

# COBALT



ISSUE 6

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Gail C. DiMaggio

## Depth Perception in Hawks

Outside, snow marks the jagged seams  
of the flagstone my father wrestled into walkway  
while in the warm kitchen,  
the old man takes the head of the table  
to wield his knowledge like an ax  
and beat back weaker creatures.  
I wear my good-daughter mask  
under the storm of facts –  
dinosaurs, angels, Abel, the Alps,  
depth perception in hawks.

But Rob, twelve now, passionate and  
brave, says optical or curvilinear  
and the old man, knife and fork in hand,  
focuses on him a measuring glare,  
sweeps it down the table in case  
someone else imagines they know  
some word outside his grasp. I look down.  
And Rob adds parallax or maybe  
just perspective.

Now, words batter the ceilings, throw themselves  
against the window. The boy says retina  
and aerial perspective. Aerial.  
Perspective. The man says, Stereopticon.  
Monocular. Distance Fog. Defocus...

He stops, reaches for his phrase, and dread  
rises in me. Where will I hide  
in a world my father doesn't own?  
Blur, he says, Defocus blur.  
And now the boy's treble  
wobbles to a stop, the old man  
grasps his son, marches him to the World  
Book Encyclopedia where Rob  
must read aloud on the subject of hawks  
and how we see.

I clatter the plates to drown  
my brother's breaking voice.  
I think of him like a shivering fur  
under the stooping shadow  
and decide I have no choice.  
I must myself become  
the bloody beak and talons.

Caroline Shepard

## Pig

If your tattoo leapt off your  
shoulder and into my arms  
you probably wouldn't notice.

I would be kind.

I would bring it on a walk around the neighborhood,  
laughing at all of its stories of  
observing you be human  
but pretend not.

Later we would go to my house.  
I would make your tattoo a  
grilled cheese sandwich, then offer my  
blue blanket and softest pillow.

After we read our favorite books aloud,  
we'll look at each other and reminisce  
about the day you stop being a vegetarian.

Your tattoo would look at me  
and place its hoof on my hand,  
let me lean against its picnic shoulder with  
all the weight a sympathetic pig can bare.

He will not turn away when told  
the worst of it—

About Caroline: Caroline Shepard is a poet and high school teacher in New York City. Her work has appeared in Construction Magazine and Freerange Nonfiction's "Freshly Hatched" series.

Don Thompson

## Fire Season

Birds woke me, an angry crackling exactly like grass fire. Nocturnal creatures must have paused outside their dens, listening, and tested the air for smoke before settling down to sleep—just to make certain that glow meant sunrise and not the hills burning.

We're all on edge now. We know what a spark can do, mere carelessness; disappointment like a shard of glass focusing the afternoon glare or an arsonist in us with a smoldering grudge. Sooner or later, something always ignites. No one makes it to the first rain without tasting ashes.

Nikki Thompson

## Panic

I said, Dad, you have to come get me; he said I had to get an ambulance—he was 400 miles away. In my head, I was calm. It had taken so long to figure how the phone worked, to figure out Dad started with a D, to figure out Send.

I said I didn't need an ambulance; Grace said she would drive. The two of us hobbled down the stairs to her car—Grace at my right side, completely numb.

Months later, Grace said she had seen the MRI of my brain—all gray with a white gash in the middle. While we waited, I kept saying how strange it all was to be the one lying in the hospital bed. The doctors kept coming by and saying I would have a room soon. A crazy lady was yelling in the bed next to mine, hospital attendants were apologizing. Finally, they took me upstairs. The orderlies wheeled me lying down. The walls were too low; the ceiling too high. Imagining I looked calm, I was out of control, panicked. In my room, Grace fell asleep on the little pull-out couch. Driving from San Diego to San Francisco, my brother got to the hospital at three in the morning.

One doctor with huge pearl earrings said I was so young, it was so strange. They found it mentioned only a few times in the literature. My carotid artery had dissected; I'd had a stroke.

Nikki Thompson

## Getting a Ride

Being 31, I felt fifteen again. I had to ask my parents for a ride to a friend's, to the museum, to the movies. I was 400 miles from home, where I would ride my bike to the grocery store, to the cleaners, to the shops on Valencia St. My old life was gone. In LA the distances were enormous—The Valley to Los Feliz, to downtown LA, to the West Side. Then a ride home with a friend. I was grateful, but in high school again: waiting, impatient, silently raging, until I turned sixteen.

With my physical therapist, I wheeled out to my mom's car in the parking lot. She did the transfer first, showing me how to place my hands and not bump my head against the window. Then I tried. She said my dad's truck would be easier. Now, I always had to sit in the front seat with my four-point, then my one-point, cane. My friend Jesse's car was low to the ground, and I fell into the seat when I got in. He said that his grandma has the same problem.

Nikki Thompson

# Speech Therapy

Hair cut at ten, accountant at two, and I felt so strange. Four days of headache gone, but I couldn't move properly. I would be fine. When I opened my mouth to cancel the appointments, slowly, slowly, the sentences dripped off my tongue. I would be fine.

Days later, when I was at Kaiser Vallejo, talking slowly, like I was Southern my mom said, I wheeled to the speech therapist. The room was small, made even smaller by partitioning. The speech therapist had her desk by the door. I could barely fit my wheelchair in. Would I be fine? She beat a pencil and said a two-syllable word—baby—matching the word to the beat. Then she told me to try. I did. Ba-by. Baby. Would I be fine?

Timmy Reed

## Moles

I like moles. Not the cosmetic imperfections, but the small subterranean mammals. In fact, I've written about them before. But there was a different protagonist in that story. This time it's actually me. In this story, I like moles.

One time I was staying at a cabin near a lake that belonged to my friend and her husband. I was staying there because life had gotten busy in the city I love and there was work stress and money trouble and the alcohol had come back and of course there was a girl. So I was hiding out at my friend's cabin. And there were moles there.

The moles lived in a lonely pile of earth across the yard from Betsy's garden, which was the site where her husband Rick had been going to build a swing set. But then there was the miscarriage so the swing set never got built and the mound just sat there, ignored. And they ended up with a molehill instead.

After about a week of moping around, not writing anything, not doing much at all, I wandered out into the yard while everyone was at work. I found myself over near the mound, in a corner of the yard by the edge of the woods. It was shady there and looked sad. I climbed up and sat cross-legged on top.

I was sitting there only few minutes when I began to notice all these little holes everywhere I looked. They made me nervous at first, I thought of snakes and creepy things. I was very surprised when a little black face popped out right between my knees. It was a mole! I had never seen one so close up before...He looked like a worm, cylindrical and sort of slimy with traces of pink skin showing through his charcoal black coat. I liked him

immediately. I felt sure that he would run off or scurry back down his hole, but he didn't. He just looked up at me from under his blind, folded eyelids, apparently oblivious. So I picked him up! And he let me!

Now we were friends. I could tell.

Then another one popped out of a little hole to my left. I picked him up too.

Now I was holding two moles!

And I liked it.

We sat like that for a while until it started to rain. I let the moles crawl back into the earth. I remained there for some time and got wet. Then I went back inside and decided that I would learn about moles.

