

# COBALT



ISSUE 4

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Panika M.C. Dillon

## If it was fate, we wanted it: one spins the yarn

as long as we tear up the love  
(letters, we will not be) without  
kindling—their voices: spit &  
spark / & then there's your jack  
rabbit smile, & then there's  
your foot thumping at my  
chest, & then there's the flick  
to the forehead / I will be  
the hasp: harrow (run hawk  
to) heart / give me some juice,  
give me battery / the oil  
& asphalt think acid, think  
acid / we want to knit  
songs into the air, to linger  
in petticoats of gun (smoke)

### **one spins the yarn (artifact)**

hawk  
we will not be  
run to smoke  
the letters

Panika M.C. Dillon

# If it was fate, we wanted it: one weaves the tapestry

come stumbling, come—pitch  
fork for crutch, rifle for hip  
replacement / the land bleeds

into what it does (not recognize  
as home)—our warren / our warrant: so thick  
we could drink it, tip ourselves into fists

of air, shift the seams of this orb / your peal       shimmers  
long enough for me to name it—pull it  
(from your mouth) like a ribbon

of highway / is it nigh if bells go off  
  at the throat? is it  
undone? / we own the needle, the bobbin,

the shears: you could just change your hair,  
there is no (impossibility we cannot) wear

one weaves the tapestry (artifact)

recount cannot, fork             over the rifle  
at the crutch of                    home, impossibly  
for us, your                         mouth

Panika M.C. Dillon

# If it was fate, we wanted it: one cuts the thread

reason (to breathe, to) embroider  
our wrists—effort / you quit

& I went on / my fists,  
prunes; your palm, the pan / fry

nail & slice callus / you could slip  
it into (your sleeve, say) I've been

up to this forever / breaking  
my foot through a drum

skin makes everything  
(clean) / godly: bend those

women into legacy,  
rob their yarn baskets      blind

**one cuts the thread (artifact)**

clean your sleeves,

your gut says

to breathe,

too

Hugh Behm-Steinberg

## As Cloth

Everything I touch turns into cotton. I spend my days untying thread. There is a stitch in my side. My father is a needle, my mother a pair of shears. My brother is a machine, that's why he hates me. My other brother has nothing to say. He sleeps under a blanket, he sleeps under a sheet. His bed is on the floor, all we have to do is roll him in. My sister has a heart made of wool, it doesn't work well enough. She wears felt and freezes when she looks at me. I want to be easy like a shirt. I want to patch every hole with silk. I know this is irresponsible. When I mend I tear and I know we are helpless. I am a thin sheet, not a sail. I don't help as much as I want to.

David Dodd Lee

# North Carolina

For years the pine,  
The sycamore,  
Swayed over my

Right shoulder. A  
Paradise, leaves  
Rustling, a bell

Someone near there  
Kept ringing for  
Dinner. First it

Thundered, then came  
Smoke, boiling tunnels  
Of white . . . It was

Because they burned  
Those trees that ashes  
Fell in summer

Once for over  
A week. As they  
Are again today.

It's as if they've  
Never stopped—ashes  
Through the snowy

Season and on  
Into spring. But this  
Isn't childhood.



Jen Karetnick

# Why I Never Took You to the Jersey Shore

It's not because Sandy Hook and Belmar,  
the closest points, are still so many

Parkway exits from anywhere inland,  
or that the Marlboro Lights I planted

in the sands with a pointed forefinger  
like desiccated seaweed are plankton

in the grill that was the whale  
of the Fort Lauderdale Strip

you roamed with Cuban cigars  
during the championship series of spring

breaks you called your South Florida youth.  
It's not the sand itself—one coast

as pebbly as a grain-roughened voice,  
the other as smooth as Caribbean rum.

Or that your wet T-shirt contests  
were covered by early Eighties MTV

while mine were sponsored by Vinnie's Pizza,  
75 cents per slice, heavy on the garlic.

It doesn't mean I'm ashamed  
by the memories of looping onto

280 East at 8 a.m. with baby oil  
already applied, Don's stained scarlet

apron, stuffed with the last night's pens  
and quarters, thrown into the equally oily

hatchback so I could change at Mickey D's  
and make it back for my shift at 4,

where I glowed with a fry-cook's burn  
while serving nickel-plated pots of half-sour

pickles I scooped up in the walk-ins  
after joining the deli guys to smoke pot

next to the deckles of pastrami and corned beef,  
cured with all the cedar and basil of our exhales.

It's not because I now prefer the milder scroll  
of tropical waters, though I do, or because my hair

lies perm-free against my head, although  
it does, and I no longer wear hues

on my eyelids as if to brighten the ocean.  
I have never taken you to the Jersey Shore

because despite these changes  
I bring the Jersey shore to you,

if only in the way that I still can't pass  
a pinball machine without wanting

to pump in a few quarters and thrust a hip  
into it, just firm enough to keep those fickle

balls from draining, but not so jarring  
that the whole fucking world has to tilt.

Jan Karetnick

# Fibonacci's Angel's at Surfing Goat Dairy

Your  
angels  
are covered  
in ash, shaped into  
convex volcanoes, crumble at  
the glance of a blade  
as dull as  
cracker  
crumbs

Your  
angels  
are broken  
hearts, caraway seeds  
nicking the tang of cool and cream,  
rudeness to the tooth  
under the black  
waxy  
shield

My  
angels  
are ping pong  
balls, marinated  
in macadamia nut oil  
and smoked over shells,

then preserved  
in sealed  
glass

heads  
without  
eyes or hair,  
Styrofoam angels  
before you add the gauzy wings  
and Popsicle sticks,  
born of goats  
balanced  
on

waves,  
angels  
draped in grape  
leaves, spiced with the zest  
of Provence, touched by Buddha's Hand,  
Thai dragon chilies,  
Malabar  
pepper,  
bone.

Allison Parker

## Shiftwork

My darling, I would like to lead you where  
I work the marble counters with my hands.  
It is my break time, I think.  
Now take my hand. Take off my glasses.  
Now I cannot see. So explain to me how  
Exploring fingers generally disturb the salt.  
Explain my customer. When I filled  
The woman's glass with horizontal splash:  
The aromas of coffee, heavy whipping cream.  
I crook my finger to the grip, handling pleasure,  
But there are motions clearer to me than  
complexion: inhaling air, listening to you drink.  
Something called provocative, I think.

Allison Parker

# Grieving Lover of the Weird Load

“I’m holding out for the thunder machine.”

That’s what Ken Kesey said as his image cast across the movie screen at the comic McDonald theatre, downtown Eugene. Day-Glo yellow, pink and green spotlights seemed to dance a holy jig up the walls, and who would have guessed it to be a funeral.

Kesey had to die. And even in my heart, I won’t question why, or when, or at what time because people are still becoming what they are, at least with these two certainties: now, and all those choices we still have to make. Choices, still resting in the grooves of our minds like strings on a banjo that break faster when played harder and all the way out.

Kesey: he knew for certain he would pass on playing some conformist harp when he got his chance in heaven: and I hear he’s holding out for a bigger halo: So when he gets a grip of that marvelous thunder machine, he’ll make sure it booms out loud on a bright sunny day, whacking those goofy blind figurine elephants right off my great grandma’s mahogany shelf.

He’ll cackle and say, “Gottcha...you old bag”

But Kesey would still be loving her with some sort of ghostly self-actualization, and he’d still be loving you, too, even if you never met him.

He’d proceed to love just about everyone else he’s never gotten to know: A little happier on the other side, of course, and a little more out there on the cosmic plane than before: just the way he left everyone and everything: Born.

Dave K.

## How to Adopt a Cat

There must be two, maybe three hundred people on the train. I'm one of them, in a sack suit that fit the last time I'd worn it. That was years ago. I look like a child in his father's clothes now.

They'd kept the suit the entire time I'd been there, all four years, and had returned it to me after discharge. I have no kin to collect me, so they put me on a train at their own expense and sent me to the closest OutPatient Resocialization Office available.

It's gray, the suit. I'd remembered it being brown, the color of a watch fob.

The other passengers in my car are businessmen, it looks like, and idle vacationers coming home after a week in the countryside. Many of them sleep, some read the paper. I watch their reflections in the window, my chin in my hand, as the rain-slick landscape carousels by. Rain had turned the dying trees black and bent the wild grass under them, and we pass through patches of mild rain that tap the windows, but don't linger.

I missed the smell of rain, the endless sky, the justified sense of smallness. I'd felt small where I'd been, but that had been artificial at best.

When the conductor passes by and tells me my stop is next, I can only nod. My speech had slurred during the years, and I'm hesitant to converse above my station. When he leaves, I pat myself down to make sure I still have my papers, that none of them had fallen out of my pocket, that I am real and solid and free of that wretched place.

The train stops, jerking to a halt that upsets the balance of anyone who'd stood prematurely. I follow the other passengers out, but since I have no luggage, I am guided to the back of the line. By the time I descend onto the platform, it's raining again. I stand in it for a second, my eyes closed, until one of the guards shoves me and tells me to be on my way.



Other passengers are trying to board. More professional men, I guess from a glance, probably clerks from uptown who lived outside the city. Their suits are fitted and their whiskers are cut close. It makes me think of hot lather on my skin, the smell of soap instead of hose water and delousing powder, and as I walk into the station I try very hard not to smell anyone. Or at least, not to make myself obvious about it.

Just inside the station there is a kiosk of maps and newspapers, and the short dark man inside keeps yelling “ten cents ten cents a newspaper five for a city map ten cents ten cents” and I start to panic because ten cents is all it costs to push through the turnstiles and look down into the atrium at us all, thrashing in our jackets, foam and spit flecking out from the holes in our muzzles. Another five cents gets you a stick to poke us with or a bag of rocks to throw at the ones in cages. “Damn sad business these lunatics,” the men say, with their children tugging on their sleeves yelling “look look there’s one beating his head on the wall,” cheering the orderlies and their crisp white uniforms.

I smack the newspapers out of the man’s hand and run outside, not stopping until the station’s grand Roman entrance is well enough behind me. As I lean against a gaslight post to catch my breath, a few passers-by stare and walk faster, making a wide berth around me. A woman in a dirty cotton dress and straw bonnet is selling fruit on the sidewalk. I don’t leave until she turns her head to spit.

