

millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium

Millennium

Spring 2001

VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University

English Department
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

mi

Editors:

Angelica Bega, executive editor
Carl T. Holscher, design director
Cory McLaughlin, managing editor
Sumitra Duncan, fiction editor
Elizabeth Hodges, editor
Amy Nunis, editor

copyeditors and readers:

Sarah Anderson, Ashleigh Garrison, Sarah Hogan,
Eva Hutchinson, Todd McCall, Matthew Myers, and
Zack Rickey
faculty advisor:
William Tester

Millennium: <http://www.has.vcu.edu/millennium/>

The editors wish to thank the following for their generous assistance: Marcel Cornis-Pope, Chair of the English Department; Jeff Lodge and the faculty and staff of the English Department; Dr. Wilma Wirt of the School of Mass Communications; Henrietta Brown at Student Affairs; and Lisa Brownlee of the Student Media Commission.

Millennium is an annual publication funded by student fees. The editors invite submissions of poetry, fiction and cover art. All hard copy submissions must be accompanied by a disk copy, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for reply or return of submission. Send to: Millennium c/o Department of English, Hibbs Bldg., 900 Park Avenue, P.O. Box 842005, Richmond, VA 23284-2005

No part of this book may be reproduced without written permission of the publisher and the English Department chair or advisor.

All materials copyright 2001 by Millennium
All rights reserved

millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium

Spring 2001

Literature

Bocca.....	Sandi Terry	6
Postlude.....	J.B. Shelleby	18
Hunger.....	Jon Pineda	26
Three Palms	Sumitra Duncan	27
Rub.....	Boz Bowles	33
Wait.....	Damon Tabor	38
Intermission.....	Jon Pineda	43
Water.....	Laura Brist	44
Scar.....	Traci Wood	50
Plum.....	Traci Wood	55
Saturday for a Straight Line.....	Alex Andrews	66
Andre the Giant.....	Robert Widdicombe	73
Girly Sounds.....	Kelly Gerow	87
Margarita.....	Amy Nunis	95
Cheyenne.....	Dave Sterner	99
At Arm's Length.....	Patrick Egan	100
Under Golgatha.....	Nicole Anderson Ellis	109

Art

Cable Car Intersection.....	Arianne K. Culley	Cover
Planting Potatos.....	Kathleen McLaughlin	56
Spring Storm.....	Kathleen McLaughlin	57
Untitled.....	Amitra Corey	58
Enemy of the Sun.....	Bruce Wilhelm	59
The Jefferson Hotel.....	Bruce Wilhelm	60
People.....	Bruce Wilhelm	61
That Last Supper Looking One.....	Bruce Wilhelm	62
Untitled.....	Amitra Corey	63
After Funeral.....	Kathleen McLaughlin	64
Shepherd.....	Kathleen McLaughlin	65

millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium mi

Bocca

Sandi Terry

My first kiss, Italy, at fifteen. A white boat on the mouth of the river. I don't remember much about it. I can't remember exactly what the boat looked like, whether the sides were polished or painted, wood or fiberglass. I remember it took my weight as I stepped into it, bobbing like a bottle on the water, and the way the thin trunks of trees looked like bundled kindling wedged into the mud along the bank. From the dirt road lip of the river all that was visible was the bursts of their branches, bare, like chimney brushes. I don't remember much about the boy either. Not his face, anyway, or even his name. Just that in the dark I followed him. I remember the way the loose boards of the pier wobbled and rocked under my sneakers. The short crop of his hair, a white collared shirt and his hand. He held it palm out, rough and big to steady me as I lifted my foot off the warped planks, over the edge and into the white boat.

It must have belonged to one of the wealthier families that lived up the mountain because I remember an enclosure, a cabin of sorts. The other boats belonged to the fishermen from Bocca di Magra. Their boats didn't have cabins, just chests and benches. Nets and lines. Dried guts and glints of silver scales like coin money. The stink of their catch.

This is what I'm thinking about as the train rattles along the tracks, as a different Italy, the *now* Italy blurs by like an oil painting, wet. The trains are not like I remember them. Torn Naugahyde on the seats is frayed into pieces of gray string, knotted. The windows are clouded and splotted with dust and fingerprints. I remember them more like the *Orient Express*. Rick and I have passed that and upgraded. We have a cabin to ourselves and Rick has his nose in a tourist guidebook.