The Hairy-Tailed Mid-Atlantic Mole is slim in shape and dark in color. Its diet is largely made up of earthworms and insects, but it will occasionally dine on a small mouse if one of them is unfortunate enough to get near the entrance of a colony. The Hairy-Tailed Mole inhabits Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Western Maryland.

In the early days of Modern English, British moles were known as “mouldwarp”, “mould” meaning “soil” and “warp” meaning “throw”. Male moles are called “boars” and female moles are called “sows”. A group of moles is called a “labor”.

For centuries, moles have been misunderstood animals. I related to that. Mainly the cause of this misunderstanding has been things like: contamination of silage with soil particles, pasture and yield reduction, damage to young plants from the disturbance of soil, and damage to agricultural machinery by the exposure of stones. I had a different set of issues of course, but still I could relate.

So I started spending more time with the moles. Making daily visits to their sad little mound. I met more and more of them. Some were bigger than others, but basically they all looked alike. I couldn't really tell them apart and when I tried to give them individual names, I ran into trouble and gave up. They would remain a labor of nameless moles.

I had zero idea what their total population amounted to, but I knew that I wanted them to thrive. I would set about developing their colony and improving their quality of life. I would cultivate their population.

I never mentioned the moles to Betsy or Rick and they never visited that part of the yard. Ever. At night they would come home and we would sit together on their porch and they would sip wine and, I think, try to cheer me up and distract me with jokes and stories and complaints about work and politics and family and things. They told me that my melancholy seemed to be improving, but they were in the dark about the molehill so they probably just assumed any improvements in my demeanor were a result of their positive influence on my spirit, or the fresh country air, or something as simple as a physical separation from my problems. Little did they know that I was purchasing earthworms from the bait shop each morning and saturating the molehill with food. I picked weeds and gathered stones from the perimeter in order that the mound and the tunnels underneath might grow. I cleared the upturned soil around each hole so that the dirt pile looked like a big brown belly covered with tiny navels. I spent hours on a little throne I had fashioned from soil, basking in the loving presence of the labor.

And I began to heal.

And the colony began to prosper. I was discovering new holes each day, which meant new tunnels. They were building. I was proud. The worms were wriggling about everywhere as well, multiplying for the moles to eat. I felt a little bad about feeding them to the moles, but I chalked it up to a natural order. Besides, I liked the moles better. So I kept buying worms.

When I saw that Shelley was calling – Shelley was my girlfriend or ex-girlfriend or something like that – I didn't pick up my phone. I was sitting on the molehill late in the afternoon and my phone began to vibrate. I was surprised to have it in my pocket. I hadn't received a phone call in weeks. In some ways, I had begun to forget about the outside world completely. When I looked at the screen and saw who was calling, my heart got weak and fluttery but just then, as if on cue, a furry little head poked out of the dirt near my foot and smiled at me. I put the phone away. I was startled by my reaction. I hadn't expected to be smiling back.

Continuing with my initiative to develop the mole colony, I thought I might like to introduce a new species to the labor. I thought it would be nice to diversify the population. It had seemed to work pretty well with humans, right? I knew I would have to go to a lot of trouble catching them on my own, so I sought out a store that sold exotic pets. I borrowed Betsy's truck and drove there. I bought two dozen moles: twelve boars and twelve sows. The clerk was a kid with pimples and a lip. He assured me, with what I took for undue relish, this particular species of mole mated aggressively and was very fertile. I would grow the population in no time. And then the tunnels would surely spread.

It was springtime and Betsy began to plant. Her garden was not near the labor. Like I said, she never went near there. Ever.

I would help her plant things on the weekends. Flowers and vegetables and carnivorous plants to keep away the mosquitoes and flies. It was good for me to help her and I felt like I was starting to earn my keep, even though I probably wasn't. I wasn't very good at gardening. I had lived in the city my whole life.

The tunnels were spreading. I began to notice new holes in the lawn on my way to and from the mound each day. The new species that I had introduced were larger and more skittish around me, but they seemed to be excellent diggers. The holes were popping up closer and closer to the cabin and the garden around it. I wanted to encourage the moles

to build in the other direction, toward the woods, but I had no idea how to go about accomplishing this feat. I thought and thought but nothing came. Still, I fed them worms. And under my care, the labor continued to grow.

Betsy was an experienced gardener, so when her young plants started to die and the grass began to recede from the area around her garden, she suspected moles right way. She asked me to help her get rid of them. For days, she searched on her hands and knees through the grass, finding new holes like hidden Easter eggs all over the lawn, but still she refused to go near the mound. If she had, she would have discovered a finely manicured little hill, swollen on the inside with moles. And one small dirt throne on top.

Rick was a carpenter by trade, but he was also a volunteer firefighter. He had access to high-pressured hoses. He and Betsy decided to use those high-pressured hoses to flood the moles' tunnel system. I didn't know what to say to them, so I didn't say anything.

The night before Rick was to bring the fire truck by the cabin, I slipped away from my futon and went out into the yard. It was pitch black out in the country at night. I had never really gotten used to not having noise and lights around me after dark, and until that night I had rarely strayed more than a few feet from the cabin's front porch after dusk. This time I went all the way to the molehill, walking on tip-toes to avoid any invisible moles at my feet that might've popped out to gaze at the stars or take in a bit of fresh air.

I sat on the mound and addressed the moles in a loud whisper. I was sure that most of them were too far underground to hear, and were probably sleeping anyway, but I did it anyway. I had to get this off my chest. Also, I had been drinking again, for the first time since I came to the cabin.

“Listen, Moles. I am afraid I may have steered you wrong. You have been the best thing that has happened to me in a long time, maybe too long, longer than I even remember. And I have tried my best for you – you know I have, don't you? But I've failed you. I was

over...zealous, my intensity was over...wrought. And now you all may die. You must move your labor into the woods. Tonight. Find a new home. And live there. Thrive.”

By now I was lying prostrate on the dirt pile, whispering into one of the larger holes. I could hear my voice as if it were someone else’s. I sounded like someone singing through a thick wet pillow. I felt ridiculous. I went back inside. That night I had a dream about underwater caverns. The fish inside had fur. And tails. They were moles, I think.

The next day, two small fire trucks rolled up with three or four volunteer firemen in t-shirts and ballcaps. I had already helped Betsy situate both of the cabin’s garden hoses in the holes closest to the house. The water did little more than trickle out, doing very little damage to the vast system of tunnels.

I sat on the porch with a lemonade and tried to enjoy myself. I was failing at it.

There were four firehoses, all total. I watched from the porch as the men dug out the holes to make room for the heavy nozzles at the end of each hose. I closed my eyes as they turned on the pumps.

I could hear the water moving through the hoses. It sounded like what I imagined the in-nards of a waterpark might sound like. And then there were the screams.

Betsy was shrill like a bird when she screamed, Rick and the firemen sounded shocked. Some began laughing. But what yanked my heart into my chest was the blast of tiny squeals, almost a song like birds in a tree. Hundreds of moles. Screaming.