I’m on edge for a while after the episode in the train station. As I walk, I take my papers from my pocket with shaking hands and look at them, making sure the address is right. I feel the rain plaster my hair down and ignore the other pedestrians shouldering past me. Most of them have umbrellas that do or don’t match their suits and dresses, and anyone less prepared holds a newspaper over his head, or gathers with others under awnings and coach gates.

“You’ll catch cold!” I hear someone yell, maybe at me, but I’m enjoying the weather.

I turn onto a cross-street and find myself in front of a church with chipped marble steps, set back off the corner behind a wrought-iron fence. It reminds me of a church near where I grew up. The priests there would pay us a few coins each for help weeding the cemetery and cleaning out the organ pipes. They’d all gotten too fat for their chores, and too pale; they wore straw hats outdoors regardless of weather. I think as I walk by that most of them are dead by now,

The neighborhood is home to a lot of degraded people, I notice. Many of them had probably been injured in factories and evicted from company housing, left to rot away in tenements while stronger backs and straighter shoulders took their places. My old neighborhood had its fair share of them, too. I'd see some of the women lying drunk on the sidewalk under the trees in the park, sometimes cradling children in their laps.

The Blind-Deaf School is where I was headed, and the crude map they'd included with my papers placed it just a few blocks down from the church. The clerks there will help me find housing and set me up disability pension, I was told. It had all been arranged. I imagine having to wait in a dim gray box of an office, shackled to a chair while some nervous bureaucrat stamps forms I'm not allowed to read and asks questions I have to answer. He might see one hundred other outpatients like me that day, one hundred sets of fingernails bitten down to the quick, one hundred weird skin rashes and scars and amoebic bruises, one hundred pairs of eyes that had forgotten the sun.

## §

My apartment is one of many on the second floor of an old brick building that sat on the corner of a residential street and a commercial one. The only window is in the bedroom. It faces the wall of the neighboring building and overlooks a bare pavement lot, parts of which have been dug up to plant flowers. The holes are ragged and uneven, leaving cracks that are slowly filling with moss.

I sit in front of the window for hours after moving in, just staring outside for as long as I want. The first time I open it, after seeing trash ride a breeze across the lot, I back away and seize up, waiting to be grabbed and buckled into a jacket and sedated. I don't know how long it will take for that feeling to go away.

The apartment's furnishings are meager, but they are mine, and that's an odd feeling too. I walk around touching everything, running my hands along the edge of the table, over the back of the chair, along the counter and over the gas-range stove in the tiny kitchen. I sleep on top of my blanket at night, afraid of getting too comfortable.

Time rolls and rushes over you when you're inside. I'd seen one steam-engine car before I was committed, but now they're as plentiful as horses, motoring along under a sky black with progress. I

make sure to step behind something or someone whenever I see one of those cars pass, just in case it stops and people in white uniforms step out, asking for me.

My building has other people in it who share my situation, and I randomly hear them screaming, punching and kicking the walls, snoring and wheezing after coming back from the chemist with laudanum or heroin to coat their raw nerves.

Their fear is mine: that we won't be able to reenter the world that built walls around us, that we're being monitored, that one day we will answer a knock at the door and get shipped right back to the asylum. Our forms would be stamped Insane: Incurable and then it's jackets and cages and watery porridge and random injections in the dark why are their rooms so dark why is his apron so white never any blood the fluid barking out from the syringe the vomit the spit when it touches my spine where are his eyes does he even have eyes or did they wash away, and then I come back to reality and I'm in my necessary, crying. Sometimes I don't realize it until I'm halfway done, and by then I'm sweating so much it's hard to tell the two apart.

When it rains, sometimes I leave my apartment and just stand in it, letting it pelt my face and run down the bridge of my nose into my mouth. I tilt my head back and imagine the water seeping into my brain and just drowning everything there. Sometimes I want it to rain forever.

## §

A cat has been sleeping in front of my door for the past couple of days now. He's skinny and unkempt, and charcoal black except for little white patches on his chest and one of his feet.

The last time I saw him, I'd come home from the chemist. A rolling prescription for laudanum had been left at his office, so I'd walked down to pick some up once I felt comfortable leaving my apartment. It was bright outside and my eyes stung, so I shaded them with my hand and walked facing the ground, which must have been quite a sight.

The chemist's office is on the ground floor of a dreary brownstone not far from where I live. A steam-engine car was idling outside, but I didn't pay much attention to it because of the smell that rushed out like a pickpocket the second I opened the door. It was a musk of old laundry, mold, and spoiling

fruit, which reminded me of how one of my early bunkmates made liquor by hiding the limes and oranges we were given under the radiator until they fermented.

There was a man in front of me wearing a blue jacket with brass cufflinks and matching trousers. At first I thought he was a military man, but then I saw the truncheon at his hip and my stomach cinched up. I turned back to look at the car. The police seal on its door was facing the chemist's window.

I must have been breathing hard, because the cop turned around and looked at me. His nose wrinkled. He was clean-shaven and smelled of mint and chewing tobacco, an earthy combination that would have been pleasant under different circumstances.

One of the men in my exercise group used to say, between seizures that made him rip out his own hair and eat it, that a cop's badge was pinned straight into his heart to make sure all the goodness drained out.

“Here it is!” said the chemist, craning his long neck up from under the counter, and the cop turned back around. I saw him take a paper bag and then avoided eye contact, focusing on the shelves lining both sides of the shop, scanning the boxes and tins and murky old bottles until I knew he was gone.

When the chemist peered over his sweat-fogged spectacles at me, I started to speak, but realized (too late to spare myself some embarrassment) that I didn't know exactly what to say. I'd never ordered my own medicine before. He asked my name, then thumbed through a fat ledger until he found it. He nodded, then walked out from behind the counter and took one of the bottles I'd been staring at earlier, a short fat one. He put it in a bag and took my money without another word.

The police vehicle was still parked out front when I left, and I felt a sudden urge to bang on the door and tell them I was free, that I didn't have to go back.

When I got back to my apartment, I was trembling so hard that I almost couldn't get the key in the lock, and then there's this cat at the door, whisking his tail at my shins. I shooed him away with a kick and slammed the door behind me.

I bet he came back within the hour.

§

A woman who lives down the hall from me reminds me of someone from the asylum. The first time I saw her was in her apartment; her door was open and she was sitting in her chair with her skirt drawn up over her knees, displaying her petticoat. The room was a shambles; clothes and papers strewn all over, a tangible greasiness coating everything she owned. She didn't seem to mind. She had the relaxed eyelids of a dope eater and was repeating the same word over and over again. Like she couldn't help herself.

I'd seen a man like that once. They were delousing the beds, so the patients were all milling around in the exercise yard, all hard dirt and tramped-down grass, under the supervision of orderlies who looked and acted more like prison guards. One of them close to where I was standing nudged his friend and said "look, Duncan's got the faucets again," referring to an overweight man who stood by himself wringing his hands saying faucet faucet faucet faucet faucet faucet.

§

I'm crying again.

One of those police whistles sounded in the night and I was bolt-upright in bed remembering whistles and every light in the place turns on at once guards stripping us we yell out our numbers over and over no more whistles no more lights guards gone quiet now but whose chair will be empty in the mess tomorrow whose sheets will they take to the furnace whose blood on the razor wire.

§

I decide to go out to a coffeehouse. The laudanum has been working, and I feel ready.

I trip over the cat as I leave my apartment and startle him, but he doesn't run far. I turn back to look just before I take the stairs down, and he's back in front of my door.

The walk to the coffeehouse is bright and pleasant. There are more people outdoors than usual, chatting from porches as they hang their laundry while their children run off the sidewalk and into the street. Even the rough men sitting on the sidewalk look comfortable. There's a man walking around with a wooden bucket selling ears of corn. I don't stop for him, but other people call him over to buy from him.

Closer to my destination, the cobblestones are slimy and water-stained, and many of the trash barrels are tipped over or dilapidated from neglect. Still, with the sun on them they're almost cheerful.

The coffeehouse is busy, and I stand around for a while before a chair opens up. I sit next to an older gentleman hunched over a book, his arms folded over his stomach. His whiskers are longer on one side than the other, and I don't think he's noticed.

When his coffee arrives, he smells it, then tilts his long face up and shuts his eyes for a moment. The server leaves without acknowledging me.

I smell the coffee and look around. Everyone else here has a cup; the sound of spoons against porcelain is unmistakable, even amid the hum of conversation. My fingers tremble. I've never ordered coffee before. How do I do it? How did they do it? They just seem to know – there's a social contract here that I arrived too late to sign.

I stiffen in my chair, trying to control my breathing, looking around as sweat blooms in my palms. There's a fat man dressed in pale blue, pulling his beard out of the way as he sips from his cup. He's telling two women about "the islands," and how their public transport is terrible, untouched by steam power, but individual natives will take you anywhere you wish to go.

"They have these rafts," he's saying to them, "of bamboo or something, lashed together with string, and they push them through the water with long poles." He laughs. So do the women, taking care to cover their mouths and blush.

I want to tell him to shut up. I can feel sweat rolling down my back now and I shift in my chair, furious at this man's inane conversation. I look at his coffee cup in his soft fat hand. I hate it and him and everyone else here for building those thick stone walls around me while they decided how things work.

My knee catches the table as I stand up and it topples over, sending everything on it clattering to the floor. Someone from the shop – the owner, maybe – follows me down the street, yelling, but that’s all he does and he gives up after a block.

I’m so lightheaded by the time I get home that it takes me a full minute to unlock the door. When I finally open it, I don’t walk in. The cat is rubbing up against my leg, his sharp ribcage vibrating with a steady purr. I close the door and rest my forehead against it.

§

I don’t know what cats eat. I’m tempted to ask the chemist when I pick up my week’s laudanum, but he’s so unpleasant that I decide against it.

I stop into a dry-goods shop on the way home and ask the shopkeeper what cats eat. He first answers my question with a look, for which I want to punch him as hard as I can, and then picks out a tin of fish and a tin of commodity meat for me, saying that cats like one or the other. He also gets a bottle of milk from the icebox behind the counter.

The cat turns his nose up at the meat, but likes the fish and the milk. I feed him out in the hallway, but can’t close the door fast enough to keep him from running into my apartment. When I try to grab him, he runs into the kitchen area and wedges himself between the stove and the wall. My arm is too thick to pull him out.