"We should have stayed in Rome," he says without looking up. This is the first time Rick has spoken since the man came for our tickets and he had to ask me what biglietti meant.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

I just shake my head and return to the window. Outside are the gray stone buildings I remember.

The boy was Italian and had come with Gianni, the son of the groundskeeper for a millionaire who lived up the side of the mountain behind our house. They invited my family up there one afternoon and my sister and I met Gianni. A thin, tan Italian kid with long straight arms. I remember his arms and the way he smiled at my sister while he spoke. He spoke English. Gianni brought the boy, and my sister and I walked with them in the dark across the narrow road that ran in front of our house. I don't remember what we talked about. The boy didn't speak much English.

"Sei una bella ragazza," he said to me. Beautiful girl.

I might have blushed in the darkness, but I don't remember that either. Gianni and my sister had disappeared into one of the boats and I followed the boy.

Outside, the buildings have given way to cliffs. I watch a streak of olive trees. Red nets hang fat with fruit like udders beneath them.

I nudge Rick, "Check it out."

He looks up and out the window. "Olives?" he asks without really asking.

"Yeah."

"Cool." He goes back to reading the guide. I watch as he slides his hand beneath the page he's reading, still finishing the last paragraph but eager to move on. "Venice. Man. Venice would have been so cool. Could've gone in one of those gondolas." He looks up at me. "Do they really sing to you in those things?"

"I don't think so. Maybe."

"Tell me again why we aren't going there."

"It's dirty. Expensive, touristy. We'd have to drop a lot of money."

"But it'd be romantic," he says, massaging the back of his neck.

I look around the cabin of the train. It's small.

Close. Rick and I are opposite each other on couches that pull out into beds.

"Yeah, I guess so."

I first saw Rick at Ivan's New Year's Eve party.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Ivan throws the best parties. He tells me it's a gay thing. I was depressed over Ivan's roommate, Travis, who'd just dumped me. Was a mess. I needed a party, drinks with friends. I just didn't want anyone to see me with mascara streaking my checks if I happened to run into Travis. So I told Ivan, no way.

"Sister-girl," he said. "In that big old house, you ain't never gonna see the boy."

I let him convince me.

Ivan had filled the basement with buckets of dry ice. When I noticed Rick, he was leaning against a wall near the keg. Back flat, one leg out at an angle, the other bent and butted against the wall. Swirls of fog like low water around his ankle. He was wearing a white Polo shirt tucked into a pair of jeans. He held a plastic cup half filled with beer on which he or someone else had scrawled drunk mother-fucker in black magic marker. I remember the ink was all smudgy and there was a dark smear near his mouth. When I passed him to get to the keg he made a face, a sort of half smile, toothy. I thought I might like to kiss him at midnight.

Rick has great lips. Rob Lowe lips, red and fat like a girl's. I watch as he licks his finger and pinches up his page in the guidebook.

Outside we pass blocks of red-roofed houses, and an old woman feeding chickens. Along another cliff, the twisted, knotted ropes of grapevines. Several men carrying crescent shaped baskets snug like babies against their hips. In the corridor a man wearing a suit and fedora pauses outside our cabin. He stares in. A shameless voyeur. Rick doesn't see him, but I do. I stare back. Wonder who he might be. The man mouths something. He taps his finger against the window panel of the pocket door without making a sound then nods and walks away.

"You're going to love Cinque Terre," I tell Rick, pressing my cheek into the cool glass of the train's window.

"It's amazing."

"Where else are we going?"

"Florence, Firenze," I say. I pop the z at the end. "That's for last. I want to take you to the Ponte Vecchio and the Pitti Palace, the Uffizi Gallery. You'll have to rub the boar's nose for luck in the Straw Market. Then, of

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

course, the Duomo.”

“The what?”

“Duomo. It’s a really big church with a dome on top of it. I’ve showed you pictures.”

“No, man,” he says, “what about a boar’s nose?”

“For luck, it’s a statue.”

“I want to see the David,” he tells me. That’s in Florence, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s a real bitch to get to. There’s a replica of it in the square—I never actually saw the real one.”

“No shit, really?”

“It’s in a separate museum or something. There’s always a line. Buses.”

“I want to see it,” he says.

I tell him we will. We’ll do it all. I want to see, too.

The boy and I looked around the cabin of the boat.