I opened my eyes. Water seeped out through the lawn everywhere I looked. But that’s not what was causing all of the commotion.

The mound in the back corner of the yard had turned into a fantastic fountain with streams of high-pressured water spraying every which way. Each stream started and stopped in a sporadic fashion. All these tiny black clumps were being shot into the air. I noticed that as many of the clumps landed, they scurried off into the woods. Some didn't.

I could tell it was time for me to go back to the city.

After about twenty minutes of watching the yard leak and flush like a toilet, Betsy, Rick, the firemen, and I were all standing around what used to be the mound. The hoses had been turned off. The hill had been blown apart at the sides. You could see in some places where the animals' passages had been. To my surprise, the top of the mound was in relatively decent shape. Muddy and misshapen, but still intact.

One of Rick's firemen buddies was the first to speak. "Looks almost like a little throne," he chuckled, pointing. "Looks like the moles had a king."

We all just nodded in agreement.

Then I spoke up. "Had one," I said.

And everyone just laughed.

Audrey Chin

# The Pearl

You're sitting at the kerb tearing at the shoelaces in your running shoes, your fingers knotting and pulling hard and sharp at the double knots you always make.

You get up the minute the car pulls up and I press the garage door opener. The door's barely open and you're already through it. I get out of the car to follow you into the house then turn back to unleash poor Bigboy, who's whining up an opera after running himself tight around the tree you've tied him to.

"You said you'd take Bigboy for a walk and I should go get dinner," I blurt out.

"I said I'd take Bigboy FIRST! You were to go when I came back!"

"I'm sorry," I say to your back as you stomp into the kitchen.

You turn around and glare at me across the kitchen island.

"SORRY!?! I've been sitting out there with this damned animal howling at every passing dog for the last hour, all the white M̃y in the neighbourhood looking at me like I'm a dog torturer."

You slam the tall glass you've been drinking from onto the counter tiles. Water jerks out, splashing your hand. You look at your hand. I look at your hand. The hard brown fingers circling the tumbler are shaking like a volcano waiting to spill. They're so tight around the clear green glass I'm sure you'll crack it to pieces and cut yourself.

“How can I be married to such a STUPID woman! For ten damn years!!!!”

You jump over the island, spilling water every which way, and loom over me. I don't move. I'm mesmerized how mad you are. How crazed with anger.

“Ten years.” You open your mouth and show me your teeth. You lift your hand up high over your head then drop it like a hammer, opening your fingers as you do. The glass flies out and shatters itself all around me.

“Happy anniversary,” you say and walk out of the house, slamming the door shut.

It's quiet. Even Bigboy's stopped whimpering.

I go to the pantry and take out the vacuum cleaner to suck away the whole damned incident. I know I'm never going to talk about this again and that tomorrow I'll tell everyone what a wonderful anniversary we had. There's no point asking for an apology because I'll never forgive you. I can never forgive him. I tell myself I'm not some Vietnamese woman you married from a farm. I am a daughter of a better age, a feminist from a striving first world city twenty hours away, a place where women have rights.

I clench my fist on the kitchen counter and hit a tiny shard of glass I missed. A coral red drop of blood forms on the side of my hand and falls on the clear hard crystal, a perfect rose. I pick up the shard and lick it clean slowly, carefully so I don't cut myself.

I swallow my anger. Allow the little piece of glass to settle into my guts, to allow it to cut me, to remind me of my grievances. When you come back from the car carrying the take-out boxes I bought in the neighbourhood com chi I'm already clammed shut. Why waste more words on swine? Silent against your remorse I pile the already cold food onto a plastic plate and go to turn on the television. When I speak of this again it will be for the world to hear.

Revenge takes a long time to plot. I already have the beginning. But the rest must be sequenced. There must be a hole in the middle where the hero (or villain) must die (metaphorically at least) and then be reborn (or fail). In my book (for this is the form my revenge will take) the hero will fail. He'll remain trapped in a spiritual deadness from which there's no escape. His wife will leave him. And he'll regret it, regret it until he dies. Coward that you are, despite all your bravado, you won't die. Not easily at least, not the way people with more strength can, by simply walking off a balcony or downing a hundred sleeping pills.

Revenge takes words, then sentences, then paragraphs. They become chapters, a history of your metamorphoses into monster-hood. A litany of the abuses you suffered at the hands of the Communists, the Nationalists; the abuses you committed against me, against other women, other men.

It takes years, another ten. Bigboy is dead and we've left that night and our tract house in Orange County far behind by the time I'm done. We've moved across the ocean, from there – where it's sunny but cool, where it never rains and the air's so hungry for water our sweat doesn't linger on skin; to here – an enveloping ninety-nine percent humidity, calf-high mud in the streets whenever it's high tide and a water system that carries fungi through the shower to grow between our toes. We're back where you started, a stone's throw from where you were born.

In ten years I've learnt to fight back with my hands and knees, my feet and fists; and afterwards with silences as long and thick as the Great Wall of China. You don't go crazy now. Not often. Only when I provoke.

I'm in front of a flickering screen in the study in our villa in the middle of a swamp across the river from Ho Chi Minh City's District 1.

“What are you doing?” you ask me as I tie up the loose ends of my revenge.

“I’m putting the finishing touches to your life story,” I tell you.

“Oh,” you say. You’re too proud to ask what’s gone into it this grand opus you’ve seen me working on for a decade. You go to bed.

I continue my proofreading as the insects kamikaze in through the window to fry themselves on the fluorescent tube above my head. Somewhere out there, across the puddles brought by the rising night tide a rich woman is wailing about lost love – another of those karaoke parties the privileged functionaries living in this neighbourhood are so fond of.

They can’t know that in the first world they so aspire to it’s not done to sing so late and so loudly. They’ve been aurally assaulted all their lives. Just like it was in the first days of liberation, propaganda-spewing loudspeakers wake our exclusive enclave before the roosters start crowing. Each progression to town in our air-conditioned cars is escorted by a cavalcade of honking. Screeching of cats penetrating each other and quarrelling bush crickets accompany our nights. What’s another tears-in-your-beer ballad thrown into the cacophony?

There’ll be a moment of silence though when my book comes out, a break in business as usual to pay respects to your reputation. It will all be gone, that image they have of you – a model of propriety like your mother before she went senile. They’ll finally see the demons lurking behind your considered opinions, your kind words offered with a soft voice.

I can’t wait. I close the file. I open Gmail. I type in my agent’s address. I type the title in the subject line – HEART BONES, THE WARS IN A LIFE. I type a little cover note. I send it.

The air-conditioner in the bedroom is on. I slide under the duvet. The sheets and duvet covers are Egyptian cotton, according to Phuong, my interior decorator. She’d gone to Singapore to buy the material, fifteen bolts of it, and then had it smuggled in through Cambodia. She knew what her customers liked, she boasted. She wasn’t just a rinky-dink

Chinatown seamstress.

The sheets are cool from the air-conditioning. You're already snoring. The street lights, seeping in from the sides of the Roman blinds Phuong didn't get right after all turn your hair into transparent strands cut into three centimetre lengths. How you like your glass noodles prepared, so they're easier to swallow.