§

When I was inside, some of us had to wear special harnesses to curb immoral thoughts and “self-abuse,” and the thighs of their uniforms were always tracked with blood. There were ways to avoid that. Laudanum was one, or an experimental treatment where they injected you with something that took away your libido and sent flashes of numbness through your arms and legs. Or they didn’t give you anything, but sometimes a few guards would show up at your bedside in the night and take you off somewhere, then drag you back a few hours later.

Laudanum usually worked for me, but I'm out. My whole body is throbbing. The knothole in a sheet of plywood would look inviting right about now.

I leave my apartment without thinking, without scratching the cat behind his ears, and run down the stairs and into the street. I know there are some working girls out here. I've seen them before. They make themselves obvious in neighborhoods like mine, especially at night.

I find her sitting on a bench in a small park a few blocks north of my building. I don't know how to ask for what I want, so I follow the stones arranged in paths around the park's small garden, trying to get her attention. I find an old gnarly tree close to her and stare up into its canopy.

I hear her clear her throat, and the noise yanks my neck on a chain. She's smiling at me.

"You look like you need to calm down," she said.

Before answering, I study her. Her face is heavier than it should be, and pudgy at the nose, and she is wrapped in a shawl meant for someone larger.

"Yes," I said, stumbling over the word. "I need..." I trail off. The words turn to dust in my throat.

She crosses her legs, exposing a pale ankle in the process. "You need to relax," she says. "I can help with that."

I smile back, trying to ignore the bruises on her arms.

"For a price, of course," she says.

I dig into my pocket and find a handful of coins, which I hold out for her. "This is all I have," I say

She takes the coins from me and holds them under a gaslight, squinting at them.

"A \$3 piece? Haven't seen one of those in ages." She looked at me. "D'you mind hosting?" I say no, and try to keep pace with her as we head back to my building, past rows of houses whose broken



windows are patched with rags and paper. Streams of dirty water fall from linens hanging over the street. It must have rained earlier.

“My aunt used to live there,” she says, pointing to a rowhouse so indistinguishable from the others that I was surprised she could pick it out. “And my uncle used to live down the street somewhere. He was an odd one.”

I nod and try to act interested as I watch her hips lilt from side to side with each step. She seems to know the way as well as I do.

She waits until we're in my apartment to kiss me, then pulls away and says “help me get out of this.” She unwinds her shawl to reveal a bottle of cheap champagne, which she sets on my bed before letting the shawl drop. As it makes a puddle on my coarse wooden floor, I help her out of her red jacket, her striped petticoat, her crinoline. They are wrinkled and matted with dirt, but she wears them well on her heavy hips and shoulders.

“Wait here,” she says, rubbing the tip of my forefinger with her thumb. I sit on the bed and remove my brogans, then my pants, listening to her putter around in my kitchen. She returns with champagne in two cups, one of which used to be a jar. She toasts me and we drink and and and and and

I wake up with a stinging ache in my head. The woman is going through my jacket pockets. She freezes when my eyes open. She looks the way things do on hot days, greasy and indistinct.

“Thought you were dead,” she says. She looks more confused than caught. I sit up and she takes off running, my coat flagging behind her.

My apartment has been ransacked. Every drawer and cabinet, not that there are many, is wide open, and my empty laudanum bottles have been strewn everywhere. The necessary has also been thoroughly searched, and soiled.

Whatever she slipped into my drink eventually wears off, but not before making me throw up and collapse. I stay where I fall, staring up at the ceiling. I feel like I'm full of sand, heavy and numb, and that anything or anyone I touch would puncture me and it will all come pouring out. My heart throbs

in my wrists and heels, in every part of me that touches the floor.

I stay there for an hour, waiting for sleep to come. When it doesn't, I think about the city harbor, the long gloomy docks where stevedores unload cargo and repair holes in hulls. I think about the stone slope separating the shoreline from the water, about how smooth and heavy the stones are. I wonder how many will fit in my empty pockets.

The cat fits the curve of his back against the instep of my right foot, and I feel him purring. He's hungry. He rubs his head against my toes and I feel lighter, as though stones are falling out of my pockets.

Matt Wilkinson

# Postcards from the River

Ed. Note: Word breaks are intentional, with interrupting blocks of dialogue.

The river water was icy compared to the weather above it – balmy, humid, windless, full of bugs that seemed no more than particles w/ a purpose, swirling along indeterminable patterns of yellow & white, catching, here & there, a flicker of sun reflected by bits of exoskeleton. But the boy was below these things, being trampled along the frigid bottom of the glass dance.

Such ragged wounds from such jagged rocks; such bone fractures, and the tearing of ligaments, doled out by the river as impassively as you'd shake a row of hands. The boy was pitched through it all like a fleshy pinball until it became almost nothing to his nerves – simple registered impacts, humming & cottony, eaten away by a swarming army of bubbles & blackness.

Somewhere above was the sun. Somewhere above were the trees. The logging action in this part of California had stopped many years ago. But the river rolled on. The river, whose shade & sound the loggers had always enjoyed, sweat forging trails through the film of salt & wetted dust coating their skins; the grease, and the machine oil; sap sticking their fingers together. Those loggers, decades gone, had washed it all away in the river, just as the boy's group had done only moments before. They came up shivering, hearts aflutter under the shadows of willow & maple, their dicks nubs and their scrotums shrunken to tiny porous nodules between their legs.

But our boy would not come up. Not ever. Because, to him, the rocks became as smooth and as comforting as your mother's touch, the rushing silence as easy as a dog resting its sleepy head against your foot. He thought for a moment about his friends– about his brothers– basking upstream, swim-trunks stuck against their legs, snacks passed around, silt & tiny smooth pebbles being fingered out from between their toes.

“Nilla Wafers always remind me of being a kid.”

“Yeah. Throw in some Squirt and I’d be there with you.”

“You’re here with us now.”

“No I’m not. I’m somewhere else.”

“Where are you?”

“New York.”

“Funny how I see you here.”

“This must be New York then.”

“Where’d your brother go?”

“Bodying the rapids. He’ll come back.”

No he won’t.

In the oxygen draining, in the memory of breath fading, there was a hallway w/ black cobblestone flooring – some parts plastic, some linoleum & chrome. There were no doors. Only windows, w/ no frames, sills, crosspieces, or glass – high up & impenetrable – w/ light shining through as that of the indistinguishable moon. When people look at the moon, they see a man, or a block of cheese, or an old woman weeping, or a dog running, or the great crab of Cancer stretching its claws to spread the new disease, or a horse on fire galloping frantically toward the shores of an oblong lake.

“What do you see?”

“Just the moon.”

“You’re an unimaginative type.”

“Try seeing it from New York.”

“Like from that bridge?”

“Which one?”

“You know the one.”

“I see it from the river.”

“Unimaginative.”

When people see moonlight, we see it as silver. Yellow. White. The movies prefer to think of it as blue. It was none of these in the hallway. It was the color of the moon. Nothing more or less or different. Like the fuzzy numbness that swept along his nerves. Until his skin tore away, and his eyes turned to

glass, and the current took him apart – piece by piece.

§

Traffic was blowing by on the long bridge, making a noise like rapids. Tourists bobbed about in a choreographed dance of picture-taking & bicycle-dodging, flecked by those who leaned against the railing, engaged in quiet reflection: diaspora of the lookyloos returning always toward their hot red center of wherever – in this case, this landmark bridge marrying two hunks of coast separated by the greater Bay at the point on the mainland furthest west before it is considered East (everything west of the continent being saddled w/ that designation). It was a modern sidewalk ballet across a two-mile stage, two hundred & some feet over wind-whipped waves engaged in their tireless assault, spreading the Bay's legs, battering the bridge's pylons and tearing away at its cement structures, at the bases of the towers that will someday give in to the waves' lotharian advances, entry & escape merging to one furious load under the water in its conquest of the land and, w/ it, the things we've built.

And, in the midst of this, there was a sad man. He was of the quiet reflection group (as sad men often are), its members being spaced far enough away from one another so as to acknowledge a common humanity w/o being a nuisance, or enduring one. The wind was against his back, stinging sweet w/ arrows of seafoam salt & fog.

Said the white sign:

WARNING  
SECTION 2193 PENAL CODE  
STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
ANY PERSON WHO WILLFULLY  
DROPS OR THROWS ANY OBJECT  
OR MISSILE FROM ANY TOLL BRIDGE  
IS GUILTY OF A MISDEMEANOR.  
THIS SIDEWALK IS UNDER  
TELEVISION SURVEILLANCE.

He spat – a pullback of chunk-heavy snot & crust & sticky funk, welled into the soft parts of his throat and given a motorized whirl where his tongue dipped under the wriggling uvula into the nether-reaches of digestion; then across his lips in a spray of static & mist, rippling white-green as it fell over the side, plum-straight until the structure's underparts gave way to the steady gusts of ocean winds that blew the globule almost sideways, disappearing into the blanket of whitecaps on the rusted sea below. Old gray love fell w/ it :: eyes & ears & sweet/sick breath, words spoken through sheets & pillows; turquoise jewelry, love letters written on the backs of dinner receipts; cups half-full w/ water & flowers, and flowers left to dry on the top shelf, their petals poisoning the roaches & cats. Somewhere far below – somewhere he did not see – it hit. It hit.

Said the yellow sign:

INJURY OR DEFACEMENT  
OF THIS BRIDGE  
IS A MISDEMEANOR  
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Delinquent Time was wearing away the paint in heaps, digging into the recognizable red, grinding it beneath its muddy boots– the ugly ferric hatred that the postcard people want to avoid, that the tourists only snap as a novelty to show the yokels & folkels back home and say, “Isn’t that funny how time just wears it down?” Not, just it, Love, but all of us. Time, w/ but her hushed, unerring whisper was doing more disaster to an “ageless” landmark than any huckster w/ a scheme, a knife, & a baggy full of paint scraps ever could. Time was leaving her mark, her seal, her stamp, her sticker, her tag on more parts of that bridge than any sideways-hatted, baggy-clothed ding-dong w/ a pocket full of spray-cans & markers ever would: any graffiti– any trade name w/ a twisty tail & star at the end shining out from a fat-tip machine-glow sharpie– was to be covered & redone again. But Delinquent Time defaces last. “She’ll tear the fucker down,” the sad man thought. “Right the fuck down.”