We looked outside at the outline of the Carrera Mountains. A cathedral of ghosts and stone. I used to imagine

Michaelangelo still hung out there looking for the perfect piece of marble. Then the boy was close. A dark outline in the cabin. I could feel his breath as he leaned in to kiss me.

Then his lips, his tongue, hot, thick in my mouth like a creature moving, his hands everywhere, too much.

Rick’s been boning up on the language for weeks but he can never remember the verb “to be.”

“Essere,” I keep repeating. “Sono, sei, e’, siamo, siete, sono,” I conjugate for him. “Finalmente, siamo in Italia,” I tell him.

He says, “Okay, yeah. I think I’ve got it.” But he’ll ask again.

I stare at the top of his head. His hair never moves. It’s straight and lays flat to the left like broom bristles. If I push my fingers around in it, it will fall back into place exactly as it was.

Rick’s hair was longer at Ivan’s party. He wore it pulled back in a ponytail. I remember I followed the nub of it from room to room so I could be close to him when the ball dropped, but I kept mistaking him for a thick blond chick in a white shirt. I lost them both some time after eleven.

At midnight I kissed a black boy with dreadlocks

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

like ivy vines. He was visiting a friend in town, he told me.

We drank champagne out of Dixie cups and took turns smoking a joint he’d brought. When it was his turn he’d kiss me and exhale, filling my mouth with the smoke. I ended up spending the night with him on the floor of his friend’s apartment. I woke up with stiff muscles, a jackhammer hangover, and only a vague recollection of how I’d gotten there. I walked home. It wasn’t until Rick came by the bar where I worked to return my belt that I realized it had been his friend, his apartment, his hard wood floor.

Two or three weeks later I met up with Rick at Crazy Charlie’s dollar drink night. That time I slept in his bed.

I remember regret like a wash of warm water. My cheeks hot. I don’t think I said anything to the boy, just barreled past him. I wanted to erase the kiss forever. I never told anyone about it. It didn’t count as far as I was concerned. It wasn’t what I wanted my first kiss to be. Hot and gummy in the sticky heat of a cabin on a boat that didn’t belong to me, with a boy I would never remember. I felt lost.

By the time the train arrives in Sarzana it’s dark outside. When we get off Rick asks, “Is there anything to see here?”

In the station stooped women with white hair carry plastic mesh bags filled with groceries. Children cling to their parents’ hands.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I say.

We step out into the cobble street and I try to get my bearings, remember where things are. The buildings are like a black and white photograph of an earlier time. In plastered rows, packed close. Thin strips of darkened alleys strung together by clotheslines. A piece of white tin advertising Pellegrino has been nailed into a cracked stone wall. Awnings jut from shops and trattorias like the brims of baseball caps.

Rick looks at his watch.

When we reach the square I know where I am. A young couple is kissing on a bench, their knees touching.

I adjust the strap of my luggage against my shoulder and watch as Rick tries not to look at them. “Okay. You

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

want to check out a killer discotheque?" I ask him.

"Disco," he says like a question.

"A club. You know...dancing, drinks...they call them discotecas."

"I don't think so," he says. "I'm wiped."

Neither one of us slept much on the flight over.

"We'll need a cab then, to the hotel."

"How far is it," Rick asks. "Can we walk?"

"No, it's in Lericci. You'll love it," I tell him. "It's right on the water. Figured we'd get up early and go to the market, head over to Cinque Terre."

"Sounds like a plan," he says. "You're the expert."

Our hotel is old, like everything I remember. Rick makes fun of the slanted floor. The strange angle of the room. He opens two doors looking for the bathroom and finds only closet space. Spare towels, extra blankets and pillows. He picks up the pitcher from the antique wash basin and puts it down again.

"Kind of a shit hole," he tells me.

"We're on a budget," I remind him.

"I'm going to find the john," he says and takes a towel from the closet he's left open. "You coming?"

"In a minute."

"You want me to wait?"

"No, thanks," I tell him. "I need to unpack a few things. Get settled."

When Rick is gone I open the blinds. The hotel is on the side of a mountain. I can see the Lericci castle off to the right. Mary Shelly's inspiration for Frankenstein. Several boats are docked on the water below us, rocked like babies by the waves.

After we'd been dating for awhile, it may have been some type of anniversary or something, I can't remember, Rick and I went to Nags Head for a vacation. A week on the beach."

