp
golden
fry.
Somewhere lovers are drunk and ankle-deep in a heady aromatic smoke that bears no resemblance to the
smoke of the grease.
Somewhere centuries-old friends are laughing in each other’s arms.
Somewhere there is darkness. A natural darkness left unmolested by fluorescent lights.
Somewhere, but not in there. Not in Wendy’s.
I finish my water. Crush my paper cup. Round up my scattered thoughts and exit the
cool of the parking lot for the fervent torpor that boils a smile of ill will, of welcome. Of eternity.
My ten’s up.
Watching a Garden Grow
Mike Aspros

Many arrived here as Mom did,
 she from Fresno,
 hands squeezing Oregon
 rolled up in a magazine.

We relished firs and rivers,
 watching moods of weather flexing colors.
 Gaping at buildings spouting like Dandelions,
 pink and white basalt pillars,
 edges of silvery gilt,
 a few hovering domed cathedrals.

If I could,
 would I flip a switch preventing newcomers?
 I’d be the greeting party,
 leading a ticker tape parade raining rose petals.
 The city’s chosen you like a perfect strawberry.
 Newcomers are needed to
 cultivate the diversity of roses,
 making room for new,
 majestic things to grow
 replenishing smiles.

Used
Laura Kate James

Well, that ashtray for example, she said,
 pointing toward the coffee table. This chair,
 she hit the armrest with her fist. All our
 things are secondhand. The sofa, our bed,
 Sitting up, she tapped her cigarette bare
 above the dish. The worn leather held her
 imprint. Nothing’s new here. Nothing’s our own
 here. She brought the final drag to her lips,
 inhaled, extinguished, lit a third. The chair,
 bleached by the sun, the leather two-tone,
 sat near no window now. Doesn’t this
 bother you? she said.

 He watched from the stairs
 a seasoned witness of this recycled scene,
 this Möbius strip of film repeating
 old refrains of longing, of wanting more.
 No, he said, it doesn’t.
From the shores of the Atlantic
to the surfs of the Pacific
I find my way by trick and a thumb.

Wandering around Portland
checking out the porn shops
with perfect cocks hanging from the walls
in perfect display like a rack of beef.
Just below motorized play toys that
vamp up my pleasure button.

When all of a sudden
I remember mama screaming at me:
“Don’t ever have sex before you marry.
You better not do it with a goyum!”

I think, sorry ma I couldn’t wait
the world lacks a pure Jewish hunk.
Besides you can’t compare a Fat Italian Sausage
to a skinny Nathan’s Frank. It just don’t fit the bill.

For years she would sneak into my sex, soothed, subconscious
ranting ragging like the wicked witch of the east-coast.
Turning my dreams into guilt ridden nightmares.

A few years pass when
All of a sudden…..
Baboom!
An awakening.

I smack her right in the kisser.
I told her to get out
and buy her own sex toy.
She never came back.

Of course it was then,
when I had to turn in the crown.
No longer was I to bare the brunt
of a guilt ridden, Jewish-American princess.
If You Find Mariett, Please, Read Her These Poems When the Sun Swells
Cody Meyocks

I.
Lying in liquor canals, Mariett’s wringing petals from torn strips of storm.

II.
Swastika resting in light on my chest, Mariett shades the window with flags of the soil, of the soil, of the earth, of the atmosphere’s lashes of sun, of afternoon.

III.
From our pale Mariett’s ankles stream ribbons of heat this evening of waking, the waterline tackled by slow constellations’ orange orbs, for our dancer eats dinner alone.

IV.
St. Elmo’s fire crowning Mariett’s birch-streaked blond, curled into herself as the saints on our masts long swing lanterns against the rain wrung from her gown. Mariett and the storm both left staggering into the harbor.

V.
Amber jagged against azure Marxist red, oceans of canyon, Pacific and Atlantic one lulling Thule, Mariett skips the glaciers like bridges to Iceland, still loved and still lovely, for she was already vast.

“In slow glimmer, the waves disappeared, silhouette of the storm on my breast.” Mariett walks, and the quiet stays quiet for a while.
VI
Berryman laid by the bridge.
Mariett laid erupting flame,
lighting his cocktail
with eyelashes, fingertips
slow as a lover over caskets of
islands of men,
pale, whose hands had seen poetry
burned and in ash.
Ash that today formed a cloud,
sent to reach Mariett’s
iris, between rising, towards setting
bands,
peeled from the sky and flowed, ribbons of setting
of rising, to
hands holding early glass
bridges, then
wrapped them, blanketing poetry burned.
Mariett,
the rivulets of thawed starlight that
stream to your palms,
only couldn’t let the river die alone.

VII
Hot orchard run,
Mariett in your roots, made of shattering
spaces
of soil whose colors seep up through
the branches to drip
colors of heat on the eyelashes, on the
irises
of my lost barefoot beauties caught under
the leaves
which act like snow acting like souls—for spring. The shadows weave
words
on the ground as they rise, and they rise
for the words on their bodies. Glass
sunlight like prisms
avoiding the dream, so I sleep, while it still projects visions on my sheets. “It has
something
to do with the view, I think.”

VIII
The men lay their guns on the edge of the tide.
Mariett, come by night, wash the ruins of ash,
wash the rubble of breaks,
wash the city of dead.
Wash my fingertips, fires of sands, in hours.
Wash my hand in the kiss of this man, when
you come, who here kisses this picture
and lays his gone down in the earth,
into azure and the mountains and distance
and birth.