And he tried to keep thinking. But as the tourists danced by, he felt their presence, invisible & jagged, breaking apart his thoughts like they were living insides; causing interruptions that, by many convolutions & coincidences, always forced him to look back upon those pretty things he’d had, and then to look forward in despair.

Said the blue sign:

CRISIS COUNSELLING  
THE CONSEQUENCES OF  
JUMPING FROM THIS BRIDGE  
ARE CATASTROPHIC AND TRAGIC  
THERE IS HOPE

And the sad man thought on it a moment. Then, he said in response, “No there isn’t, ol’ Blue. Never was. That’s what keeps us all even. These tourists spinning centrifugally across the cracking cement, and the sunburnt cyclists ringing bells to pass the swarthy hordes; thick-accent Nigerians, and the Oklahoman caterwaulers trying to out-twang the wind – their dustbowl dither vs. its sea-shanty slurs; and the locals, all the time thinking themselves better than the rest. They’re just like the rest: catastrophic and tragic; with no hope at all.” Oh how the inborn wind blew him sideways when he fell. And the cameras recorded how the lookyloos got their fill. At a comfortable distance from common humanity, not bothering anyone.

§

The whole thing could have come off of a postcard. The broken piers & jetties, seagulls perched atop some, splintered wood stabbing out from the wave’s tops like syringes seen from the underside of the skin, stabbing into the vein and, via the vessels, delivering black bubbles of air to the heart, sucking blood up in its silvershine killing-stroke. But it’s just the water lapping woo

“When did it happen?”

“We were just kids – high school.”

“No. Your other brother.”

“Oh. Last week. Sometime. His wife died a while back. I told you.

She nods.

“He always said he was doing better. Always, always. ‘Doing better.’”

d-rot; the same water that laps the shores on both sides of the river; and the same that laps at the pillars of yon grey stone bridge upstream – the cables hanging so cool & easy that they whistle Mozart

and snap their fingers to the jazz of cars passing over. And those stones, erected in god-knows-when, A.D., are the same stones that any dipshit who ever saw an old flick or newsreel, any dope who ever saw Bugs give a “what’s up, doc?” knows – w/o really having to think– what its name is, what its game is, what it would say if you walked up to the stone & metal & girders and asked it the color of the moon. A man who jumped off it once got a comme

“They say when you hit, you don’t die right away. Your bones break from the impact, and the current takes you, limp and alive and drowning, into the depths, and out to sea.”

“You can’t look back on it like that.”

“Yes I can.”

morative plaque. But the bridge didn’t get its fair say in the matter. Because you know what it’d say. You know it surely: nothing. And the sky– blue and opaquely glowing as a single diamond facet stretched against the space beyond– its edges would cut into our glass eyes, burrowing into our brains, and leaving the eggs of scintillant bugs to fill the decaying noodle canals & causeways of our dry neural riverbeds that had served to form our perceptions, our graces, our se

“I’m kinda glad Mom died, if only to miss today.”

Still trying – “They also say that when you accept drowning and the oxygen gets depleted in your brain, a sense of euphoria sets in. Why not think of it that way?”

“I drowned a bird once. This pigeon a hawk had got. It was stuck between the grates on this fire escape. I didn’t want to hurt it by hitting it – like with a shovel or something – so I drowned it. Didn’t seem too euphoric.”

nses of death & borders, & of loneliness. W/o them, the world is a long hallway w/ no light. A darkness. A numbness. A thoughtless obviation of self. A drum sinking, polluting every living fragment of the river w/ filth, that stings the eyes to sizzle-crack acid dissolve, cauterizing them where the diamond sky had cut them, plugging any holes left w/ pink puff flowers for the insects to pollinate; flowers not native to this part of America, that grow so wonderfully on the riverbank stream lapped by the water. Icy. Brown. Full of bodies. Like the coffin being lowered w/ those pink puffs on them. The water is the same, containing every life lost in its arms. Rivers flow une

“Your mom died of cancer, right?”



“Yeah.” She makes a face like sadness. It only comes off as empty pity. But it’s not her fault. It’s the same w/ everyone. And he knows what she means. “Kind of a boring death, really. And I’m alone.”

nding to the sea. They evaporate, they fall as snow & rain, and they become streams (from tiny to intense), and they head back out to sea again. The moon may be different– the moon may influence it – but all waters are the same. No matter where it happened, they drowned here– in N

“No you’re not. I’m here. I’m here with you.”

He makes a face like understanding, but it comes off like the quiver-lip beginning of a river, full of stunning edges, & jagged things hidden beneath your feet.

She knows what he means. And she holds him.

New York. The whole thing could have come off of a postcard, bobbing precariously atop the crests & ripples of the ceaseless flood; anywhere in the country; bobbing; east & west; anywhere, everywhere; bobbing; beneath silent bridges; and doomed always to sink, under a moon whose color no one can agree upon.

Caryn Coyle

# The Stairs

Maura is watching a twenty year old movie, *Pretty Woman*, when she hears something odd. A thump. She is sitting on her brother's green leather sofa, which feels like butter. The movie is playing on his large screen above the fireplace. The noise sounds like something has fallen, bumped on the floor upstairs. She sits up on the couch, pulling her bare feet off an ottoman in brown leather. Maura looks at her brother. He sits in a wing backed chair with his lap top. He has papers through which he's ruffling on the brown leather ottoman before him. Her brother doesn't look up. He doesn't appear to have heard it.

Maura imagines that she has not heard it, either. The thump could be something on the TV where Julia Roberts stands in a fancy dress shop. Her hair floats around her face in unruly ringlets, like a huge steel wool pad without the crusting of pink soap.

"Excuse me," Maura whispers to her brother. His face is hidden behind the lap top's screen. He tilts his head; his gray eyes stare at her over the top of his computer.

"I'm gonna' use the bathroom."

"K."

"Upstairs," Maura tells him, so he understands that she will not use the powder room that is close by. It is next to her brother and sister-in-law's bedroom. Maura has heard the loud rush of water that toilet makes. She does not want to disturb her sister-in-law, who has turned in.

She presses the small rectangle of white at the bottom of the steps. The light turns on. As she climbs, she thinks of the bathroom for which she is headed. How much nicer it is than the one Maura has at home. Some of the tiles on Maura's bathroom wall are cracked. Black mold has formed on the caulk-

ing material which she hasn't replaced in years. The bottom of her seventy year old tub has stains on it from the "flower power" rubber skid things the previous owners must have used. The outlines of the flower petals are still visible on the floor of the tub.

Maura's brother's tub is pristine. Brand new. The white tile walls have a strip of navy blue with bright flowers, about three inches wide that encircles the tub at chest level. Mediterranean looking. Nice. Maura looks forward to showers at her brother's. His tub has a large, round shower head that pours down on her, like rain. The pipes in Maura's old house are clogged. Her shower only releases a thin stream of water; enough to rinse herself off.

## §

The second floor of Maura's brother's house is dark. She climbs the stairs slowly, thinking of *Pretty Woman* as a remake of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Julia Roberts is a call girl, instead of a girl who sells flowers. At the end of the show, both are transformed and neither of them is alone.

As she ascends the stairs, Maura can see the white couch from her father's former living room on the next floor. She can make it out in the dark but something is on it that was not there before. It moves as Maura gets closer.

Her stomach drops. Maura's dad is wearing dark red Stewart plaid pajamas and wobbling to his feet from the seat he has taken on the couch. Maura thinks of how small he is. Thin. Frail. Pushing on the couch's cushions with both hands bunched in fists, he rises, slowly.

"What are you doing here?" Maura whispers.

"I couldn't sleep." Her father is eighty-five years old. He went to bed hours ago, after a successful meal. Maura had made lasagna from her mother's recipe and served him a generous portion. She was pleased that he had eaten all that he had been given.

Her brother, who has discussed their dad on long walks with Maura, told her that he will not eat anymore. The sound of her brother's voice was light, as though he was joking. He added that he watches their dad push food around his plate. Hiding what he doesn't eat under his napkin as though

her brother doesn't know what he is doing.

"His appetite is the first thing to go," her brother said, stepping off the path next to the asphalt road that circles his gated community. "Let's cut through the golf course."

Maura had been aware that her breathing stopped when he said her dad's appetite was the first to go. Her father is dying. Maura searched for large, rectangular noodles, ground beef, tomato sauce, cheese in her brother's kitchen when they returned from their walk.

She was awash in relief when her father ate all she had served him.

Maura is grateful that her brother has made a home for their dad. There are too many stairs in Maura's house and she would have to leave him alone each day to go to the office. Her brother put an elevator in his house for their dad and her sister-in-law cares for him.

§

Her father looks at Maura, standing in front of him on the light colored carpet of the second floor. "C'mon," he says. He does not have his teeth in his mouth. He looks like Popeye.

Maura realizes that he is the same height she is. He used to be at least three inches taller; six feet. She remembers how he would lace up ice skates and glide with her. Gracefully, they would skate together, downtown, by the Inner Harbor. The rink opened each year the Friday after Thanksgiving.

Her dad turns from her, heading toward his room. His sparse hair is white and ruffled on his scalp. Maura can see a small black rectangle with "Pendleton" stitched on it, sticking up out of her father's pajama collar. He shuffles the few feet to his room and switches on his light.

Blue/gray walls are trimmed in a bright white. Maura's dad has three large windows with blinds that curl into a half circle with a little clip at the bottom. The room feels bare, though there is a shelf filled with books on the war in the Pacific. A white armchair that matches the couch in the hall. His dark wooden dresser and a queen sized bed. There is too much space surrounding the bed, chair, bureau and bookshelf. Nothing is hanging on the walls. The room feels temporary.

He has maybe six months, her brother told her on the phone. It's not an exact science.

I'll come down next weekend, Maura had replied, stunned. Her voice cracked.

§

Maura is ashamed that she cannot take care of her dad. She envies her brother and his wife, that they can do it, that they have each other. They share an ease that has eluded her.

Maura has never felt comfortable with anyone. Her dating experiences have been disappointing. She has shared too many awkward silences at fancy restaurants. Men have surprised her with unwanted gifts, showing up to hand deliver them to her at her office. They have called her from phone numbers that are blocked, hiding her from their wives. Maura thought her last date had possibilities. He had never married, had no children. Like Maura.

Sipping a cup of green tea at the bookstore café near her home, Maura talked about art because he was an artist. He fidgeted, squirming in his arm chair. "Do you want to sit here with me?" he asked her, wiggling to indicate space next to him on his chair.