I wonder how you'll swallow the revelations in the novel when it's launched.

We're at a seminar room in one of those five star hotels in New York. Or is it San Francisco? when I begin to read the first chapter about how you let Bigboy wind himself around the lamp post, how the glass shatters all over the floor, you're floating over the dessert spread, your fingers running lightly through the mini fruit tarts. As I sit down to let other people continue telling on you, I see you pick up an almond slice and crunch into it.

My new friend Luc reads from a chapter where you betray your buddies to court a Central Vietnamese princess, his delicious French accent making the act sound like a seduction. Jane, my New York agent, reveals your dastardly treatment of the American woman journalist in her no nonsense Colorado tones. Finally Mai, the street child at the coffee stall on our street corner, singsongs the paragraphs about you debauching the night away in an opium den as Saigon falls and your walk to the Presidential Palace with the invading troops the next morning.

The room is silent when Mai's done. Then it explodes unexpectedly with loud clapping and cheers. I look up from my seat and see that everyone has turned around to applaud you.

You smile uncertainly. I see your thumb and index finger come together, snapping the cocktail stick you're holding into two. You bob your head to acknowledge the goodwill directed your way then begin to back away into the silk lined walls of the room.

An old boyfriend, now a monk, jostles through the crowd and clambers up the stage to give me a hug. “One has only to read this to understand the depth of your relationship, how much you love him,” he whispers, making his final renunciation.

The audience steps over him to surround me and lift me off my feet. I feel myself pushed through the air, bounced along the top of their heads and shoulders towards where you are – at a chocolate fondue fountain.

You take my hand and bow to the room then lean over and look into my eyes. Suddenly, there’s nobody in the room but the two of us.

You offer me a marshmallow you’ve speared and dipped in chocolate. I bite through the glossy dark bitterness, into the soft pink interior. My teeth crack on something hard. I cough and spit it into your hand. You hold it up for me to see. It’s a pearl.

So, this is what the shard of glass I swallowed became after a lifetime of covering up.

“I won’t have it!”

I pluck the pearl from your fingers and put it back in my mouth, between my back teeth. Clamping down with all my strength I crush it to pieces.

I wake up choking. There’s a tooth in my hand, blood on the sheets. Your forearm has somehow fallen across my face. What were you dreaming when you brought that arm down too hard? Or was the tooth loosened last week when I pushed my knee into your groin and you slapped me?

I go to the bathroom to vomit up my anger, to wash away my tears.

It cannot be borne, how the heart cheats us of our free will, our liberty.

Chad Sanderson

## Cold River

Grandpa was always quiet on the river. He sat with his back against the wet inside of the canoe, the brim of his Spanish Moss colored cap pulled low around his sideburns. There were times he made raspy comments to no one in particular- whether the bass were taking or the thunderclouds rolling in from the coast were as foreboding as they looked- but mainly he was quiet. He was the guard of the Lumber, and the kingfishers and snapper turtles and long-finned carp each made their rounds with him, passing under or over the boat as the gnats bobbed across the water and clung in the feathers of mallards drifting with the current.

I was a writer, not a fisherman, but I liked being on the Lumber. I also liked Grandpa and the two of us got along well together. He complimented my fishing even though it was poor, which kept my spirits up when nothing was biting. There was something about Pembroke that seemed untainted: the soothing whisper of the wind passing through cottonwoods, the distant rumble of freight trains, the smell of pine trees and fresh earth. It gave me the feeling of being in the presence of something much bigger than myself, something that had deep secrets and a forgotten past. Grandpa gave me the same feeling. He was short, dark skinned, and wore his gray hair in a tight ponytail. His eyes were a muddy brown and oftentimes seemed to be lost in the river; looking far away- past the bend where the branches of water oaks stretched towards us like grasping fingers, past the turtles sun-bathing on ugly black logs, past the highway rising in the distance like the spine of a noisy beast, and even past the miles of cotton fields that extended into the neighboring towns of Red Springs, St. Paul's, and Barker Ten Mile.

I suddenly felt a sharp prick on my neck and instinctively slapped at the source. Mosquitoes. “The bugs are tearing me up. Don’t they bother you, Grandpa?” Grandpa looked at me and smiled. I was about to say something else, but he lifted a finger to his lips and shushed me before turning back to his line. Grandpa didn’t talk on the river if he could help it. Whenever we passed other fishermen, or old hunters with duck rifles crouched in rusty flatboats; he acknowledged them with a wave or a nod but never a, “Hello, how are you?” I’m almost sure he found it insulting to the water in some way, like it broke a secret bond between them. It was a treaty of silence signed by both parties, an understanding that the most important things usually remained unsaid.

Grandpa let out some of his line as the autumn breeze carried his bobber downwind. Its rubbery pink coat disappeared below the surface and re-appeared moments later fighting against the invisible tug of the current. A blue heron watched from a mob of cattails. His knife shaped beak was the color of pine sap, and he ruffled his cobalt feathers as the bobber floated past him. His slender neck turned with the canoe as it drifted downstream, gazing at us with eyes that looked like dewdrops on a sugarberry bush. “Beautiful, beautiful bird,” Grandpa whispered. He held the heron’s stare until it flew off, its princely figure vanishing behind the tupelo trees, squawking over the cicadas’ otherworldly drone. Suddenly, Grandpa’s line went taut as a bass threw itself out of the river. It thrashed in the air, and its green body curved like the brim of a baseball cap. Grandpa jerked up, yanked backwards, and began to reel. The bass struggled in the water- dived low, pulled away, and flung itself from side to side until Grandpa knocked all the fight out of it. He hauled its limp body into the boat and held it by the mouth for me to see. It was a big fish; seven or eight pounds at least. Grandpa put the bass into the bucket and sat back in the canoe, satisfied. I spent the rest of the afternoon trying, in vain, to make a catch. Grandpa was content to watch silently and stare at the clouds. When the sun began to dip into the water, and the first stars emerged in the sky like lost fireflies; he took one long look at the river, picked up his paddle, and we headed for home.

Grandpa docked the canoe at the edge of a sandy bank and pulled me out by the wrist. He took the fish bucket next, handed it to me, and then tied the boat to a cinderblock with a piece of rope. We could see our house from the riverbank. It was perched at the top of a hill, dark except for the dull blue glow of the T.V. that flickered between the cracks of the closed curtains on the patio. As we walked through knee-high grass we passed a mottled wooden playground hidden in the shadows of the pine trees. A single swing with rusty chains and a worn-out seat swayed in the breeze, creaking in tune to our slow march up the hill to the house. We entered the garage through a side door. The fish would spoil if we left them unattended; so Grandpa took off his jacket, threw a towel over his work bench, and plucked the bass one-by-one from the bucket and put them on the table. He cleaned them with an old Indian knife. He smoothly separated the basses' scales from their skin, lopped off the heads, and finally ran the blade across their stomachs, opening up the guts. He pulled out the gooey innards with one hand and threw them into a plastic bag for the dog. Grandpa was a master at this. During the Vietnam War he was a food inspector for the American ground forces. He learned how to slaughter a cow with a pocket knife and cook only the best parts.