IX
Our fingertips met,
Mariett,
and we brought together our palms, underground.
We made mountains
wove joy into the hair of all
those we call
Lazarus, calling from this corner table to
dancers who mend their own hours on
the
edges of azure or windows of
Thule
a while longer.
Charlotte had a hole in her heart when I met her, damaged tissue that she shrugged off as something far away, like a spot on the moon. Her mother, she said, had called it “God’s little thumb print.” But Charlotte didn’t believe in God and instead touted Murphy’s Law as the god of all things in this inconsequential Earth. Still, she always got so upset over small injustices like gum on the bottom of a shoe, a spilled purse, or a dead deer on the side of the road.

Charlotte’s first words to me had been crass and wet. She had a habit of spitting when she spoke. My face was sprinkled with saliva and I was trying to think of something to say, a witty remark that would match hers. She was leaning on a bike rack, drinking Diet Pepsi, waiting. But all I could think to do was laugh—at myself—with her. We started accidentally meeting after that, then purposefully, neither of us saying much. It started with simple curiosity and I didn’t really know what was happening at first. And when I did, I didn’t let on that I knew—it was easier that way. But I couldn’t help that she somehow had me from the moment her spit landed on my nose like a tiny kiss.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Charlotte said, a speck of pepper wedged into her gum line. I told her I didn’t and she laughed. I paid for our sandwiches and then walked her back to work, just a few blocks away. As we crossed the street she unabashedly took off her Cocoa Beach T-shirt and, taking her time, put on her khaki polo and name badge. She said, “Thanks for lunch. I’ll get it next time.” Then she slipped through the heavy side door of Drugs Plus, letting her fingers linger to delicately wave goodbye.

The park was sparsely shaded. The fall had moved in and the leaves littered the ground like fallen soldiers, waiting for the wind’s absolution. We used a clean pink sheet from my bed as a picnic blanket. I didn’t even think of how I’d explain the grass stains to my Mother. Charlotte brought her signature ham and potato chip sandwiches. I jokingly offered her after-dinner mints left over from my cousin’s birthday. I had found them in my pants pocket, chalky and garnished with lint. We were lying on our backs, picking out figures in the clouds, and I felt her hand absentely brush up against my arm. Then I felt fingers—cold at the tips—searching for mine. I closed my eyes. Charlotte told me to relax. I couldn’t see her face, it was so dark. But I could see the silhouette of her head in front of my bedroom window, the way her hair hung in front of her face like a curtain. I was wrapped up in my blanket, covering my breasts, pretending I was cold. But I was sweating like crazy, and I couldn’t help that my crotch was getting wet. I sternly told her to stop giggling, the walls being so thin, my parents just in the other room. I kept remarkably quiet, self-consciously taking her in. I’ll never forget the only sound—like a cat lapping up water.

In the bathroom, as we brushed our teeth, I made a point to reach around her for my hairbrush, letting my elbow familiarly graze her side. We made eye contact in the mirror and I smiled, blue foam resting in the corner of my mouth. She left for work wearing a pair of my jeans without asking, and I knew she reveled in not having to.

Several times Charlotte told me I was too gentle. I think she was used to abuse, her lullaby. But I sometimes couldn’t bring myself to do some of the things she asked me to. Sometimes I’d just close my eyes and enjoy it. And sometimes I was barely there with her at all, except at the end when she’d hold me and stroke my hair. Then I would tell her that I loved her. And at that moment I’d mean it.

For my birthday she bought me a book about horses. I never realized just how much I liked them until then. It was this great power she possessed, illuminating my desires like white writing in black light. It excited and terrified me that
she seemed to know me more than I did. And I think that’s why I tore out the title page where she had written my name and hers in perfect cursive.

It was mid-afternoon. The radio was on, and she was crying hard on my bed. I couldn’t get her to stop long enough to form a coherent sentence. Finally, she told me to just hold her and I did. I rocked her back and forth and felt guilty for letting my eyes wander to the door. My shirt was wet and the inside of my elbow felt sticky. Shivering in her pink and blue spotted sweater she quietly accused me of being ashamed of her. She asked, “Why do you treat me like a dirty secret?” I tried to reassure her, but my touching and consoling her did not come easy. But I swear, I never thought of her as dirty.

When I moved out of my parents’ house and into the studio on Cypress St., Charlotte kept her copy of the key on a sorry looking key chain, accompanied only by a small troll with a pink gem for a belly button.

After painting my four walls baby blue with sage green trim, we laid on the floor and contemplated the textured ceiling. She tucked her head under my chin and said, “I’m so happy right now I could just squeal.” And she did—a small and lovely exhalation. “Now you.”

“I can’t.”

“Just try it. It feels good.” She propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at me, her face speckled with blue and green. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” I said. And at that moment I meant it. Then I took a deep breath and let the air come out in a steady, pleasant tone.

It was late and I was tired. I craved an empty bed to climb into and my heart sank seeing the lump of Charlotte’s contorted figure beneath the sheets, her clothes making a trail from the door to the foot of my bed. I climbed in quietly, rigidly keeping to my side as if trying not to set off an alarm. I looked at the back of her head for a long time the next morning. She wasn’t a natural blond and her roots were showing. It wasn’t that I cared about it, I was just disappointed that she no longer did. She rolled over and opened her eyes. Then she smiled and brought me in close, her nipples as hard as pebbles against my back.