"I'm fine," she smiled. His energy was attractive.

Maura accepted another date with him. The artist met her at a museum. They walked into the air conditioned lobby and his voice boomed behind her, "Sixteen dollars for admission? I'm not paying that."

He suggested a stroll in the park next to the museum. Maura followed him up the park's concrete stairs, ignoring his heavy breathing as he matched her quick hops, step by step. She remembered the last time she had been to the park. That man had introduced Maura to his children. Maura was not comfortable meeting them. His two girls, teen-agers, did not appear to be impressed with her, either.

With the artist, Maura took a seat on a park bench overlooking the harbor. She chose a spot several inches from him, out of his reach. She crossed her legs. It was humid. Maura's legs stuck together. Boats floated along the water before her and volley balls sailed in the air above a big sand lot near the

water. The volley ball court used to be a skating rink. The same rink on which Maura had skated with her dad.

She felt beautiful in her father's presence, like she was the most spectacular person in the world.

On the park bench, Maura had watched the artist's yellowed teeth and tried to make conversation. He told her about getting lost in a canoe, once, with a woman. How they screwed in the boat, hidden by tall grass. He leaned close to her and whispered, "I have good news for you. I've been tested. I don't have AIDS."

Maura stood up.

"Uh oh," he said, reaching for Maura's backside.

She skipped back, out of his reach, "What?"

"We've been sitting on wet paint."

Maura's stomach felt like it had fallen out of her body. She twisted to look at her back. Her cotton sundress, a favorite that was covered in cornflowers, looked like it had been slashed in dark green. She walked as briskly and as quickly as she could, away from him. Green paint stained the driver's seat of her car.

§

Maura's father pulls the top drawer of his dresser with veiny, age spotted hands. "Here," he says, "Look at this."

He claws at a piece of folded paper. It has a typewritten paragraph on it. Unsigned. Maura reads it. It is curt, explains that crumbs left in the sheets will attract rodents. That the chocolate he likes, stains the rug and the bed clothes. That it is unhealthy to eat a diet of cookies.

“There is no love lost between her and me,” he says. Maura knows he is referring to the woman who married her brother for better or worse. And she thinks her sister-in-law may not have foreseen this twenty-four years ago when she danced with Maura’s dad in his precise, playful version of the jitter-bug. Her veil fell off her head, but she held onto the full, white skirt of her wedding gown, letting her new father-in-law twirl her around. He wore a black tuxedo with shiny lapels.

“I’ve gotta’ get outta’ here,” her dad says.

Maura’s eyes jump from his sunken jaw to his plaid pajamas. She feels sick. Helpless.

“I’m in prison, here.”

Maura stands still, her head pounding. She is unable to think of a thing to say.

“Look, look at this,” he unfolds a shiny page from a magazine. It is an ad, with a circle in her dad’s hand. “I need you to answer this for me. I can’t let them send me any mail here. She’ll see it.”

The ad is for a condominium in Florida. Maura looks at her dad. His blue eyes stay on her. “I can’t live this way anymore,” he says.

Maura nods, takes the ad and slips it into the pocket of her jeans. She hopes he will forget he asked her. She cannot squirrel her father away. He needs to be looked after. A move to Florida, hundreds of miles and several states away, is impossible.

She feels dark. Like she has disappointed her dad. Like she has repaid his love, his kindness, his care of her, with a slap in the face. Her eyes tear, “Do you want to come downstairs with me? We’re watching *Pretty Woman*.”

Her father shakes his head, waving both hands at her, “No, thanks. I’ll just wait until he goes to bed. I do it every night.”

“What do you do every night?”

“I get cookies.”

Maura thinks of how he used to give her three Hydrox cookies every night when she was little. The two of them sat in the breakfast nook facing each other, the cookies lined up on the Formica table. Maura took turns with her dad dunking the chocolate cream cookies in a shared glass of milk. Her father let Maura drink the sweetened milk when the cookies were eaten. Maura’s mother had died by then. Her brother, a decade older than Maura, had other things to do.

“I put them here, look,” her father opens the top of a dark wooden cube. On the sides are photos Maura slipped in years ago. In one of the photos, she is standing with him in front of an F4U Corsair at an air show. He is tall in the photo. At the air show, he was a star. A World War II pilot who talked about the smell of raw gas in the cockpit and ill fitting flight masks with veterans of wars years after his.

“Go ahead, smell it,” he says, flipping up the lid to the picture box. It is empty, but there is a scent of vanilla.

“That’s what I was doing when you came up the stairs just now. I sit in the dark and wait until he goes to sleep.”

Maura tries to stop her ragged breathing. She begins to cry, “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine. Go on. Go downstairs. Finish watching your movie,” he sits on the edge of his bed. His back is bent in a half circle. He looks broken.

§

Downstairs, Maura crosses her ankles again on the ottoman in front of the green leather sofa. She says nothing to her brother, who is typing on his lap top.

“He does it every night,” her brother says without looking up. “Once I saw his little, boney head peeking around the corner there,” he points to the archway to the hall. “We locked eyes. And then he just turned around and crept back up the stairs.”



Maura wants to scream at her brother. To tell him that he is their father. He is not a boney headed little man. He is not. He is their dad. Their dad. "Daddy," she murmurs.

"Pardon?" her brother asks.

Maura takes a long breath. She does not want to open the can of worms she feels she is holding. To tell her brother he is doing a shitty job of taking care of their dad. Her brother will yell at her, tell her that he is doing more than she ever could. Did she want to take care of him? And what would Maura say in response? That no, she could not put up with his scrutiny. That if she took him home with her, he'd begin to hate her. Just like he now hates her brother and his wife.

Maura thinks of the stairs that her brother mentioned. "Why doesn't he take the elevator?" she asks.

"He doesn't use it at night, thinks we'll hear him." Her brother slaps the lap top down, "But we hear him anyway. Thumping down the stairs."

# Safety

If you are sitting in an exit row please identify yourself to a crewmember to allow for reseating if:

- You lack the ability to read, speak, or understand the language.
- You cannot understand the graphics on this safety card.
- You told her that you loved her but she said that wasn't enough.

It was the last conversation you had with her, that night, when she left and went out the door and drove off and it was raining, you think, but you can't remember exactly. Sureness isn't something that comes easy or often these days. Your doctor says you'll get used to it, or snap out of it. Either way, it's not supposed to last long, this unsureness, this feeling of transition you seem to be trapped in.

This afternoon, at the airport, you went to the men's bathroom. Packed. You waited to go, fighting the urge to hop up and down on one foot like a little kid to keep from pissing your pants, watching the other men standing in front of the urinals like superheroes: hands on hips, groins thrust forward, eyes never wavering from the tile wall directly before them. When it was your turn, you too stared at the tiles, the handle, the white urinal cake resting below you. Anything you could find to avoid staring at what was going on around you, losing yourself in the monotony of everyday objects.

Now, on the plane, you fly over Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana. The world outside your window is black, black, black. You could be in space. You could be underwater.

In case of an overwater emergency, your seat cushion may be used as a floatation device. Federal Aviation Administration regulations prohibit smoking on this flight, but goddamn could you use one right now.

You told her you loved her, or you think you did.

“Love,” she said, looking over her shoulder from the doorway just before she left, before she drove off. “I don’t know what that means anymore. I don’t know if that’s enough.” And what could you tell her about love?

- Before her there was nothing. Now that she’s gone, nothing again.
- That brief moment of living in between, was that love?
- Sometimes you can feel her presence on you skin, light as breath.

Other days, she pulls you down like gravity.

When you close your eyes it’s becoming harder and harder to remember her face. It’s blurry now, like a smudged photograph, dark around the edges. Ever since that night, you feel like all of the color has been washed out of the world. You probably said more to her, before she turned to leave, and after, to yourself, staring at her as she walked down the sidewalk to the car. Probably. It’s not clear anymore.

“Taylor,” you might have said, because that was her name. She always hated it. She said it was a boy’s name, that her father had always wanted a boy, and that’s how she ended up with it.

“What is it? What’s—”

“I just need some time,” she could have said. “Things just don’t make sense to me anymore. I need to figure it out.”

Of course, since that day, since she drove off, you could very well have made all of this up in your head. Filling in the blanks to explain why she left with a conversation that may never have happened. You’ve read about things like this happening to people. It’s not, you realize, entirely out of the question.

In the event of an emergency in which a crewmember is not available to assist, a passenger occupying an exit row seat may be called upon to perform the following functions:

You work, you travel, you build up thousands of frequent flyer miles. You hope for storms. You pray for turbulence so powerful it will rip the skin off of the plane and suck you out into the sky.

“I just wanted to tell you,” a co-worker said the other day. “The way you’re handling this, I mean, what happened with your wife, it’s just, you’re doing great, man. Really great.”

You wondered if he was talking to the right person. If you stand still for too long, if you stop moving, working, your life starts to unravel, piece by piece. You had no answer. “Thanks,” is what you finally settled on.

You are almost positive that you told her you loved her.

You keep remembering inconsequential things about her, little things that you can’t get away from. The way she tapped her fingers when she read. The impossible number of flip-flops she owned, and how she wore them all year round. The pale pink of her toenail polish (not paint, Taylor corrected you once. “You paint a house,” she’d said. “You polish nails”) she wore the night of your last argument.

Please ask to be resealed if you are unable to perform one or more of the applicable functions depicted on this safety card or listed below because you:

I) Lack sufficient mobility, strength, or dexterity in both arms and hands, and both legs to:

- reach upward, sideways, and downward to the location of the emergency exit and exit-slide operating mechanisms;
- push, shove, pull, or otherwise manipulate those mechanisms;
- reach the emergency exit expeditiously;
- she hated flying.

Wait.

Actually, you have no idea how she felt about flying; the two of you never flew anywhere together. As far as you were aware, she’d never been on an airplane. Not like you, flying everywhere. First, in the military, then for work, training, seminars. Never with her. You realize, looking out the window at the darkness, at 30,000 feet of cold and black, that you’ll never really know how she felt about flying. Maybe she would have loved it. Maybe she would have yearned for the feeling of escape.