When I was young I asked Grandpa if he had ever shot anyone. "I never touched a gun," he said, with a wave of his gnarled hands. "But your Uncle James was an infantryman. The only Indian in his division. He made us proud." From pictures, I knew Uncle James was brawny. He had wide shoulders, a wider smile, jet black hair, and tanned skin so dark it was almost red. I never met him, but his Army photo held a spot in the middle of the mantle in the living room. There was only one other photograph of James. He was much younger in it, maybe fifteen or sixteen. He stood shirtless on a river bank with one arm wrapped around the trunk of a cypress tree and the other holding a fishing pole without a lure. His hair was unkempt, jeans torn and caked in mud, and was grinning mischievously from beneath a straw hat. A second boy stood beside him with his back to the camera, hands on his hips, shoeless in the sand as coffee colored birds soared over-head, suspended in the sky like tad-poles frozen beneath the surface of an icy lake. Sometimes Grandpa

would linger at the mantle on his way out of the house. His eyes seemed very distant in those moments, and they shone like polished stones from the river bed.

Grandpa finished cleaning the fish, wrapped them in plastic, and stacked them neatly in the freezer. He ate dinner without saying a word. Mom threw him softball questions over the lasagna. “So were the fish biting today, John? How’s your arm holding up? Have you seen anything interesting on television?” Sometimes would Grandpa would nod, but he barely seemed to hear her. It went on like this until Dad whispered something in her ear and everyone stopped talking. When the cuckoo clock chirped three times, Grandpa put his dish in the sink, took two yellow pills, disappeared into his bedroom, and closed the door. For a moment, things were very quiet. Our forks rested neatly in their napkins, the cuckoo clock chimed softly, the T.V. was on mute, and our terrier Rudy gnawed on an old shoe in the den. Mom ran a finger through her blonde curls, the way she does when she’s thinking. “Joey,” she said. “What do you think of putting Grandpa in a nursing home?”

“Ellen,” said Dad. He sounded very tired.

“Why not, George? What’s a better time?”

“Not now. Please.”

“Joey, your Grandfather hasn’t been doing too well. He doesn’t talk. He barely leaves his room. I’m sure you’ve seen a change in him lately. It might be dementia. That’s what the doctor said.”

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“Well, something’s wrong. He didn’t even touch his food.”

“Ellen.”

“The point is, Grandpa isn’t well, and we need to put him somewhere he can be taken care of. He’s not happy here anymore, as much as it hurts me to say it. Your father and I have already talked this over. We only want what’s best for him. That’s all.”

Dad rubbed his forehead. He looked defeated and old.

I couldn’t sleep that night. My body felt too heavy for the bed. After hours passed, I turned to look at the digital clock on my nightstand. 5:00 AM. No use in trying anymore. I sat up, yawned, and gazed out the window. The backyard was illuminated by the light of the moon, and the shadows of oak trees stretched across the lawn like iron bars. I rubbed my eyes. Grandpa’s stout figure was reeling in a line by the water’s edge, adjusting his lure, testing his throw, and casting to the middle of the river. He stood silhouetted against the darkness, his Spanish-Moss colored cap pulled low around his side-burns. I couldn’t see his face but I imagined it was quiet, searching the current for the answer to a question that could not or would not be put into words. As he stood knee deep in the muddy water, the moon reflecting off the Lumber’s quiet surface; I thought I heard the river whisper something in a long forgotten language- a language only the bass, the blue herons, and Grandpa could understand.

About Chad: Chad Sanderson is an undergraduate Writing and Linguistics major at Georgia Southern University. He is currently working on obtaining his Bachelor’s degree and keeping himself sane by reading, writing, and teaching martial arts.

Katie Coyle

## Girl Eats Boy

A few days after graduation, the girl sits on the beach with some former classmates, their faces lit orange in the glow of the bonfire, their red plastic cups full. She observes the girls. For four years she's watched them conduct magnum opuses of emotion, pining themselves into oblivion. For what, the girl thinks. For the chance to now be sitting under some bro's arm. She herself has spent adolescence developing qualities with real world value: authority, drive, will. You can't cultivate these things and a boyfriend at the same time. It is better to eat than to be eaten. Still, the girl thinks. Maybe it would be nice not to be a virgin?

The boy's yearbook photo shows him shirtless on a pier two summers ago. It has served as a reminder: the boy is dreamy. Last year, he went from basketball player to stoner; his blonde curls went dirty and wild. But the photo's publication was like the shifting of a veil—everyone realizes now that the weed has done nothing to his exquisite bone structure. If he were less high all the time, he might notice the way girls have looked at him since the yearbook went out. They look at him like they want to swallow him whole.

When the boy catches her eye with his half-closed ones, giving a sexy, enigmatic half-smile, the girl trains her laser-sharp focus of energy on her next thought. The thought is: "I am going to have sex with that boy."

When the boy smiles at the girl, he's thinking about a meatball sandwich. She asks him to leave with her and he does, thinking he'll be able to eat one. He couldn't ask his friends for a ride to the deli, a mile away, because he knew they'd act laughingly superior about his hunger. They all started smoking last autumn, but he's the only one to have made a career

of it. It hasn't yet occurred to the boy that the girl's invitation might have nothing to do with a meatball sandwich. He can already taste the oregano on his tongue.

She knows the initial act will be a loss, not a gain. After her graduation dinner, where her parents poured her too much wine, the girl had a string of panicky dreams, in which unfamiliar naked bodies knocked against her. Teeth on her neck left permanent scarring, even the softest of kisses obliterated eyeballs, earlobes. A nightmare, and yet—slightly seductive. So sweet, to be subtracted from. She's willing to lose tonight. But it will be the first, the last, the only time.

He has to turn twice, to remember who's driving. The girl—her red hair pulled into a knot. Hair the color of tomato sauce. The third time he turns, a memory: fifth grade. She wrote in a notebook. He was a basketball phenom then. Because he could, he yanked the notebook away. Held it out of her reach. She'd written a poem he read out loud. Here in her car, he wants to apologize. But maybe that was some other girl. The boy remembers she didn't try to snatch it back, didn't shout to drown him out. She'd bared her teeth at him. She'd snarled.

She parks somewhere arbitrary. She turns the key, and the world is snuffed out. Girl, boy, car. The boy laughs at something. The girl unbuckles her seatbelt, gets on top of him. His lips are dry but his mouth is wet as anything, and she can taste the sweet foresty weed on his breath. The boy accepts her kisses like water. She wonders how much this is going to hurt.

Life for the boy unfolds with dream logic. Occasionally girls just get on top of him. Hey, the boy thinks. Can't complain. Suddenly he feels something rear up in him: the ghost of the basketball star. Like the older version of his younger self is inside, watching the scene unfold from behind his eyes with a self-satisfied smirk. The boy can't stop his inner point guard from taking the girl's head in his hands with violent urgency, and biting hard on her lower lip.

Alarmed, the girl tastes for blood. Her control of the situation—slipping. Is this normal?