She found the horse book in a pile of things I had boxed up for the move. It was her idea that we get a place together, combining our resources, something a bit bigger than my claustrophobic studio, closer to the Laundromat. She held the book in front of her and smiled, then asked me, “Do you remember when I bought this for you? Remember how much you loved it?” Then she opened it to where the first page should have been and her face suddenly melted. She stared a long time before closing the book and neatly placing it back in the box. She didn’t say anything and I didn’t either. We just kept folding and packing, the Pretenders playing softly in the background. I couldn’t understand why she didn’t throw the book at my face in a rage. A part of me really wished that she had. It would’ve been easier that way.

Our house was very small and smelled like store-bought corn tortillas. The kitchen floor had permanent stains and the wall behind the stove was splattered with what I could only hope was spaghetti sauce. Within a month of living there, the only room we had completely assembled was the bedroom. But she quickly became the perfect domestic, taking to cooking and cleaning almost obsessively. More and more, I took to being lazy. As much as I wanted a clean toilet to sit on, I wanted more for her to have to clean it—passively punishing her for her getting what she wanted. And she always eventually did it, the heavy smell of bleach lingering in place of the stinging words of an argument she had chosen not to have.

The night the kitchen curtains caught on fire—her attempt at some exotic meal—I told her she was stupid and selfish. She let the insults roll off her shoulders like a light rain, assuming I was just angry about the curtains. Later that night she apologized over and over in bed. And I let her, telling myself that this was what she deserved, to grovel and beg for my forgiveness. But she didn’t sense the real resentment behind it. To her it was just a little game, the necessary coyness of inti-
macy.

She got the cat without telling me. She named him Percy and bought him a zebra print flea collar. She didn’t mind that she was the only one cleaning the litter box. He slept at the end of our bed, sometimes attacking my feet in the night, digging into them violently. She would playfully scold him and I would contemplate throwing him against the wall, wondering if she’d never forgive me.

I opened the dishwasher and, amidst the fog of sterile air, decided to start secretly seeing someone else—one of those rash, misguided decisions one deems as logical for its semblance of something proactive. I went looking for this person at bars or in the supermarket. But it was as if I was marked, like she had branded me. Every pass I made was fruitless, a half interested smile sinking behind a thick glass of beer, then gone. I would find myself sitting on a recently vacated bar stool, taking in the left-over warmth through my good jeans, wondering if she was the only one in the world who’d ever want me. Maybe I just didn’t try hard enough, or maybe a part of me didn’t really want to succeed.

I needed a hobby, something that would be just mine, a clean white space outside it all. I tried drawing, but was only reminded of elementary school and my inability to work in the two dimensional—I could never quite get a handle on perspective, depth of field. Then I found a camera at a thrift store for twelve dollars, the kind I imagined fashion photographers use.

I tried capturing the landscape around our neighborhood, a somewhat secluded area surrounded by old fields. I wanted to get the breadth of it all, the way the hills looked just beyond the broken fences and neglected field equipment. But I eventually scaled it down until I was photographing just the fences, the posts sinking towards the ground like blown-out birthday candles, the individual strands of barbed wire strangling the oily wood.

She bought me a tri-pod from Wal-Mart. It was cheap and difficult to operate. But I appreciated the gesture, her sincere contribution to my happiness. Then she insisted on me taking a tasteful nude picture, a portrait we could hang, a photo I could keep in my wallet. I really was no good at photographing people, waiting for the right look to come over them, pulling the trigger. But Charlotte kept on insisting while shooting melodramatic glances at the tri-pod leaning in the corner with a damp bra dangling from it like a white flag.

We set up in the bedroom, the only room with decent lighting. She spent a half hour in the bathroom doing her make-up and hair. She arranged the pillows on the bed while I adjusted the shutter speed and fought with the tri-pod. Her body turned away from me, she looked over her soft white shoulder.

She took the roll of film to the Rite-Aid herself the next day after work, so giddy when she got home she didn’t even change her clothes or take a shower. She spent over an hour perusing the photos at the kitchen table, fanning them out like a game of solitaire, picking the ones she liked best, then changing her mind. “You make me look so pretty,” she said.

“I just took the pictures.”
“Thank you so much. I really love them.” She rested her elbows on the table, looking down at the photos like a tempting box of chocolates.

“Which one’s your favorite?”

She handed me a thick photo album wrapped in bold birthday wrapping paper—slices of cake floating in a wash of red and gold. I peeled at the remains of the price sticker and told her I was giving up photography all together, that the materials were just getting too expensive. Her mouth smiled and her eyes took on the expression of small but significant pain—the removing of a band-aid, a flu shot. But she agreed that it was probably for the best and put the album in with her cookbooks. She never knew that I would sometimes still take my camera nearly everyday to the river or even downtown.

Charlotte made omelettes and hash browns one particularly bright and crisp April morning and set two heaping plates on the table, fresh Dahlias in a glass jar in the center. The omelettes were dense and the sickly sweet smell of the Dahlias made my stomach churn. I said it was a bug, something going around. I laid on the couch and amidst the cacophony of the morning news I could hear the sound of scraping plates and the thud of
breakfast in the trash can.