Six years of marriage. Of living in the valley, of Northern California, driving your shitty Toyota with no air conditioning and only the driver's window could be rolled down. Getting The Look on the commute home during the summer, that Zen-like acceptance of the heat that came from living in a city where the mercury hovered at triple-digits for five months out of the year. Then you and Taylor bought that car. A wagon. A horrible little compact wagon, lime green for Christ's sake. But the air, oh Jesus, the air on that thing. How that air worked. On summer weekends you and she would go for long drives to the ocean, turning the controller down so low you could have worn a sweater, seen your breath. Forget the gas mileage, it felt great.

II) Lack the capacity to perform one or more of the applicable functions without the assistance of an adult companion, parent, or relative;

III) Lack adequate ability to impart information orally to other passengers;

That last night, when she drove off mad about something you said, or money, or renting instead of owning, you can't remember the topic anymore, just that she told you, after you think you said "Wait," and maybe, "I love you," that she said "That's not enough," and drove off in that little green wagon.

You were going to ask her what that meant when she came back. When she came back from her mom's or her sister's or her best friend's or wherever she went to calm down after the fights. You were going to apologize, like you always ended up doing, even though you usually didn't know what for. And you were going to ask, and kiss her, and maybe make love, like the two of you did sometimes after the fights. You tell yourself that this is what was going to happen. But after she left there was the intersection, and the other car running that red light, and what the police report called a "High speed 90 degree impact to the driver's door" of that ugly wagon the two of you bought. Did she have the air on that night? Was she enjoying the ice cold breeze against her face, listening to the radio, as she drove to wherever she was going? You don't think about it that much, but when you do, you hope she did. You hope she didn't see the car coming.

IV) Has:

- responsibilities, such as caring for other people, that might prevent the person from performing one or more of the applicable functions; or,

- a condition that might cause the person harm if he or she performs one or more of the applicable functions.

The next time you saw her was at the hospital.

You did apologize, all night and most of the next day, but she couldn't hear you anymore. She lay under lights that sucked the color from her cheeks, and her lips were cold when you kissed them.

Camille Dawn

## Frenzy: A True Tale of Mobbing

What's New. Through surreptitious side-glances we see the new girl. Our own position within the department is secure, so we look at her, searching for clues. What is her story? Who does she know? What are her vulnerabilities? Does she appreciate how strong we are? So far, she's refused to take sides. She's bright and cheery. Polite to a fault; always, and with everyone. Well, what if we're not? Not today. Not tomorrow. Not next week. What will she think of that? She's eager to volunteer. A real team player. But it's savage around here for a girl. Did anyone tell her that? The Best Girl Competition is not a game for those without guile. She speaks with a posh not-from-'round-here accent and wears skirts and dresses. Very professional. She seems fragile and vulnerable. We notice the dainty girl bracelets that grace her small wrist. The little flower pendant on her simple string necklace. We hear mentions of boarding school, and that makes sense. She comes over and asks us for our opinion on her syllabus. What do you think of this, What do you think of that. We take notice. She's a perfectionist, arriving early, leaving late. She's doing fine, but questions everything. What do you think? She asks us. Is this the right thing, or not?

"Nice shoes," one of us says and then we watch how she models them and smiles. We touch her collar and comment on her dress. "And your skin..." Students cheer when you mention her name. So friendly and unassuming. That can't be real. What really drives her? This is a go-go, hard-driving city so which is it? Power or money? Still, she has all those questions.

She questions documents, filed without her knowledge. Is this permissible, she says. Doesn't seem, well, ethical. Dressed for business, she comes by to make an appointment, to discuss what we've been doing. One of us tries to disarm her by saying, "I like your hair." She blinks and says, "So, Wednesday afternoon then." Fine, we say, and she turns and walks away, after just declaring war.

"Did you hear what she did...?"

"I don't know how she was hired...."

“She can’t be that good.”

Immediately we go to the dean to set the record straight.

§

Feed. It started Monday morning, as I walked past the coffee pushcart and said hello to Ron, waiting in queue. His eyes narrowed to slits and he kept looking forward. I smiled weakly and continued to my office. No one looked at me except Alexandra, who glowered when she came through the door, “Everyone wants to know how you got your special schedule? And, why do you have a special chair?” These could easily be proven untrue, but I was taken by surprise. Immediately, I realized these weren’t the only untruths; plenty was being said, but by whom exactly, and when, and where. At the time I didn’t know what was happening, except “good friends” stopped talking to me, or pretended not to know me. I was bad news, with a bad rep. “Dangerous.” Best avoided. Another angry black woman. Don’t be deceived by the pedigree, and other signs of good breeding. At the office party I got looks. I tried talking to my dean as my pariah status became more obvious. She spoke to me from a distance, outside her office. She had a stern look and said: “You’re a bad person. Not someone we want around.”

It felt like every day, over weeks, months. I took my anger home, and soon I lost everything dear. I kept the guilt and shame, and kept reliving past events, trying to understand (“What if I had said this instead of that? What if I were more like this, and not like that?”), but nothing made sense. As for trying to explain (“I’m not a bad person! Let me tell you what really happened.”), well it only proved that I was “insane.” By the time the vote for non-reappointment became official, I was a shell of my former myself. Sullen and sick. A walking black mark. Now my attackers had proof, proof that their original judgment was true.

§

That’s Entertainment. Expelled! Gone! Forgotten! Life continues as usual, although, occasionally, the ladies find occasion to talk about what they accomplished. Every once in a while they’ll hear of a similar case somewhere else, and they’ll shake their heads and sigh: What a pity, and yet, such a relief to be right.



Curtis Smith

## The Dark Mirror

Busy today at my resource room work table. The radio plays Christmas carols and classic rock. The boy beside me punches numbers into a calculator. Another flips vocabulary flash cards. A girl sighs as she pages through a science text that offers scant connection to her hardscrabble life. Around the table I go, assisting, encouraging, redirecting. In an unclaimed moment, I survey the room. Outside, flurries, traces of white in a gray morning, a scene which calls to my daydreamers. Only now do I realize one of my boys is missing. I make a plea for civility in my looming absence then leave to check the bathroom across the hall.

I enter quietly. A faucet drips. He strikes the same pose I've discovered him in a half dozen times, his beanpole frame bent slightly forward, his pelvis pressed against the sink. His nose hovers inches from the mirror's surface.

I say his name, the same hushed tone I use to wake my son. The boy doesn't hear me. He's distant, the moment a snapshot of a greater fading, a sinking into silences and obsessions and wooden gestures, an affliction his doctors and psychiatrists have yet to explain. Three years we've been together, saying little, laughing less. Each day he chokes out, "Hello," and, "Goodbye;" sometimes he brings me a math paper, the problem he's struggling with indicated with a tap of his chewed pencil. "Thanks," he stammers when we're done. My room is his safe place, his refuge amid the school's chaos and noise, and for this, I am thankful.

I say his name again. He straightens himself, the jerking movements of a machine joined together with frayed wires and rusty cogs. His reflection abandons the mirror.

"Come on, pal." I open the door. "Let's head back."

Our knowledge is imperfect. Our philosophies are imperfect. Our tongues will cease. So writes Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. When all these fade, we are left with the mystery of ourselves. The mirror waits. The mirror exists in the eyes of loved ones and strangers. It exists in our thoughts. Reflection—few words possess such simple poetry. We grow old. We stop thinking and reasoning as children. We are left to spend our days seeing in a mirror darkly.

§

Late Christmas morning. A log in the fireplace. Flickers of yellow; here and there a spark. A new CD plays on the stereo. A roast in the oven. Wind whistles beneath the eaves. On the carpet are bright paper scraps, candy wrappers, trinkets pulled from our stockings.

My son wanted three things for Christmas. Since Halloween, we'd enticed him with gaming systems and current fads, this in a desire to provide him some currency in the world of second-grade boys. "No thanks," he said, his replies as unwavering as they were polite. He held fast to his list, and in return, we've honored his wishes. Today, he is the proud owner of a telegraph, a pocket watch, and a tuxedo.

I sit alone in the living room. Cradled in my palm, the pocket watch. The gold carries the tarnish of years, its cover etchings too intricate to appreciate without my glasses. Decades ago, this watch gleamed for its first owner. This morning, it was made new again. I call my son, hopeful he'll want to sit close and talk about the watch, but he doesn't answer.

I enter the kitchen. My wife turns from her work at the counter. Smiling, she nods toward our downstairs bathroom. The door is cracked, and I glimpse him through the narrow opening. His cowboy pajamas lay in a heap upon the floor. Standing atop a chair he's wedged into the narrow space between the toilet and sink, he studies himself in the medicine cabinet mirror. His hair remains knotted and poofy from his night's sleep, his feet are bare despite the chill. He turns slightly, his hand gripping the tuxedo's shiny lapel. He isn't admiring himself or the jacket. He is lost within a gaze, imagining a scene beyond—or perhaps beneath—the moment. I step back, careful not to make a sound.

§

Consider Borges. Consider Alice. Consider Bergman. Consider van Gogh's self-portraits, bandaged ear and all. The mirror's precise mimicry fascinates us. In physics, images are divided into the real and virtual. A real image's rays converge at a focal point, which in turn can be observed on a screen or piece of paper. The physicist relegates reflections to the murkier realm of the virtual image. Virtual images are a trick of the eye and the properties of light, the playthings of magicians and the subterfuge-filled origin of the phrase "done with mirrors." Yet this virtual ghost, this unreal image, remains our most tangible aspect of self.

We interact daily with our reflections. We groom. We splash water onto our faces. We brush our teeth. These tasks are inconsequential. They cross nothing off our to-do lists. They are acts of maintenance, nothing more.

But other times, we engage in a more involved communion. Our gaze settles upon a blemish, a gray hair, a razor's bloody nick. We lean closer, drawn by these imperfections, and when we pull back, we enter a moment of fleeting reintroduction. The moment snags. The moment expands. Focus is racked, and we are cast back into a relationship as old as awareness itself. Gone are the masks of spouse and parent, coworker and friend and neighbor—and we are left alone with ourselves. In our gut, tides of honesty, cutting and true and beyond articulation. The reflection warps, bulging from two dimensions to four, for in these images wait echoes of our past selves: the gullible child, the foolhardy teen, the unsure parent. Stare deeper and discern what waits: the disintegration of age and gravity and disease.

The mirror doesn't lie; only we are capable of that.

## §

My son circles the vestibule, hugging cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents. A dozen embraces deeply felt, and the moment's emotions soften my antsy desire to hit the road. The door opens, and January rushes in, shivers all around. "Goodbye!" we say after the last kiss has been offered.