Each day we spent sunning ourselves so we could go back to work with tans. Rick took a book and I watched children playing frisbee, body surfing, chasing waves. I'd point things out to Rick. A woman placing shoes on one side of a blanket while the other side caught the wind like a skirt. Three guys burying some chick in the sand while she

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

slept. Kids making a sandcastle with buttresses and turrets. Lookout towers and a moat.

Walking back to our hotel one day Rick told me, "I should get a place down here. Rent it out to tourists."

"Would cost a fortune," I'd said. "But, it's not a bad idea."

"You like the beach, don't you? Navy brat and all.

We could come down here then, whenever we wanted to."

"There's definitely a market for it," I told him.

"Tourists, I mean."

"Yeah," he'd said. "I could make some money alright."

We'd spent our evenings treating ourselves to extravagant restaurants, and later dancing with strangers to disco or pop in the local clubs. In bed together, drunk and woozy, by two.

In the morning, the market is overcrowded, but exactly the way I remember it. Everything from trading cards to tablecloths on sale in a maze of stalls. Rick and I walk past a man selling parakeets in painted wooden cages, then a table covered with waxy ice filled boxes, a fat brown woman in a bloodied white apron selling fresh fish. A man inside a dingy trailer is grilling meat for sandwiches. Behind the sliding glass window is a giant pig head. It's fat tongue swelling out of its mouth. Rick and I look at each other and make faces.

"Gross," Rick says. We laugh and I promise him we'll have lunch somewhere else.

Two stalls down, a stick figure man is singing what sounds like opera. When we reach him I see that several people have put money at his feet. I throw down a couple thousand lire. Rick rolls his eyes.

The air is sweet with the smell of rosemary. There used to be another white trailer with chickens roasting on a rotisserie. I weave between the stalls looking for it. Without paying attention I run square into a guy coming around a corner. He's my age, somewhere in his late twenties. He asks me in broken English if I'm lost.

"Tutto bene," I tell him. Everything's fine.

He looks familiar.

I have asked Rick to wait for me by the singing man

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

but when I get back he's walked ahead. When he sees me he jerks his thumb back at the guy and says, "Fucker can sing."

At some souvenir kiosk, Rick has found a brochure on Cinque Terre. The whole thing is written in English, French, German, and Chinese. "Says here you can only *get* to this place by boat or train. Is that true?"

"Yes and no," I tell him. "I remember cars, but I don't know how they got there."

"So? What'll it be then," he asks, ready to go.

"Train or boat?"

"Train first, I guess. We can take the boat back tonight."

"That'll do."

We take a taxi to La Spezia. Rick and I stare out opposite windows.

"Come over here," I say, palming his inner thigh, pulling him in. "Sit close."

We share my side of the cab, our shoulders flush against each other. I point out things that are familiar as we pass, but nothing is exactly the same.

"What?" Rick says.

Rick had proposed to me in a drunken stupor about two months before this. When he woke up asking for aspirin he also asked for my answer. I sat on the edge of his bed with a palm full of Excedrin and a glass of cold water. Floored.

"No shit," I said. "You were serious?"

"Sure." He took three aspirin, placing them in his mouth one at a time. The water shook in his hand each time he swallowed.

"Jesus...really?"

"Yeah, I mean it. Why not?" He lay his head back on his pillow and closed his eyes.

The phone rang and I remember listening to Rick tell someone on the other line that he was waiting for my answer. When he got off the phone I begged a little time and went to Barnes and Noble. I bought an Italian-American dictionary, the tourist guidebook that has since become Rick's Bible and a coffee table book packed with glossy pages. Pictures of Italy. That night I cooked him linguini

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

al pesto and insalata Caprese. I gave him the books and told him I'd do it on one condition. "I want you to go to Italy with me," I told him.

"What do you mean, like a honeymoon?"

"No, before...before we do it."

Rick started chopping his pasta into bite-size pieces without saying anything.

"Ultimate road trip," I said. "Get a couple of Eurail passes, stay in cheap hotels. We can try each other on for size in a foreign country." *A test run.*

He scooped a spoonful of linguini. "Okay," he said. "I'm game."

When the driver pulls up in front of the slate-faced station Rick asks me if we have to tip here.

"Why wouldn't we?" I say.

He counts the money out slow to make sure he doesn't mess up. He hasn't quite got the hang of it yet.