Maybe if she'd been on even one date in four years, she'd know. But it's hard to even remember the time when she had crushes. The girl's fierce and frightening ambition never extended to boys. Always she has striven in the direction of Yale. She searches the glittering black voids of the boy's eyes in the dark. Just one loss, she reminds herself, in an inevitable lifetime of gains. She reaches down to recline the seat.

His high is peeling up around the edges: he senses the point guard at the controls. Point Guard is inside his eyeballs, maneuvering him like an airplane, an SUV, something made of metal. The girl slips his gray-blue t-shirt over his head and Point Guard thinks, I deserve this. If the boy is here in the passenger seat of a girl's car, while the girl contorts herself to kiss the line of fuzz beneath his navel, it's because this is where he deserves to be. The boy nods his blonde head sagely. Then the girl gasps.

The girl has just now noticed that the boy has only one nipple. But—no. In yearbook photo, he has two. She pictures it very clearly. If he'd only had one, the ensuing conversation would have different. Surely? Maybe the girls sitting around the bonfire would shrink from this development, would excuse themselves to gag, or keep going like it was none of their business, but this girl is too much of a scientist for that. The boy props himself up on his elbows, cocks his head like a dog. In an effort to be sensitive, the girl doesn't speak—she turns on the overhead light, and with two fingers pokes the bare spot on the left half of his chest. He glances down.

For a minute, he says nothing. And then he says: It was there this morning. I swear.

The girl is a born strategist, a future CEO neurosurgeon Secretary of State. She sweeps the car with her gaze, and when it falls on the boy's t-shirt, crumpled in a ball in a cup holder, she picks it up, and shakes it out like clean laundry. A small disc of flesh flies from the armhole and falls flat on the empty driver's seat. The girl and the boy stare at the limp little nipple for a few tense, silent seconds. Is this, the girl wonders again with clinical detachment, normal?

Well, says the boy as he cups the empty spot with his hand. Point Guard is freaking out up there, curled in the fetal position on the floor of the control room. Poor Point Guard, the boy thinks, feeling kind of sorry for him. Point Guard did not see this coming. Point Guard will have to tell this story to every girl who ever sees him shirtless. Point Guard will never again lounge on a pier without shame. And then the horror is a ringing in his ears, because the boy has realized: he and Point Guard are the same person. The same stupid stoned one-nippled dipshit.

The girl doesn't notice the look on the boy's face as he turns to her now, his helpless silent plea, because she is appraising the new weirdness of his chest. It sort of looks like you're winking, she says.

The boy pushes her off him, and stumbles out of the car, into the thick summer dark. This is not a dream. The girl (a witch?) has done something to him and she has done it on purpose—without his noticing, she plucked the nipple from his skin like it was a loose button on a winter coat. She must have done it, he thinks, because of the poem. She must have waited all this time to win. The boy walks five steps in the direction he thinks the beach is before falling to his knees, retching and half-naked in the night.

And the girl, before she slides back over into the driver's seat, takes the nipple into her hand. It is soft, still warm. She cannot imagine his anguish, but she tries to—what if this was her own nipple, pointlessly lost? The girl waits, expecting tears, but none come. Empathy, she thinks: another skill to cultivate. She doesn't even remember the time the boy grabbed the poem away—she was eleven then, and the cruelty of boys was everywhere. It's a wonder she didn't let it swallow her whole. The girl puts the nipple on her tongue like a communion wafer. It tastes neither sweet nor bitter. It has the slightest tang of salt, of sweat. But mostly it tastes like nothing. The girl keeps it in her mouth the whole way home, like she's waiting for it to melt, but it stays as intact as she does.

Tracy Krulik

## You Can Stop the Beat

“Let’s go see Hairspray this afternoon,” I said to my husband.

“Are you insane?” Tom replied.

I expected many losses when I learned that I had cancer, but one caught me completely off guard: I lost my love of music. Well, maybe I didn’t lose my love exactly. It was as if I had locked it away somewhere safe until I could put that whole cancer business behind me. But what would happen if I never could put cancer behind me? If I lived the rest of my life under its thrall, would I never enjoy music again?

The first indication that Music and I might have to part ways occurred a couple of weeks after my 2007 diagnosis of an incurable but, thankfully, slow-growing form of pancreatic cancer. Unfortunately, at the time, I was back in school working towards a Ph.D. in—wait for it—music.

One night, in an analysis class, we deconstructed Beethoven’s Waldstein Sonata. As I listened to the signature ostinato grow in intensity, a pipeline of tears filled up behind my eyes and threatened to burst. What are the odds that I’ll live to complete my doctorate and teach this piece? That was when I knew that music had to go. Not only did I not want to feel such powerful emotions, but I also felt like music was the key to unleashing them.

Beginning with my earliest memory—watching Oklahoma at Jones Beach in New York when I was three—music defined me. I attended theater camps and competed in classical voice and piano competitions throughout high school, worked professionally in musi-

cal theater in my twenties, and pursued a doctorate in music theory in my thirties. But Beethoven's sonata unleashed emotions I had tried to suppress—reminding me that I would never be cancer-free—and for the first time in my life I wanted nothing to do with music. I could handle listening to Top 40 or some random Euro-techno-pop tune on the car radio, but anything that had once been meaningful, like Broadway music, evoked too many emotions that I simply did not want to feel.

Over the next few years I stuck with my studies to keep my skills honed and forced myself to listen to pieces assigned for classes—assuming that one day my mind would embrace music again. It didn't. In January 2011, I finally accepted that there might never be room in my life for both tumors and music. I took a leave of absence from school to see if I would regret leaving music behind, but rather than regret, I felt peace. That week, I sold my piano and started writing a book. By clearing away the dead leaves of music, a new passion germinated.

A year later I was feeling exceptionally healthy—since a surgeon removed the primary tumor from my pancreas, the small metastases on my liver and chest had not grown—and I figured that because I was doing so well my brain must have green-lighted music once again. So on a whim one Sunday morning, I bought matinee tickets to see *Hairspray* at Signature Theater near our home in northern Virginia.

My husband was leery. Tom grew up with music as well—he trained on reed instruments in childhood and later picked up piano, guitar, and drums by ear. Though now an attorney, Tom worked for years as a jazz musician and later became an actor and award-winning musical director. Similar to me, Music began tormenting him after my diagnosis, but rather than feel sad when he heard the drive of a major-ninth chord, he would seethe. I knew that he still couldn't listen to SiriusXM "Broadway's Best" in the car without turning red and starting to shake (they do play more Ethel Merman than anyone should have to endure), but I figured enough time must have passed for both of us to handle a live contemporary show again.

“Hairspray is campy and fun,” I said when he worried that the show would upset me. “How could I possibly get depressed from that?”

Halfway through the opening number where Tracy Turnblad, a 1960s high-schooler with dreams to dance on television, sings, “Good Morning Baltimore,” I felt my throat constrict. By the third song, “Mama, I’m a Big Girl Now,” I realized that I was not experiencing joyful tears. In their bubblegum voices, Tracy and two of her classmates were pleading with their moms to let them grow up. It’s a fun number with a hook that never lets go. Mamas: “Stop! Don’t! No!” And the girls: “Please!” But I wanted to pull the plug on the whole production by this point. I was thinking: “Stop [singing]! Don’t [make me sit through this]! No [more, I can’t take it]! Please!” Music broke out of its lockbox and brought with it repressed emotions.