The following month, Charlotte was in the hospital, complaining one night that her heart was acting up. It was just a scare, an irregularity in the rhythm, but nothing to really worry about. I stroked her hair in the beige and orange waiting room while Dr. Monty wrote the prescription, something to help her sleep at night. Her hair felt thin and greasy and I couldn’t bring myself to kiss her, even though she rested her head on my shoulder, waiting. I asked her to pass me a magazine, something with pictures from far away places and little naked children with big eyes seeing a camera for the first time. She read an outdated People and commented on how ugly everyone was.

The portrait of her hung crookedly opposite our bed, a strand of cobweb hanging from one corner like a kite tail. She asked why I had really given up photography, if it really was just the money. And I told her, like with most things, there was just a loss of interest and I had moved on. Then I turned off the light and said goodnight into my pillow, the ends of down feathers poking through the pillowcase. I drifted into sleep and dreamt about a little man selling flowers on a busy street. No one bought any. They just passed him by, hailing a taxi from the thousands that constantly streamed in—a line of taxis going on and on forever. I briefly woke to the sound of her trying to quietly catch her breath, the rustle of the comforter as she slipped out of bed, the water running in the bathroom sink, the tinkle of pills spilling onto tile, her quiet cursing. Soon I felt her cold feet brushing up against mine as she climbed back in.

The sun was finding its way through the blinds, intent on making it to the other side, reaching with all the loneliness of morning. I at first just looked at her face and how pretty she was without any make-up, without that ridiculous orange tint of K-Mart cosmetics. I stroked her hair without rousing her from sleep, her breathing slow and steady. Then I took a long shower and was careful to be quiet as I got dressed.

I left her alone all morning, making myself breakfast, cleaning the kitchen. Later, I checked on her, smiling at how peaceful she looked nestled in the comforter like a plastic doll, her breathing still slow and steady—the generous effect of her favorite Drugs Plus knock off. I waited a short while before decidedly kissing her forehead, whispering that I was sorry for what I was about to do.

I found a blank roll of film in the sock drawer. She looked so delicate. I captured the way her hand rested on the pillow near her face, her palm upturned, trusting, like waiting for a raindrop. Her feet tangled in the sheet. The way the sun made the stubble on her legs look blond and plastic. Her hair spread over the pillow like a doily. Her shoulder peeking from the neck of her oversized t-shirt—white, smooth and curious.

I reheated some leftovers in the fridge, something with chicken she had thrown together a few nights before. Then I set the thermostat to a comfortable low and locked the door behind me. I left everything behind but my camera, a single set of clothing and the book about horses.

I stopped just once to take pictures at a rest stop where strangers were playing cards and dogs were lounging in their designated areas. In the cover of night’s forgiveness the buttons on my stereo glowed green and the backlit speedometer kept reminding me that I was moving a mile a minute, though the only thing that seemed to really be moving was the yellow line extending forever before me, my headlights clearly illuminating particles of dust and not much of anything else in the far distance. It was so dark I couldn’t see my hands on the wheel or my arms in front of me or my legs below me, falling asleep, tingling, a disembodied head hovering above imitation leather. I had put the roll of film in the glove compartment—a safe small place. And it tumbled forward as I suddenly slowed to a stop to let a deer cross safely to the other side of the road, where it looked at me for a long time before quickly disappearing into the darkness surrounding my small, inefficacious box of light.
The way I feel things
i can’t even say them
not because i don’t want
but because there are no words, yet.
they will probably never be invented
because all the inventers are busy
making computer robot gizmos
and bombs
instead of trying to get into your pants.

i’m gonna have to learn hand talk
because there are things in the body that can’t escape out of the body.

things like my heart.

there are things that can’t be heard in phrases like
“let’s go to the movies!”
because that is just a cheap facsimile of something you’ve heard before.

i will go to a community college, then,
and sign up for a sign language class
and on the first bullshit day when they’re like
“why were you interested in this class?”

i’ll tell them
i have a parasite
called
love
and i want to let it play puppet master with my hands.
I must have been thirteen
(a word that has always gotten in the way of my
tongue)
the winter that i helped the sheepman
i recall that his name was william
and i called him bill, as I best remember it
he drove a red two-wheel-drive pickup
and would arrive in front of the old schoolhouse
my mother and I lived in.
the schoolhouse had maroon walls and curtains
made of burlap wool sacks,
until we moved in. and painted eight of the ten feet of
wall white.
but the ceiling was still maroon
bill would arrive in the evening, when i was just-home from school
he would verify that i had my puddle-jumpers on
and i did
i remember not saying much
as we drove out into the green winter fields
and moved irrigation pipe.
so it must not have been winter, must have been summer
and so why was i in school?
i do not ever remember being paid for that
just that he told me not to pet the dog that guarded the sheep
and that behind the most idyllic, pastoral pond with loons on it
was the pile for the dead sheep.
bill talked more than i did
and we moved a lot of pipe
Kiss the spout of your sink,
    Raise your hands to
    the power lines.
    Whisper love songs into
    the telephone receiver.
    We will,
    together.