Inside the station is dim. Several tubes of fluorescent light flicker almost rhythmically overhead, like strobe lights. Cigarette smoke hovers like layers of gauze above us, floating. We have our tickets and walk out onto the concrete platform. A low ceiling extends from the building to the edge of the tracks. Rick and I walk down a dank brick stairwell and through the tunnel that runs beneath the trains. Dark splotches of moisture mark the cement walls and the sound of dripping water echoes through the passage.

"I don't know about this," Rick says, looking up as he walks.

"It's fine," I tell him.

He boards first, jumping onto the step of the train like hopscotch. I wait until he's in shadow and follow.

This train is in better shape than the last one. It smells of lemons. We slide into our seats and slump like dolls. Rick hoists a knee up and braces it against the seat in front of us. He says, "We're going to have to walk a lot, aren't we?"

"Climb, yeah. Hike I guess. Through vineyards. It's gorgeous. You can see the water from the mountains."

"Sounds exhausting."

"Yeah, but the key is to stop in each town and drink a bottle of wine," I explain. "That way you don't care. The

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

wine here's awesome. Some of the little trattorias are owned by the same people who have the vineyards and they sell the good stuff."

"I'm not that big on wine."

"They have beer, too, but I don't know who drinks it."

"People who don't go ape shit over fermented grapes," he says, smart alecky, then locks my head between his forearm and shoulder and knuckles my scalp.

"Quit it, you'll mess up my hair." I try to duck free but he's got me pinned to his chest.

"Say, wine is for snobs."

"No," I laugh into his shirt.

"Say it or I'm not letting you go." He flexes his muscles and I feel their bulge against my ear.

"I can't breathe."

"Then say it. You know it's true."

"Wine is for snobs," I say. We're like children.

Rick lets up his grip and I'm free. I fake like I'm going to punch his arm and instead slip my hand beneath it; find his nipple through his shirt and twist. "You ass."

"Hey, that hurts." He swats my hand away and rubs at the spot.

"Well, serves you right," I laugh.

"Wine snob," he says.

"Beer slob," I shoot back.

"I'm going to get us a bottle when we get down there," I say. "You at least have to try it."

Rick pushes back a strand of hair from my face and kisses my forehead. "It's not gonna happen," he tells me.

"We'll get some good bread and cheese. We can have a picnic on the mountain."

The world outside the train has changed. We're out of the city and riding through shades of brown and green. Earth and leaves. "Look, we're missing it," I point.

The train takes us through a mountain and I hold my breath in the tunnel.

"Is it a long way between towns?" Rick asks, picking at the pillared upholstery on the seat in front of us.

"Not too bad."

"What do you do if you have to take a piss?"

"Fertilize the grapes."

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Rick looks skeptical.

I link my arms around his. "It'll be great. I promise."

From the first town we follow dirt paths down the mountain and back up. Shaded by a solid covering of leaves, we step over roots and stones, steadying ourselves against the sturdy trunks of trees. I should have brought water. Instead I gulp red wine out of the bottle and offer it to Rick. He waves it away.

In places the trees give way, opening onto the mountainside. Grapevines twist down rows forming chest high walls. Each one a foot fat. We have to walk between them to get to the path on the other side. Grapes are nestled tight together in snug bunches, the color of sky at twilight, a deep blue. I tear a clump from the vine and bite it like a pear. The sticky juice runs down my arm.

"They're dirty," Rick says.

"And sweet," I tell him.

A boy, a teenager, sees us. "Non per mangiare," he says. "Questi solo per bere." He laughs.

I lift my wine bottle.

"Sì, per bere," he tells me.

"Mi dispiace," I say. He has straight arms like

Gianni's.

The path starts up again by the edge of the mountain. Rick has gone ahead without me. Below I can see a horseshoe shaped cove, a narrow beach. The wave caps foam like frothed milk and the sound is like the steam working. I uncork the wine and swallow long. After the first two legs of the hike we stop in the third town. Rick hasn't eaten any of the cheese or bread, and so I sit with him drinking more wine while he eats pizza and drinks beer. He buys more for the hike and we head back into the mountains.

Rick walks fast and when I fall behind he yells back, "still there?" I remember coming here with friends and pretending to be lost explorers. But we were never lost. I climb up a tall rock where the ceiling of leaves is thin and can see the ocean. In the other direction, up the path, I can see Rick. I slide down a smooth part of the rock and try to catch up.