Not wanting Tom to worry (and also because I felt extremely foolish), I pretended to scratch my cheek so that he wouldn’t see me wiping away tears. My subterfuge was made easier when he left to visit the restroom during intermission.

In the second act, my misery ran at a sort of medium drip until Motormouth Mabel, an African American record-shop owner fighting for race equality sang, “I Know Where I’ve Been.” Her gospel voice was so emotive that I lost control. I felt like I was in a scene from *Glee*—me, spotlighted in a pitch-black auditorium, saltwater pouring down my cheeks, reflecting on how the ticking time bomb on my vital organs would one day start to count down again.

Three numbers left. Almost to the curtain. I pulled myself together for the first two, but the rich Broadway sound of the finale, “You Can’t Stop the Beat,” finished me off.

I exited the auditorium before Tom, and covered my face in my hair when I told him that I was headed to the restroom. I needed to wash the tears from my face, but when I saw

my reflection in the mirror I knew that there would be no way to hide it—I looked like an extra on *The Walking Dead*.

Once we were in the courtyard in front of the theater I caved: “Tommie, I can never see a show again!” The pipe erupted.

“Oh my god, what happened?”

“I’m never going to survive this cancer, am I? I’m fooling myself into thinking I’m healthy. As soon as the music started I lost it.”

He squooshed me into him until I calmed down a bit.

“I thought it was just me,” he said. “All I felt was pure anger when I heard the music.”

“Wait.” I stepped back. “In the encore when that chorus girl was standing right in front of us and I was bawling my eyes out, you were sitting there looking pissed?”

“Yeah, I was staring straight ahead furious.”

“That’s hysterical!”

As we walked back to our car, we laughed (through some more tears) and discussed whether it was time for one or both of us to try to work through these emotions with a therapist. But we’re fine most days of the year. The only times we might crack are when it’s time to return for scans at Johns Hopkins, or on the rare occasion when we listen to a song that once was meaningful. We agreed that it’s safer to stop the beat than unearth shunned emotions.

Hairspray will likely be our last show. We joke that 2007 was the year the music died. I can now say that 2012 was the year we buried it.

About Tracy: Tracy Krulik is a freelance writer who reports regularly for Washington Post Express. Author of the eBook I Have Cancer. And I've Never Felt Better! Krulik lives with two cats, four bikes, and one husband in northern Virginia.

Jessica Dur Taylor

# Balloons

I knew his name before I ever knew who he was.

At St. Thomas More High School, the more popular you were, the more variations your name had. Barlow Lancelot: Bar. Lance. King (as in Arthur?). But there were so many popular senior boys that he didn't stand out until the spring musical. He was the unexpected star of *Grease*, his Kenickie easily out-shining the affable Danny. I'd seen the movie more times than I could count, having watched it daily during my eleventh winter. I knew every burp in the old VHS, every place where Mom had pressed the pause button just a smidgen late; I knew all the scenes where Olivia Newton John wore a fake ponytail, had nailed the hand jive choreography. When the announcement of the spring musical was made, I wished I had the nerve to audition, dreamed of playing Rizzo, was almost coaxed into joining as an extra, but ultimately settled for attending three performances, two of which I was seated in the front row.

I was one of those below average freshman girls, not pretty or skinny enough to elicit upperclassmen attention, not artsy or weird enough to elicit upperclassmen ridicule. Nothing special. Which is exactly why, when the idea came to me, I knew that I might just be nobody enough to pull it off.

At STM, with its prison architecture and frigid air conditioning, the balloon kiosk served as the administration's emblem of fun. It was the place where students could purchase balloons for other students, whose names would be called during the afternoon announcements. The beginning of the year was always the business boom, the excitement of back to school buoyed by consumerism. On their birthdays, the popular kids could hardly wrestle

every last balloon into their cars (inevitably one popped or was given away to some lucky passerby). Heartbreak was a fourteen-year-old boy waiting after school for his mom holding a single happy birthday balloon. But I liked to fancy myself the only balloon secret admirer.

There was an art to it.

I recognized almost all of the mothers working the balloon counter; their enthusiasm betrayed smug gratitude for their popular children. That first day, the mother stared hard at me, as though she was trying to read a riddle in my blank face and shiny brown hair.

But I had tailored a list of foolproof rules to keep me safe: never make eye contact; act natural; always use exact change; make the purchase during first lunch, when most of the seniors were still in class and most of the freshmen were ballooning up on grease from the cafeteria. I slipped the note into the envelope, already queasy at my rhyme:

School's more exciting  
when I see your smile  
My mind and my body  
taken over, Kenickie-style

§

That day I bolted right after school, too scared to watch him retrieve his balloon, sure that he'd intuitively know it was me. The second one he picked up a day late and I only glimpsed him ripping open the envelope as Amy, my best friend, dragged me out into the parking lot. Already she was getting exasperated by my devotion. When I'd said "secret admirer" she envisioned more note-passing in Biology. What she hadn't anticipated was me brainstorming clever rhymes while she watched *Saved By the Bell* virtually alone after school. You just missed Slater's afro jiggle! What is wrong with you?

From my locker I watched Barlow retrieve the third balloon, betraying (could this be real?) excitement. At the very least curiosity. The play had been over for a month now. He read quickly, then put the note back in the envelope and into his back pocket. He patted it once, then looked awkwardly at the balloon. He made a reticent move towards the trash-can, shook himself straight, and strode to the door like he'd just been given a scholarship to somewhere he wanted to go.

Still, I knew I was blowing up a fantasy that was sure to be popped. How long could I keep cranking out these cutesy rhymes before he got bored? And one day, wouldn't one of the Blonde Bobs (Amy's name for the mothers) get wind of my name, perhaps mention it to her kid, who mentioned it to...

Charlotte Goodwin. Her name was synonymous with talent. She wrote poetry that got published in teen lit journals like Stone Soup, had danced the Nutcracker since she was six, and was the best Rizzo since Stockard Channing. She was the only sophomore girl in the freshmen second period P.E. because of her private piano lesson during sophomore P.E. She was rightfully peeved. For starters, second period was the very worst for P.E. because you're wearing the muggy Louisiana grime-air by ten o'clock. Even worse, freshmen P.E. was "taught" by Coach Arnold, who wore too-tight polyester shorts that crept up his chunky inner thighs. He also ogled the pretty skinny girls.

With the exception of a few die-hard athletes, most of the prettyskinnies hated P.E., and Coach Arnold was a willing sacrificial lamb for their severe protests. As long as they moaned and complained, he smiled and cajoled. The more they fluttered their eyelids or caressed their flat stomachs (But I just got my period, Coach Arnold!), the more he'd flash that sweaty-eyed grin (Then it's a perfect time for you to work out some of those cramps!). As for those of us who had flabby arms and tummies untamed by our P.E. shorts, well, we became part of the outdoor shrubbery, blending right into the blue and maroon stripes running the length of the basketball court.