Outside, we hurry up the walk. "See you soon!" cries the smallest cousin, a shadow framed in the doorway, the inside lit and warm behind her. The door shuts. The spilled light evaporates. Above, stars, winter's crisp sky, the promise of a deeper chill by dawn.

In time, the car warms. My clenched muscles ease. Our headlights sweep across the twisting two-lane, a route bowed by creeks and ridges, by centuries-old farmlands and forgotten cattle paths. Mist rises from the bottoms. On the ridges, bare trees, skeletons beneath the stars. Rutting season has passed, but I'm still wary of the stirrings in the roadside shadows. My son chats, a returning to his latest passion, the armies of ancient Rome, and with his help, I too know the gladius and the scutum, the lorica and the pugio and the deadly pilum. We talk, comparing the advantages of the legion over the phalanx, discussing Hannibal's masterpiece at Cannae and Rome's brutal retribution of Carthage.

We hit the highway, wide and smooth and straight. The tires hum. My son grows quiet. My wife closes her eyes. Exits pass. Then another hush, one I recall from my boy's early years. I twist the rearview, and there he is, shut-eyed and slumped.

Ahead, an empty stretch of road. I readjust the rearview, and the glass's narrow strip holds my eyes. I am alone with myself, past and present; alone with the wordless tides of awareness and perception. This is me, I think. All is still. I can imagine no greater gift than the peace that greets me from without and within.

GINNA HOWARD

## The Body

In this morning's email he tells her: You're going to enjoy your new gas-fire stove, not having to haul in wood. No need to get up in the night to throw on a log. Even if the power goes off, it'll still fire up. He and Judy like to sit in his study by their Vermont Castings—red enamel—Did you get a colored one too?—have a drink before dinner, watch the glow. Judy is his second wife and between every line he writes about her, pulses his gratitude for living with someone so solid, so sane. And often, somewhere in the email, after he's responded to all her news, he tells her about his body: what the lymphoma is up to this month. They have been friends for fifty years. Even for a lonely time in their thirties, tried out being lovers. At sixteen, they got drunk together, commiserated: his girlfriend, Melinda; her boyfriend, Paul. O love, O heartless love. å Vermouth. After a basketball game, his parents away, her sick, lying on the bathroom floor most of the night. First it was the lump in his neck in 1993: removed, the hope they'd gotten it all. A few years later, the lumps in the groin: they hadn't. This past April he wrote: Well, it looks like I'll be having a stem-cell transplant after all...Two days after the catheter I'll have a massive infusion of Cytosin...The purpose is to "mobilize" the stem cells by scaring them out of the bone marrow into the blood stream, where they can later be collected and frozen for future use...The drill goes like this: 4 days of high dose chemo, 2 days rest, then the melting and re-infusion of the stored stem cells. If all goes well, the stem cells will gradually begin making new red cells, white cells and platelets... Now it's September, and he's just completed 18 rounds of "mop-up" radiation. Next big step will be CAT and PET scans, probably in early November, to see whether the stem-cell transplant + radiation has gotten rid of the lymphoma for now. Meanwhile, there's his stepson's wedding next week, the night-before party at the farm, with a blue grass band, croquet, badminton, a catered barbecue. She remembers the farm: where the two couples spent the night after their senior ball. She remembers rising early, after confusing hours of silently resisting, climbing the ridge in her white shorts and red T-shirt, looking down on the house, everyone sleeping. All the while singing, "I'm through with love." He later married the girl; she later married the boy. Years later, and all the things that go with that, her husband killed himself; his wife ended up in a McLean halfway house. Know what I mean, one will write to the other, when the present has a lot to do with the past.

Yes.

Michael Brantley

## 610 Minges

So this is how I'm going to die.

What other conclusion could I draw as the woman jumped from the curb onto the bus just as it was about to move, clutching a bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows in the other? As I looked around for the emergency exit, I thought, man, those terrorists are getting more creative every day.

I always knew I'd go down in some weird way. An MSG-induced coma at a Chinese buffet, maybe. A run-in with a clown, possibly. Something banjo related, perhaps. Honestly, being on a college bus highjacked by an archer never crossed my mind.

My wife and my mother would find out about this by turning on the news. A TV reporter would be standing there, like they always do, at a scene where nothing is happening. The reporter would appear very grim and dramatic. The assailant's neighbors, like they always are, would be shocked. She'd turn out to have twenty-four cats, and be subsisting on four tins of Army surplus peanut butter a day, like they always do. Then the Bluebird lurched at the next stop, and as quickly as she appeared, the armed lady was gone. That's how my first day on the 610 Minges started.

§

When I applied for graduate school at East Carolina University, the minutiae of getting to class everyday was the farthest thing from my mind. There were a lot of hoops to jump through. After my experience at the GRE testing center, I was convinced those folks actually train the frisky TSA airport search teams. There were shot records to track down, transcripts to dig up, and of course, trying to find three professors willing to put their credentials on the line by writing recommendation letters. I mean, they hadn't seen me in twenty years — how would they know how much havoc I might have wreaked?

Then the first day of class arrived. Somehow, I had the misconception there was student

parking in Greenville, North Carolina. I bought a parking pass and after consulting a GPS, Google Maps and the Transportation Office, it was determined that the place I would be permitted to park did not actually exist. It seems there are more Internal Revenue Service auditors in Heaven than there are parking spaces at ECU. The final result: I would park at the athletic complex, and ride the bus to Joyner Library.

The route is known as the 610 Minges.

§

Having grown up and lived most of my life in a very rural area, I've never had much exposure to public transportation, but I figured it couldn't be too bad. My thinking was that by riding the bus at the same time every week and boarding at the same location, it would be inevitable to meet some folks. I have never seen anyone more than once. And for that matter, no one wants to talk. My first couple of, "Good Mornings," brought puzzled stares, reminiscent of how my puppy looks at me when I want to talk about Billy Collins or Ernest Hemingway. One day, when the bus was really crowded and many riders were forced to stand, I got up and gave my seat to a weary looking lady, younger than me, but older than the undergrads. My fellow riders looked at me like I was crazy.

One thing that stands out as the main difference from today and my undergrad days — which ended just before the invention of the iPod and when most cellphones were purchased with 30-minute Emergency Packages — is that no one wants to communicate face-to-face anymore. They still want to be social, just not in person. As soon as most riders step foot on the bus, they are plugging in ear-phones, making calls or checking emails on their phones. No eye contact, not even a Forrest Gump "seat taken" comment. It's the same on campus, everybody is LOL-ing, but not really, they just type that they are; when was the last time anyone ROTFL-ed in person?

I told a friend from home about this lack of social participation and he had quick, direct advice for me. Stop, he said. Nice is the new Creepy, he said.

§

Lest you mistakenly get the impression that the buses at ECU are rolling mausoleums of silence, let me stop you right there. There is plenty of talk, from people getting on the bus together or worse, those yelling into their phones, not realizing that by overcoming poor reception and the roar of the diesel engines, they are informing the world of a lot of the things the world would probably prefer not to know.

Some will say that it is eavesdropping or just plain nosy or voyeuristic to intrude on a conversation you've not been invited to join. I don't consider it eavesdropping when people sit on opposite sides of the bus, or one is forced to sit next to me and they carry on a conversation that can be heard from one end of the bus to the other.

One day, I was joined by two girls who were dressed exactly like one of my daughter's Barbie dolls, cute as they could be. Then they opened their mouths, releasing a shock-and-awe of F-bombs. I think Quentin Tarantino would have been embarrassed.

Sadly, many drag onto the bus in the morning, even at the late hour of 10:30 a.m., still dealing with the consequences of the previous evening. Some had a few too many drinks, some have addiction problems, some question the wisdom of the one-night stand. One thing in plentiful supply that hasn't changed since my generation — and I suspect it goes back much farther than that — is the concept of “dranking.” I lost count of how many guys have gotten on the bus talking about drinking heavily as if it were some kind of accomplishment.

One morning, two guys got on and one was bragging loudly about his multiple female conquests from the previous weekend. He went on and on for several stops, sparing few details and running the gamut from obnoxious to full blown misogyny. Finally, his companion spoke for all riders when he compared the speaker to a feminine hygiene product. For a moment, I wished the F-Bomb Barbies would get on the bus. They would have been a great match.

Maybe they could make a reality show out of the 610 Minges.



If I had paid better attention in high school science class, I could tell you the name of the guy who talked about herd mentalities, or learned behaviors. Bus riders are no exception.

For example, as the bus approaches the bus stop, everyone — no matter where they are standing — takes one step closer to the curb as the vehicle comes to a stop. Conversely, as the bus pulls into each stop, those who are getting off begin the scramble long before the doors open, as if the driver will trap them for another loop around campus.

Then there are the drivers. They seem like pretty good folks, mostly students working to pay for school. But there is one, one driver, who is evil.

At least I think he is evil. Or she. I've never actually seen him. Or her. Everyday, at least once, as I scramble across a parking lot or hustle through the brickyard at the library, this driver lets me get oh-so-close and then slams the doors shut...just as I get within a few yards of the bus. He, or maybe she, always decides to do this on a day when other buses are out of service or way behind schedule, or it is raining and there is a 20 minute wait for the next one. I picture her, or maybe him, laughing maniacally as she or he guns it into traffic at 20 miles per hour. Think the crazy mailman from the 1980s Chevy Chase film, "Funny Farm." I vow vengeance and shake my fist each time this happens, except for the vowing and fist shaking.

## §

Don't get me wrong, I've come to appreciate the bus, the hum, not rattle of the engine. The faint smell of diesel fumes may take away a few of my brain cells everyday, but maybe those are the ones where the Simpson episodes are stored. The hiss of the hydraulics opening and closing the doors signal it is time to begin the day, or end it. A bus is there for me everyday and it always gets me to the Library and then back to Minges. The seats are comfortable and always clean. Maybe it is good that no one wants to be friendly. Starting or ending a day with a few quiet minutes of not having to think, or control a motor vehicle, or carry on a conversation can do a man good. Maybe it is good to know what the generation after me is worried about and I can't say that I haven't had an education about realistic dialogue. Even conspiracy theories about bus drivers have a positive side...if you're a creative writing grad student.

Jenean McBrearty

## Battles and Beatlestones

One of the most heated debates I ever had took place in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1973 about who was more talented – the Beatles or the Rolling Stones.