Today is not a normal day. Tonight is not
    a normal night. Everything is alive.
The utilities are alive. Drains
and pipes and wires sew us
    together like a quilt.
My neck is sore, questions scratching like talons
on my skull.
    I will answer them another night:
The cosmos thawed; dripped down on Vegas with so many shots of tequila—
    beaming rivulets ran like ink beside the car. Where did we go? Did we stay? Who drove?
    Were the lights from
the streetlights or the headlights or the Marlboro lights or the traffic lights
or the casinos? And which, in the dark of the new moon desert, came upon
    the hangman? And did I stand alone on the gallows,
visions of Alina blushing in the sky? Or was I alone?
I don’t know Alina in the morning, I hardly know
myself. My shoes are full of sand.
    I remember being lost. How—late—did we find our way back to
the electric dew on the web of utilities alive?
    “Later still,” says the hangman.
The black curtain was slowly raised to reveal the show’s two inebriated hosts. They referred to themselves with single letter abbreviations rather than names. Mister A, and Mister B. Both of them were thirty something, but the constant toxicity of their bloodstreams added years to their faces. Their couch was made of red velvet, and it propped them up inside of the spotlight. A coffee table in front of them held a junkie’s delight, a smorgasbord of drugs, paraphernalia, cigarettes, and booze. The audience had been ushered to the front rows of seats in the abandoned amphitheatre. A film crew had documented their arrival, turning the cameras on Mr. A and Mr. B when all of the names on the guest list had been checked off. They began the show through the fresh smoke of a joint, each with a drink in hand.

“Well, well. They’ve given us a playhouse to play in I see. My best mate, Mister B, what is there left to see?”

“Let’s ask the audience then, Mister A,” he said, squeezed through a smoky exhale, “what do you all want to see?”

The audience was a bizarre cross-section of the city. The show’s producers had combed through clubs, bars, parties, and the streets for just the right mix on opening night. There were squatters from the warehouses nearby, fad following socialites from uptown, club kids, barflies, poets, rock stars, actors, artists. A total of about fifty showed up for the 4AM invitation. Mister B repeated his question to the crowd, much louder this time.

“What do you want to see?”

“Tits!” One voice yelled.

“God!” Another one shouted.

“The devil, big tits, and fucking anarchy!” A man in the back screamed. Most of the crowd laughed. Electricity, a buzz maybe, filled the burned out playhouse. A few of the better-dressed members of the audience whispered, debating whether or not they were in danger. Mister A quieted the crowd, raising one finger to his lips.

“You may see that and more, my friends, this night. I only know a bit of what is to come, isn’t that right, B?” Mister B nodded, rolling up one of his sleeves. He reached for a dropper and spoon, mixed some of a twenty bag of black tar heroin with a little water in the bent utensil, and cooked it. The shot was filled and placed in a cup to cool. Mister A tied off his upper arm with rubber tubing, smacking at his best mate’s forearm as he made a fist. A woman in the crowd gasped. A man yelled, begging them to throw him some. Mister B injected the best vein he had left inside the tracks on his arm and slumped back on the couch, needle in one hand, rubber tubing in the other. The gasping woman held her Versacci handbag under her fur coat, and forced her fiancé out of his seat to leave with her.

Mister A continued his erratic monologue.

“One less debutante, oh well … so you want a show … the clock in my head says 4:20AM, … so smoke ‘em if you got ‘em. If we didn’t tell you already, this is being broadcasted, live. Public access, but broadcast all the same. The cameras are rolling, so, maestro, drum roll, please!”

The snare drum rolled in smooth from somewhere in the shadows. Mister B wavered for a second, and nodded back out. Mister A played air drums; then stopped to light an elongated pipe full of opium. He exhaled a cloud. With a sinister grin, he spoke low.

“Contestant number one, … you have the spotlight.”

Instantly, Mister A and Mister B were in darkness. The spotlight blasted an incandescent hole on the opposite side of the stage. A woman wearing a red robe stood in the light. A series of metal hooks hung from cables in front of her. She shed the robe in one effortless positioning of her body, revealing a wealth of tattoos and pierced nipples. Some of the men in the crowd cheered. Someone barked. The naked woman fastened two
of the hooks to her nipple rings, the others to rings on her shoulders and back. The drummer began again, and the cables slowly lifted her upward. The drum roll then broke into a beat, and the rest of the unseen house-band played along. She rose, a foot off the ground, then two, slowly upward, until she was dangling high above the stage. The music was a slow build, a trance-rock sound that one audience member likened to the sound of the ocean if it were somehow plugged in. As for the woman held up by cables, as if her arms were tattooed snakes, she let her hands slide down over her decorated thighs, pausing with her fingertips at the center. The crowd seemed to stop breathing. One finger slowly disappeared inside the triangle. Another finger, then another, then another, until they were all moving together in rhythm. She swayed and wriggled side to side, as the music intensified. Cymbals crashed as the guitars swelled to the edge of their necks. She began swinging crazily from the cables, as the nude singer for the band; louder and louder, her shrieking shot up to the rafters, echoing through the theatre. The music fell into white noise feedback, deafening, and audience members began covering their ears. She rose to the suspended crescendo, and then... Bang! The music dropped off an invisible cliff. She hit the high note, against a blanket of silence.

She remained suspended, gasping for breath, as the curtain slowly fell. Applause and cheers flew to the stage. The audience wasn’t sure if what they had just seen was art or pornography, but most didn’t care. The spotlight shot back to the red velvet couch, and the two hosts.

Mister A laughed as he spoke, “Well, well. Are you glad you all came? How many of you out there just died?”