By the end of the day Rick and I are both tired and a

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

little drunk. The ferries run every fifteen minutes or so during peak hours, but we've missed the last of those and now they only have one every hour. We sit in the sand and wait. It hasn't gotten dark yet, but the sun is pulling away fast and there's a breeze off the water making me chilly. The sand is still full of heat, a giant warm beanbag. I'm considering lying down in it when Rick drapes his arm across my shoulders. It's dead weight. He leans close until our noses touch.

"That was okay," he says. "Thanks." Then he kisses me. His mouth tastes like garlic and his lips are dry and hot. I try to convince myself that this time doesn't count.

When the ferry pulls in, it takes awhile for the workers to get it roped, then some more time for the few latecomers and residents to get off. On the boat I hang my head over the edge and look down. The water is transparent blue and looks like a silk sheet moving on a clothesline. I can see the white sand shift beneath the surface. Rick has met another American and they're poring over a map spread across both of their laps. Out beyond the wake of the ferry I can see a young boy and a man in a small boat, fishing. The American is saying something about a girl named Doreen, his girlfriend probably, or wife. Rick just nods and occasionally looks up to see if we've arrived, if we're there.

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium m

Postlude

J.B. Shelleby

Largo

Now, his mail is delivered to their house.

I lower my overnight bag and look around my parents' living room, where cups of coffee are forgotten on end tables and photos are heaped on the fireplace. Rumpled covers on the couch make a mountainous terrain. The past weeks' *Sports Illustrated* lay on the coffee table and I'm sure that my dad has not subscribed, that if I look closely I will see a yellow forwarding sticker placed over the first address, my brother's.

"I want you to go through the letters we got," Mom says from the couch. "Did I tell you we got a note from his nursery school teacher?"

I nod. She has mentioned this before. Maybe more than once.

"And Miss Mason from second grade—we got one from her, too."

I'm barely home, still standing behind the flowered armchair.

"Did you see what Marilyn did?" she asks, indicating the piano. On the wall above it hangs a large wreath of dried flowers. At first, nothing registers, then I remember the garage lined with floral arrangements, swelling with sweetness for days after the funeral, then disappearing — My friend has taken them, Mom explained, to make us a wreath.

"It's pretty," I say. "Marilyn did a great job."

But Mom has more to show.

"That's the flag case," she says, pointing to the desk. "Came last week."

The triangular case nestles a brass Marine insignia in the top angle of its dark wood. Behind the cover, a folded flag is concealed, as are shotgun shells tucked

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

inside the starred blue.

I wait for more, but her eyes are fixed on the case.
Or within it, or in some way I can't see.

In the past two months, the layers in her hair have grown long. They pull, exaggerating her part, where I can see a half-inch of gray-black. Then brown. Mom's been coloring her hair for as long as I can remember. When I still lived here, I helped her dye it. She would sit on the toilet lid, dressed in an old shirt and jeans worn to cross-hatchings at the knees, as I ran the bottle tip across her scalp, opening layers of hair like rows of corn, squeezing out gel the color of maple syrup. I talked about school, friends, boys, whatever; she closed her eyes as she relaxed, listening to me. She systematically wiped at her hairline with the stained towel that we wrapped around her shoulders, but there would be a light brown taint on her forehead for days, like some mark of piety. Like ash.

The color of the dye was close to the color of this flag case, a gift intended to encourage my parents. Mom looks up at me. Her eyes fill and she lifts her hand to her mouth, patting the pointer finger against her upper lip in a rapid cadence, a new nervous habit.

"Oh, sweetie, it's so hard," she says.

On the phone, every day, I can't find words.

"I don't know if I can do this," she says.

I can't get the heavy breath in my chest to pass through my lips.

I stare at the area carpet, following a pattern from the armchair to the piano.

I hear her breathing break.

mezzo piano

It's been maybe a year since I've played this song. When I opened the familiar volume of piano literature, I turned instinctively to Chopin, who wrote music that sits in my mind like rosemary on my tongue. "Prelude in E Minor" lingers for days.

They performed this song at Chopin's own funeral, though I wonder how they chose it over all the others. He'd been composing music since he was seven, and when he passed away at 39, they saluted him with two preludes from

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

his vast collection, B Minor and E Minor.