It was obvious to me. The Beatles, heartthrobs of millions of bubble-gummers, grew stylistically, musically, and lyrically, became socially aware and politically relevant, evolving and helping to define a generation of Boomers.

John, my husband and three years my junior, disagreed. The Beatles had sold out to the mass media, commoditized and exploited social and political protest—not to mention Eastern philosophy—and abandoned their leadership of the generation of change. The Stones, on the other hand, continued to produce pure music of the working class, reflecting the truth about the nuclear age, tune-in, drop-out, pessimistic, drug-ridden generation that would prevail and wreck the country. It took a lot of talent to stay true to one's lower-class roots. In the face of billion dollar profits, the Stones were the Gibraltar of rock.

We lived in an apartment on Cumberland Street, within walking distance to the Baptist Day Care and the Arkansas Democrat where I worked in circulation. We owned a T.V., but rarely watched it. Our “thing” was music and reading, the hobbies of working-class graduates of Catholic schools, raised by people who lived through times we only read about.

On Saturdays, three-year-old daughter in tow, we walked to the library. John studied military history and strategy, particularly the Eastern Front of World War II. His hexagonal grid maps of battle sites were sprawled over the living room floor. Hundreds of flat, square war game pieces representing men, artillery, aircraft, and supplies, their importance registered in tiny numbers, advanced, retreated, and succumbed accurately in historical chronology as John visually recreated the entire Russian campaign.

I mostly read non-fiction too, sometimes reading whole passages aloud as John made notes from his complicated rule books. I tackled *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, *Enemy At the Gates*, *Hitler's War Against the Jews*, *Arendt's Totalitarianism* and *The Banality of Evil*. And a slim mis-shelved volume entitled *Suicide* by a guy named Emile Durkheim that I thought was about kamikaze pilots.

When it was John's turn, instead of passages from a book, I got in-depth explanations of why the Eastern Front was militarily inevitable and inevitably decisive. I didn't understand the capabilities of weaponry. They seemed irrelevant compared to the outcomes of the war: the suffering, the dislocation of millions of people, and the ill-advised and expedient political arrangements that seemed remarkably stupid in hindsight.

I was a big-picture, philosophic Beatles fan. John was a detailed, in the trenches Rolling Stones fan. Despite our common interests, our world views could neither converge nor balance. I was *Abby Road*; he was *Exile on Main Street*. I was *Sgt. Pepper's*; he was *Sympathy for the Devil*. It was a classic struggle of idealism versus realism played out on vinyl and volumes.

Two years after our Little Rock debate, now in San Diego and immersed in the emerging war gaming genre, John and friend affectionately nicknamed "Papa Joe", agreed

to refight the battle for Russia—the result of seemingly endless arguments about totalitarian insanity, invincibility and fate. John had found kindred spirits far more knowledgeable about the masculine world of war than I was.

"I'm going to prove something to you," John declared defiantly as he threw down the gauntlet. "What was did not have to be." As thick and bushy eyebrowed as his Russian namesake, Papa Joe told him he was on a fool's errand. But, masculinity being what it is, and with bragging rights on the line, the battle was on.

Each side had three members, with John and Papa Joe acting as Supreme Commanders of their respective teams. Each side predicted a date of victory, put the information in an envelope, sealed it and gave it to a willing and bemused landlord who vowed not to reveal its whereabouts till the end of the "war".

Sets of boxed games with names like Blitzkrieg, Panzer Leader, Luftwaffe, and Tobruk were combined and distributed according to historical accuracy to reflect the relative strengths and weaknesses of both sides. Eight sections of maps, comprising all of Eurasia's terrain with the hexagons superimposed to represent historically accurate distances, formed their elaborate chess board, and were laid on three 5x4 foot sheets of Plexiglas mounted on construction horses. Plastic shoe boxes, appropriately labeled, were used to separate the small pieces that represented men and material. Stores of junk food, and a refrigerator full of beer, were brought in. Work and family commitments were adjusted; a wedding was postponed. The garage was "off-limits" to all except the six participants, and me, so I could do laundry. It was a pragmatic concession, but I was honored.

The war dragged on. Just like in real life, fighters became weary. Hours would pass in the garage in silence as the "officers" did nothing but stare at the battlefield. The German team held meetings in my dining room. Sometimes, emergency meetings were called after an Allied move had the Germans hauling out notes and graph paper as I tried to serve dinner. More than once, I awakened at two in the morning and found John in the cold, dimly lit garage, rubbing his fingers back and forth across his moustache as he surveyed deployment.

Four months later, having fought with only historical technology and resources available, Germany had won. We celebrated the conquest of Moscow with champagne, the Supreme Commander romantically telling me the city was his gift to me. Would Hitler have said the same to Eva Braun? When he sobered up, he told me how he'd done it. "The key to winning Russia was forsaking Leningrad for Moscow, drawing the Russian troops away from the capitol, holding Stalingrad and cutting off oil supplies to the Russian tanks. Think what would have happened if Hitler had won the battle of Kursk! If Hitler can do that, he can fortify the Western Front for the Allied invasion with Russian armaments to replace his dwindling supply."

Simple. But not easily done. The game pieces are deliberately numbered to reflect the adversities the Germans encountered. As in life, the pieces are sometimes stacked against you.

John's victory in Operation Barbarossa was inspiring, but eventually games must be put away, debates ended, decisions made. After five years of marriage, John and I chose different campaigns. I went to college, and he went down a moonlight mile with Sister Morphine in New Jersey.

Eight years after the divorce, just three weeks after I graduated with my B.A., John committed suicide. The coroner's office tracked me down, relieved that the body in the morgue was no longer a John Doe, and said, according to witnesses, John's swan dive off San Diego's Laurel Street Bridge had been spectacular. Would I notify his family?

I remembered Durkheim's book, and thought I should have seen it coming. John beat the Russians, but couldn't beat the drugs. Like Hitler, John mistakenly equated external victories with personal inner strength, and luck with invincibility.

John's sister, echoing the coroner, said she was relieved too. The war for his soul was over and there is no sympathy for the devil. John had told his family he was going back to California to start a new life; his sister told their mother he'd drowned. It was a tactical lie. At that time, Catholics believe suicides went to hell and no one wanted to annihilate an already vanquished heart.

I preferred to think John was at peace, but what he said to me—"what was did not have to be"—haunted me. Maybe there was more somebody could have done, though the psychiatrists' said John wasn't the first addict to suffer from drug-induced psychosis. Perhaps. But he was drug free, according to the pathologist's report. I decided to believe that what killed John was not psychosis but the realization he'd surrendered to desire, and that he was too weak to fight. Like Hitler, he chose a swift death by his own volition to the humiliation of defeat. I didn't cry for him. I had learned too much from him. How to be resolute. How to fight. How idealism doesn't pay the bills or change the oil in the car. How to calculate. Most of all, I learned the greater the effort, the sweeter the victory.

In 1985, when it was time to submit my M.A. thesis topic to the chair of my committee, the intermittent echoes of John's epitaph evolved into a constant thunder. If what was did not have to be, then what is does not have to be the future. Karma isn't instant. Taking a page from the 1977 Operation Barbarossa playbook, I laid in a store of junk food for a weekend brainstorming session. I would have a topic and a campaign strategy by the following Monday. I needed this victory, just as every nation does after years of struggle, to justify the sacrifices I'd made—deficit spending, loan debt, and rationing of scarce resources—in the name of nebulous educational values. I had severed friendships, neglected family, and ignored fatigue of mind and eyes to prove I wasn't just another welfare mother trying to game the system—this last "long paper" was to be my personal jewel in the crown. This couldn't be just any thesis. This had to be, like a musical composition, an expression of who I was,

and I was a woman who had already lost many battles. I was a thirty-six year old political science graduate student—never taken seriously, always ignored, quickly sliding into the “matron” category, and destined to be underemployed and constantly broke.

Now, locked up in my Section 8 apartment, I imagined myself, like John, a Supreme Commander of history as I stared at a map of Eurasia and said to myself, “There is a way.”

In 1986, the suggestion of a reunited Germany without nuclear war to the Soviets and the difficulties of overcoming forty years of economic and political divisions along ideological grounds was preposterous. Wacky. Typical of German nationalist thinking. Typical female, untheoretical, and downright silly. Was I ignorant of the realities of the Cold War? Didn't I learn anything in that National Defense class? I argued I had, and that I learned much in Sociology class too. Social movements had a way of developing while no one was paying attention—especially governments that could not keep the promises made in Marx's name. I asked four professors I knew to chair my thesis committee, and all gave me an emphatic, “No!”

Except one—a Czech expatriate named Ivo Feierabend who had fled Nazis and Communists and carried the credentials of a survivor, who listened to my rationale. No ideology survives forever, we agreed. People and political landscapes change. All I am saying, I told him, is give peace a chance. When and if reunification occurred, the dominoes would begin to fall in the other direction, and his homeland would be free also. He could take his aged mother home before she died. Let me explain how it could happen using Smelser's social movement theory, if I'm wrong, no harm done. If I'm right, we may have a predictive tool at our disposal.

Three years after my thesis was published, it did happen—through a social movement as I predicted. The wall came down and the world did not explode, and Mrs. Feierabend lived to see a free Czech Republic. I got bragging rights.

Imagine. What life would have been like if what was had not been, if Hitler had held Stalingrad and been able to supply the troops during the winter, and the Beatlestons had become a reality? What would McCartney Jagger's music sound like? What would my life have been like if John and I had stayed married and gone to college together? I can imagine all these scenarios, but the last.

It's been twenty-six years since I won my battle in the Political Science Department. My world is now larger than my personal biography—I am the idealist who was mugged by reality—and I view life with the bifocals of experience. As I study the red and blue map of a politically polarized America, I remember the six men who gazed, for hours at a time, the entire geography and history of two clashing cultures replicated on poster paper. God-like they saw the big picture and the minutiae of the greatest armed conflict in the history of the world from the safety of distance, and weighed their actions with the luxury of time. Our real-life leaders on both sides of the aisle lack those assets. Yet, the enemy is at the gates once again. The time for theoretical debates is over. The games have ceased, decisions must be made, and there are real wars to fight. The political winter is upon us and we are short of supplies. As a nation, America needs more than love and luck, and I no longer hear the assured words of a great garage military commander. He is dead.