Some of the crowd went wild, while one or two began to boo. It had begun. Cigarettes and joints sent smoke trailing up to the ceiling; bottles clanged in the aisles. Everyone in the playhouse was high or drunk to some degree, but most of the audience was far less polluted than the hosts. Mister B was just conscious enough to raise his finger to his lips, and amazingly, the crowd quieted once again.
“The things you get for free,” he said. “Her name is Rose, our swinger friend. A fine freak indeed, but now we have another bit of something or other for you. Different you might say… Drum roll please! Contestant number two, the spotlight is yours.”

Another hole burned bright out of the void. The audience fell silent, fascinated by all of the performance possibilities that might outdo what they had just seen suspended by such sensitive points. Rose had set the bar high, the first of three.

Into the spotlight, a man wheeled over a podium-sized table draped in a white sheet. Atop the table lay a wireless microphone, a glass jar with some kind of clear liquid, and a machete. The man looked weathered; scars ran down one side of his face and across his chin. He gave the crowd a grin, revealing the spaces where teeth once posed, and the few stubborn ones that remained. Through the microphone, and the jitter waves of amphetamines, he spoke as if he were preaching.

“Pain is all illusion! Do you remember the monks that set their own fires? The mind is a terrible thing to taste.” That being said, he put down the microphone.

The drum rolled back in, building volume and swelling to a perfect breaking point. He lifted the machete, held it up to the audience, and then extended his middle finger firmly on the white cloth surface. With one swift motion the blade came down just above the knuckle with the force of a guillotine. The masochist let out a primal scream louder than an orgasm in mid air. He then picked the severed finger up with his bloodied thumb and pinky, and placed it in the jar. He bowed his head and gave a theatrical hand gesture to bid the audience adieu, as the curtain fell once again.

A mixed reaction swirled from the audience. A few of the warehouse squatters, club kids, and performance artists stood clapping and shouting. One man who was slurring his words had thrown up in the second row. Mostly, there was a low murmur, two person conversations about what had just taken place. Words like, “mentally ill,” and, “fucked up,” could be heard from the seats.

Mister A and Mister B sat illuminated again, each of them snorting a line of crystal-meth to further alter their energy. They each raised up a hand, and Mister A spoke.

“And now, oh my friends and new family, the final freak of the night! Drum-master, you know what to do.”

The stage was set as before. Music and new light held the final contestant in a cradle for all to look in on. The man was heavy. An ex-football player maybe, who had put on two or three hundred pounds since high school. He sat in front of a table covered in hot dogs, and spoke into the same microphone the machete man had used.

“What’s up? You know in Cool Hand Luke, when he eats fifty hard-boiled eggs? Well, there’s fifty hot dogs here…” He set down the microphone, pumped his plump fists with a loud caveman grunt, and shoved the first hot dog into his mouth in two bites. As he finished it and started on the next, he held up a finger to begin the count. The audience counted along. “Two, three, four, …” Every few seconds another dog disappeared as they counted together. People began laughing and hurling insults through the sound of counting. “Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty…” At about the four-minute mark (by the stopwatch that Mr. A held), the fat man’s face looked like it would explode once he made it to about the fortieth one. Pieces of chewed hot dog and bun hung halfway out of his mouth as he strained to get it all down. The count moved slower and slower. Laughter followed each swallow. “Forty-eight… forty-nine!” The crowd chanted in unison. “One more, one more, one more!” He made it to the fiftieth bun and beef by-product, chewed for a few agonizing seconds, and then swallowed to the sound of the drummer’s rim shot. The crowd cheered the disgusting feat. Fierce applause. Just as the curtain began to fall, the fat man puked up at least thirty-two parts of his misadventure. Darkness swallowed him whole, and the hosts re-appeared.

“So the time has come, my friends, to vote for the freakiest freak. One of the producers, the silent, in the shadows type, has put up prize money. A grand I think, isn’t that right B?”
Mister B opened one eye and nodded. Mister A continued, “So, my friends, your applause will decide it. Who has won our little freak show? Is it number one?”

Rose appeared in a circle of light on stage. The audience cheered loud and long. She bowed to them and then walked back into the shadows.

“Will it be the self-surgeon?”

The second contestant held his hand wrapped in a tourniquet. There was some clapping, some booing. The lunatic bowed with a jagged-toothed grin, and then walked off.

“Or will it be number three?”

The fat man pumped his fists in the air on stage. The audience mixed in cheers with laughter. Some of the men started chanting, “Rose, Rose, Rose!” The fat man walked off.

“The people have spoken! So, Mister B, our little experiment has come to an end. Rose, you are the freak among freaks! Our congratulations!”

The crowd cheered wildly as the black curtain slowly cloaked Mister A and Mister B. Most everyone began making their way to the rear exit of the playhouse, but two men in suits made their way back stage. They were cable television executives. They were like two prize pigs trained to hunt for truffles with powerful snouts; only they were out for more than mushrooms. These pudgy porkers smelled money. Reality T.V. had already become big business, and what they had just seen was all too marketable. Millions would be made. It would be copied to the point of exhaustion by the other networks. This ‘Freak Show’ was what the people wanted. It was a new reality. As real as a heart attack.

Mister A and Mister B were still sitting on the red velvet couch where stage lights had lit up the space behind the curtain. The show’s main producer, a film student, knelt next to the two hosts while snorting a line of cocaine. The two television executives approached the couch with their hands outstretched.