I rehearsed both preludes on this upright piano. The piano. It's the reason I'm here, sort of. My father came from a line of musicians, and my parents believed that giving me and my brother music lessons was giving us something that nobody could take from us. So now I'm taking, literally, this gift back with me. My parents are relieved to see it go, to free this shadowy corner of the living room, even though I am not the one who was supposed to get it, not yet. My brother planned to complete his pilot training in September and finally settle into a home for a little while.

As the oldest, he had a claim on the piano. But this was before a malfunction, a blown tire and a few seconds that were out of anyone's control, before the hook wouldn't catch on wire and a T-45 flew straight off an aircraft carrier into the Atlantic.

D.S. al fine

There's a tiny bit of cleaning on Saturday. Dad works out in the yard, running the Weedwacker along the edge of the porch, sweeping dead leaves from the driveway. Mom and I throw some laundry in the wash and go through junk mail forwarded from Texas. Limited time offers.

While supplies last. Dated reply cards that will not be sent on time, will not be sent at all.

We don't do much around the house, because Mom doesn't care about this anymore. Instead, she waits for the mailman to bring more letters from second grade teachers or fraternity brothers, and she checks her e-mail nine times in five hours.

When I hear the dryer buzz, I drop loads of clothes on the family room floor, and on my knees beside them, begin folding. Growing up, Saturday morning was our cleaning day. Mom went grocery shopping while we were still asleep, but by the time she returned, we had to be ready to help. Mom put on The Doobie Brothers or The Rascals and we all danced around the house while we cleaned, singing "Lonely Too Long" over the moan of the vacuum, twirling matching socks above our heads like victory towels. In the kitchen, Mom unloaded bags of food and my brother and I snapped dish towels at each other until Mom said,

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

“Hey, cut it out,” to stop us long enough to snap a towel herself.

Once, when I made some crack at my mom, maybe about getting old or something, she chased me around the house with a spatula in her hand and smeared peanut butter on my face.

I carry the folded clothes to Mom and Dad’s room but take with me a leftover sock, to ask Mom about its match. From the doorway of the study, I see her reading e-mail, her eyes searching the screen.

“It’s so dumb,” she says, “but you know, I keep hoping there will be a message from him?”

It reminds me of when my aunt died, and weeks after when I phoned her house to talk to my cousin, the voice on the answering machine was still Aunt Anne’s. *Sorry, but we’re not here...*

“We got this one,” Mom says, “and the subject was, ‘No, I haven’t fallen off the face of the earth,’ and I just prayed, ‘Please, God, let it be from my son.’” She shakes her head and taps her finger on her lips, and I think that when she’s doing that, she must be keeping back the tears, building a dam.

I wrap the sock around my hand, my wrist.

“That’s the only way I know it’s true,” she says, “because we haven’t heard from him.”

One of my brother’s best friends identified him. They wouldn’t open the casket so we could see him, not even for us. Something about an emergency ejection, a shattered helmet.

“And you know how much he called,” she says, looking at me. I can’t meet her gaze. She is small and weak and very empty. Or very full. I don’t know.

I nod. My brother called home at least twice as much as I.

“I want him to call me,” she says, “I want him to call me and say, ‘I’m coming home. Love you, Ma.’”

The truth is, I want him to call, too. There are things that I meant to tell him that last day we talked. But we were rushed; he was on his way to the carrier for qualifications. “We’ll talk this weekend,” I said. “Sounds

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium m

good,” he said. “Talk to you later.”

Truth is, every night, I tell him this is his job, not mine; *he* should be here, not me. I don’t know how to do this, how to make people happy. I tell him every night that he was the wrong one.

I lean against the doorway and unwrap the sock again. She turns back to the computer, reading, shaking her head.

“These people are incredible,” she says, but I don’t know how she means it. There are people who say things like, *you have to find a special place in your heart and put him there, so you can go on, so you can finish the race.*

And My parents can’t hope to make them see that there is no place vast enough to tuck their son into their splintered hearts.

But there are other friends who say the proper words, who can hear my mom weep over the same thought seven times and those people feel the appropriate amount of sympathy every time.

I am neither of these.

They say that Chopin looked younger after he was done performing. That when he sat down at the concert grand, he seemed fifty years old, but as he progressed, the shadows on his face lifted, and when he arose, he seemed twenty-five. As he played, as he breathed life into the black flecks on the page, he breathed life into others, into himself. Fold after fold softened, layer after layer lifted, and what was revealed beneath was a young, compassionate being.