Though Charlotte definitely qualified as a prettyskinny, she seemed to derive no pleasure from his attention. Somehow, we'd become cursory friends. We exchanged glances when Coach Arnold's butt crack crept out of his polyester as he demonstrated a discus throw, discussed the probability of Bill Clinton inhaling, partnered up for the medicine ball toss.

She mentioned nothing about Barlow's balloons. It was easy to forget that she was dating (probably having sex with!) the guy I thought about even more than Father Louie, the young priest who said Mass once a month at school. Sure, she got to kiss him. But I made him smile sometimes, and he didn't even know my name.

§

Amy and I watched Grease in her loft bedroom with two twin beds. Her room was all pinks and whites and the softest cotton. A box of Lucky Charms was spread out on the floor in front of us so that we could more easily pick the marshmallows from the cardboard cereal. When we got to the slumber party scene, I dutifully performed Jan's "Brush-a, brush-a, brush-a" song without a flaw. Amy laughed so hard that she spit a chunk of blue marshmallow out onto the floor. I laughed, too, but I was tired of loving that song. Tired of going along with the consensus (established years before) that we should fast forward through "Hopelessly Devoted to You" because it was too long, too boring. If I couldn't even admit to my best friend how much I loved Sandy's nightgown in that scene, wasn't I the actress?

That night, bloated, I wrote rhyme after rhyme and rejected them all.

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Amy was right, I would get caught. And the craziest part? I didn't care.

In fact, my fear of getting found out was dwarfed by my fear of no longer writing rhymes, pushing a damp dollar bill across the counter, imagining the cigar box where he stashed all my notes. I thought about school without the balloons: gray and over-air-conditioned. Classes I'd long ago grown bored with, and the looming Theology assignment of memorizing—and then reciting to the entire class—the names of all sixty-six books of the Bible. Old and New Testament.

And then one day in P.E. Charlotte and I were getting changed in the locker-room while all the other girls tried desperately to de-frizz their hair and resurrect their soggy faces. She turned abruptly towards me just as I was tugging my shirt on over my bra. My eye barely caught hers as she glimpsed my belly. Flustered, it took me a minute to register her words.

Barlow got into Brown. And he's going. He's, like, practically enrolled already. And I'm really happy for him, I just don't know if I want a long distance relationship, you know? I mean, he's going to be so far away, surrounded by so many new girls, who are going to be, obviously, so pretty and smart—here she takes a breath and I'm trying to figure out why she's spilling this to me—I mean, college isn't like high school where there are so few original and interesting people it's easy to be someone special, or noticeable.

I nod.

If I were him, I'm sure I'd want to be free to explore my options.

I'm still nodding, but she looks like she expects a response so I say:

So are you, like, breaking up with him?

I say it because I'm actually curious about how she'll deal with this major crisis, but as it slips out of my mouth I remember the note I sent him just yesterday—

Your eyes warm these frigid halls  
Your mouth looks good enough to eat  
Your voice echoes off the walls  
And my heart skips, skips a beat

—and I sort of catch myself and for the first time since she started talking, Charlotte seems to notice me. She sighs.

Well, I don't think I'll break up with him until he leaves. Because there are still two more months of school, and prom's coming up, and it would suck to have to be at school without a boyfriend.

And then Charlotte starts to cry. Not belly sobs, but tears so real I have to stop myself from touching them. Instead I hug her. I feel her small body shaking, her crying tapering and then finding renewed strength as she no doubt remembers all the great sex they have. And as I imagine all the things that she is going to miss about her boyfriend—his disheveled morning hair, the stubble that is popular among the senior and junior boys—I realize that I really know nothing about him.

And for the first time since Grease, I'm mad. Mad because here I am comforting a girl who gets to hold hands with her boyfriend in the hallway, gets to shop for prom dresses with her friends, gets to roll her eyes when Coach Arnold compliments her badminton swing. Mad because it would be worth it to have my high school boyfriend leave for a fancy college with prettier, cooler girls than me, if it meant getting to have a high school boyfriend. Mad because Charlotte doesn't even seem to notice the secret admirer that is weekly assaulting her boyfriend with elegant poetry. Mad because those tears are mine.

Mad because now the thrill was over. Barlow was going to Brown; I was running out of rhymes and dollar bills. I needed to end it. But how?

For a few days, I thought about Rizzo's sorrowful song and tortured myself with thoughts of the worst things I could do. I could sing, "You're the One that I Want," outside his bedroom window. I could declare my love in a letter so long it would weigh the balloon down to the ground.

Instead, I called him one night from a tent of sheets on my bed. I could hear the television in the living room, could smell the spaghetti I'd eaten for supper on my breath. Though I knew he was probably at home doing trigonometry problems at the kitchen table, I couldn't stop thinking about Kenickie at the car race down at the L.A. River. I hung up a few times until I didn't.

I begged him to never tell anyone at school. I wanted to believe him when he assured me he wouldn't. My balloon admirer hadn't been played on a major frequency, but it certainly had been picked up as a minor buzz on STM's gossip channel. Barlow was popular, which meant he had no loyalties beyond his crowd. Why would he keep this juicy bit a secret? Then again, I thought, what if he keeps it a secret out of embarrassment? After all, no one knows who I am. Maybe he won't tell because there's nothing, really, to tell.

Here is what I will never forget:

You're a freshman? Wow. From those notes I guessed you were at least a junior. I kinda thought you were one of the senior girls just playing a trick on me.

And there you had it. My writing had transformed me into one of the cool! senior! girls playing a trick on Barlow! I could not have been more thrilled.

As long as I can remember, I've hated endings. Most kids grieve the end of summer, but I've always grieved the end of the school year; summer happens again and again, but fifth grade is only once, and then it's gone. The first time I saw the ending of Grease I was annoyed that Danny and Sandy's red convertible becomes airborne, heaven-bound. Even at twelve, I knew I would never be as thin as Sandy, as bad-ass as Rizzo, would never nab the most popular guy at school. I could still imagine it though. But a flying car? From then on, I always stopped the tape before it happened.

The real ending of this story, the honest one, goes like this: Barlow still didn't notice me at school. And the following year, after he'd gone to Brown, Charlotte began dating Keith Broussard, the guy who played Putzie in Grease. Though we usually smiled and said hey in the hallways, she never really talked to me again.

But I wish this story ended with me floating away on a balloon. Set adrift above the gray prison of St. Thomas More High School, unworried about my flabby arms and eleven-minute mile. I wish I could tell you that I became close friends with Charlotte and she helped me to unleash some of my own creative talent. I wish I could tell you that Barlow found me at school the next day and dragged me down an isolated hall just as the bell rang to begin class. He kissed me passionately, met my gaze, and then drifted away to Physics. I wish I could say I played a Pink Lady in a local production of Grease a few years later when I went to college. Mostly, I wish I could tell you that I was sent a few happy birthday balloons that freshman year. And boy, it sure felt good to walk outside into the thick Louisiana air and wrestle those suckers into the back seat of Amy's mom's Corolla.

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