“My congratulations, Gentlemen,” the executive shook each of the host’s hands as he spoke, “great show, really, really great.”

The young man pinched at the base of his nose and sniffed. He stood up to introduce himself.

“Andre Knox, Producer, Director, etcetera, etcetera.”

“Excellent. Just the person we were hoping to meet. My colleague and I represent a group of corporations that will be launching a new cable channel in the fall. We just loved your freak show, and to be perfectly honest, we think that it could be the show that defines us as a network. You see—there is basically an untapped market that our bosses are willing to roll the dice on. A massive audience already visits Internet sites that are considered lewd, or depraved, or downright disgusting, and we are confident that television, at least cable television, can capitalize on this public fascination.

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“Outstanding,” the other suited man said, exchanging handshakes. “Mister A, Mister B, and… I’m sorry, what is your name?”

Andre Knox, Producer, Director, etcetera, etcetera.”

“You don’t want to change the show at all, do you?” He asked the two executives.

The one who had been doing most of the talking answered.

“We don’t think you should change a thing. We do have a few minor suggestions though.”

The other executive nodded in agreement.

“And what might those be?” Andre asked.

Mister A and Mister B had lost interest in the conversation and were mumbling to each other about the quality of their cocaine.

“Well, first, we would have to have some kind of disclaimer about the drug use, that the network does not advocate or condone it, or that it is just acting, something along those lines. The main suggestion… I don’t know how I should put this really. Ok, how would you go about selecting the contestants? Because we just had an idea. See, what we feel will sell is what people haven’t
already seen, and it will be difficult to keep the acts shocking after a few shows. So there will be a time when our bosses will want an episode that we can hype up to the public, as being above and beyond the others. Something that people will talk about around the water cooler, in their college dorm rooms, in chat rooms, what-have-you. Bad press… Well, it really has become the very best kind. It sounds strange, but it’s true. Public outrage can send ratings through the roof. Now we are not telling you to persuade a contestant to do anything illegal… But, if you were to casually suggest something…”

Andre looked at the man suspiciously.
“What did you have in mind?”
“IT would have to appear, Andre, that the contestant was in no way encouraged by anyone on the show. They acted completely on their own.

Or, it was an accident… either way. But what will really sell, what will really make this show a hit… is when someone dies.”
No. 7
Kate Carver

Jon on the desktop dangling his feet, reading Marquez. I’ll probably show up later, he says, in some poem you write about solitude. He is a secondary character, I knew even then before he moved to that East 5th Avenue apartment with the cable spool coffee table covered with names of visitors in cheap acrylic paint (l.k.james in small black letters obscured by the raw wood grain), littered with empty styrofoam take-out boxes, milk film dried on the bottom of empty bowls, empty cans of Bud Lite, of Nati Ice; the people sitting around on ripped couch cushions; the TV altar in the corner, cords and controllers at its feet. He’ll do just fine, I thought. I couldn’t have guessed he was a Business Man. I didn’t notice his shining silver cufflinks. I didn’t notice his clean pressed pants, his monogrammed leather briefcase. He didn’t notice my frayed denim cutoffs or my white Jockey t-shirt ripped at the sleeves until we dressed again next morning; I step over his loafers as I leave. I chance the flashing hand. I cut across an empty lot, kicking up gravel, hiding from headlights behind a For Lease sign.

The Best of Thursday
Britt Godchaux

She used to be a man, but then they made her put her shirt back on, wouldn’t call her Peter.

She used to be dying slowly of the untraceable virus but then Vincent Van Gogh shot himself on her birthday and she realized that audacity takes the cake

She used to bury those bones but her guts got all full up and exploded ungracefully.

So she honed her holy heart her sense of light emitted pulsing flaming grace and put her instruments down to fate.

The last time they saw her she was skipping bare-breasted areolas sun-shining a boogey-woogey insanity-silhouette on the horizon.

All they could do was sing clichés in unison and lament having not known Peter.
The Last Great Film
Eamon Ffitch

The last great film I saw was short and blue
And starred a dozen young and busty blondes
Plus five Brunettes with waists like wasps; and thighs
Like sticks of butter wrapped in silk and set
On fire. A frisky group, content to soap
Each other’s leased convertible sedans
In only tiny tees and daisy-dukes.
But life was not all pillow fights and home-
Made margarita-mix. The rent was due,
And sleep-overs, like Twister games, must end.
It was the saddest story ever told.
Their problems were the problems of the world
And when the lights went up I wept for them;
And the mistakes I hope to make again.
He tells me that he wrote a novel once, that he knows it’s no big deal, that everyone’s done it, that it doesn’t even require talent, just the belief you have it, a belief so rampant it’s best described as an epidemic. Andy’s is a classical Greek dialogue between the state of nature and contemporary pop culture. Judith’s is an existential first person narrative told from the perspective of processed food. His mother’s is a scathing imagination of the alternate reality of the life left unlived by a middle age housewife whose children have left home modeled after herself that she claims is more archetypal than autobiographical. He says that the words people use to describe their novels are generally every bit as meaningless as the work itself, that they’re divorced from definitions, that people insist that they mean what they want them to at the time regardless of what ideas the words contained within this avalanche of the unpublished actually represent. Black is white. Up is down. Orwell is Huxley. That it all stems from the arrogant notion that they have something to say, that their story is different, somehow unique from the constraints of the human experience of being born, eating, drinking, sleeping, breathing, working, dreaming, loving, fucking, fighting and eventually writing a bad novel, finally dying over the whole sorry experience.

Then he says that his is different. Of course, he tells me, we all say that ours is different, but that his really is, even though none of them really are. Still, his is. It’s cursed. He tells me that everyone who’s read it has never spoken to him again, and that he’s not talking about publishing industry people avoiding his phone calls. Friends, lovers, family; gone. All whose eyes have skimmed his words have skipped town or his inner circle. Five readers, and five dropouts from his life.

He tells me that his friend Michelle was at school for publishing, that she wanted to be a book editor, that she offered to look it over as practice in exchange for drum lessons, that shortly after delivering her a smartly bound copy of the manuscript he had made special for her along with a specially purchased red pen, not even enough time for more than a few chapters, she stopped arriving in his basement on Tuesdays at three, that her phone number stopped working without report, that she disappeared from class, that she never returned the manuscript, her thoughts on it, or the pen. He fell in love with an English major, a “writer” herself. Mad with passion and poetry, they exchanged books. Hers, a blip only of novella length, was read in an afternoon, reported on over dinner. His, a full novel, a solid hundred and five thousand words needed more time for full analysis, time it would never receive. She gave her novella and her love to a rival by chapter 7, and he wondered if Michelle had also been on chapter 7, thinking it a shame, because the exposition and backstory had barely faded at that point, that it didn’t really pick up until chapter 9.

He tells me that his roommate’s mother was a professional novelist, that they’d met and gotten along and that he wanted her to be his mentor, but that he didn’t want to give her his novel until it was at least readable enough for people not to reach chapter 8, or she wouldn’t really be interested in helping him. He gave it to her daughter, his roommate. And she promptly moved out in a swarm of the type of meritless allegations roommates always make of one another upon exit. He didn’t know what chapter she was on, only that she didn’t pay the electric bill when she left. He tells me that her mother moved shortly after. To a deserted tropical island. To write. There was another interested publishing student he knew, Erin. He tells me that he resisted, that by now he’d caught on to the curse, at least in some sort of kitschy way, and that the moment those papers left his hands, those whom they were deliv-
erated to would leave his life. He would lose a friend and a nice pen. But she insisted, said that knowledge of the curse neutered its power, that not only would she reach chapter 8, she would read every single word, scouring for grammatical and logical errors, and would return the manuscript covered in so much red ink it would look like a mutilated corpse. You can call me a butcher, she said. He flirted, said he wasn’t sure. The curse had already claimed four. Erin was. She was wrong. There was an incident, he was never clear on the details, only that she lost her scholarship, that she had to drop out of school, return home. The ritual murder of his words was a lost desire for her, the manuscript languished in a box in her parents garage. He tells me that was when his grandfather wanted to see what sort of crap he was paying for at that fancy school of his grandsons, that he begged him to want something else, that he knew what would happen, that it wasn’t fair to ask him to shoulder that responsibility. But his grandfather was a solid fellow of the greatest generation, adamant, resolved, and deeply convicted of the superstitious belief that superstition was for queers and pinkos, and he practically tore the pages from his grasp. He tells me that he never knew how far his grandfather read, only that it was far enough for him to make up his mind that it wasn’t only superstition that queers and pinkos wielded, that it was the florid nonsense he had dribbled onto those cursed pages, that though he would finish paying the bill for school because he’s made a commitment, if the words contained within those pages were how he felt about his family then he was no grandson of his, and that he never would be again.

He tells me that this is when he knew the curse was real, and though the obvious course of action was to shred the manuscript, delete the file, disconnect from the internet to ensure the curse could not escape, remove and burn his hard drive while reciting the proper incantations to cleanse it, finally scattering the ashes to the four corners of the Earth to avoid its supernatural resurrection, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. It was his novel. His work. One hundred and five thousand emblems of his soul made concrete. And one day, there might be a time or situation that could defeat the curse. He could be quarantined in a room with another, jailed, married. Then the reader could not leave and he could watch them absorb every last syllable. It was possible. He hoped.

So you see, he tells me, that though it may contain the same bullshit, the same arrogance, the same self-aggrandizing departure from reality, and that the curse might just be an equally meaning-divorced word to explain that it was those very qualities that drove his readers away from his life. It is still different. It’s cursed. Even if that’s just a word. He tells me that this is why he’s never mentioned it before, that he wanted me to stick around, that all powers of positive thinking, trust and human intention were powerless against his apparently complete and total lack of talent or soul.

And then it’s there, on the table in between us, four hundred printed pages with a black plastic copy shop binding and a big red bow. There is no pen.

He tells me that he wishes this were about trust, about art, about love, but that it isn’t. He tells me that he knows I’m leaving him, that at least this way he can rationalize it, lay blame, it’s not him that drove me away, it’s the novel, the cursed failed novel, the one that’s waged a war against him for years now, a ruthless enemy that will stop at nothing to destroy him and that he must eventually master or die trying. He tells me that he needs to understand it, that this is the only way to make it all make sense in his head. He tells me that he knows his desires probably mean little, but that he hopes I’ll read the whole thing, that it doesn’t really pick up until chapter 9. He tells me he is sorry. And then he is gone.