The piano that is tucked in the back of the van won’t match any of my other furniture. It’s light, like the color of honey; the wood in my house is dark, like the color of the case that encloses the flag.

decrescendo

My dad and I pick up dinner, early evening. As we glide down a windy hill, Dad hugging the bends with familiarity, I play with the car door handle, following its curves with my finger in a continuous motion, circling. Dad rests his elbow on the window, his finger tracing lines on his thumb, sometimes snagging on a hangnail and staying

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

there, like a skipping record needle.

"Do you think you'll be okay getting the piano out of the van when you get there?" he asks.

"Yeah, we told some neighbors about it already. At least it's first floor."

He reminds me not to roll the piano on its decorative front legs.

I say that I won't.

I can't imagine my dad any other way than he is today. Mom says that when they were dating, Dad played in a band. That they covered hits, and my dad used to be on stage, in front of lots of people, singing "Twist and Shout." But I can't get that in my head. I feel like she's talking about someone I don't know. Dad barely speaks. Even after my brother died, he said almost nothing.

"I think you have a good idea about Thanksgiving," I say. He wants to serve dinner at the homeless shelter where my brother donated money, instead of sitting around, not thankful at all.

"You like that?"

"Yeah, I think that we should do something like that."

"I also want to get involved with that 'Toys for Tots' thing at Christmas," he says, "the Marines are into that program, so I want to do that."

"I think that's a nice idea."

He turns his face to me for the first time. He nods his head and we look at one another for the briefest moment.

I turn my head to the window, where it is unfocused through my eyes, just damp at the thought of our Christmas coming up, the first like this.

"It's clouding up," my dad says, nodding toward the sky.

"Yeah."

I think that if I were driving, I would like to see if we could break through the guard rail, soaring for just a second before we sink into the silence, like my brother.

It's warm for October, and the cold rain hits the part in my hair like staccatos. At the curb a stream spills down our hill. Crouching, I stare into the current, but can't see the

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

bottom in the dimness of midnight. I reach my hand out, flat-palmed, and tap tap tap on the surface, feeling the water clinging to my palm each time I bring it back into the air. I tap it hard enough to hit the asphalt beneath, where small bits of gravel dig into the soft, lined flesh. I hear the E minor prelude, the taps of my fingers like the bass line, the melody lost somewhere between my tip of tongue and the invisible horizon.

Fine

In the living room Sunday morning, my parents sip coffee, the steam rising from their fists like prayers. I set my bag down at the door, noticing that the wall where the piano sat now feels so empty. Except for the wreath.

"Do you have everything you need?" Mom asks.

I try to remember.

"I'll just get some water before I leave," I say. I fill a travel mug from a pitcher in the refrigerator. We've had this refrigerator since I was very young. While we grew up, the door was littered with class pictures and report cards, collages of construction paper glued together in Sunday School. I remember a lengthy series of colorful banners around Easter that said, "He's Alive!" We repeated the story in awed whispers: Jesus died, but then, he came back to life.

After we got the word about my brother, I kept waiting to hear he was alive, still, again. Evidence of a miracle, a rolled away stone, strips of linen.

They wouldn't even let us see him.

Mom watches me from the doorway, leaning against it. She wears one of my brother's dogtags on a belt loop. I chose the other before Mom and Dad could study the tags carefully. I had chosen it because it's marked. In the bottom left corner, under "Protestant" are two dents. They're not deliberate. They cut into the rim, their edges are glossy and almost bubbled, their dark brown is striking against the dull silver. They are undoubtedly burn marks. I took this one because I'm certain it was with him.

At the door, my dad hugs me, patting me on the back. "See you later, Kid."

I feel relieved to be going back to my sterile apartment seven hours south of here, where I won't be buried in

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

my weakness.

I reach for my mom, and with my arms around her for the first time since I've arrived, she goes weak, she leans wearily into me. I stroke her hair and feel her shaking. I stroke her hair and sway side to side.

"I hate it when you leave," she says.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say.

"When you leave, I feel like we're losing him all over again," she cries into my neck. She is hanging on to me so tight I can feel her collarbone against mine. The weight of her emptiness pours into me, it's that close to my core.

"Come on," I say, guiding her to the couch. I sit beside her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders, her head bearing into my neck. She shakes and doesn't bring her finger to her mouth to build the dam.

"I know," I say quietly into her hair. I do.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

Hunger

Jon Pineda

The morning after their son is born, he goes home to feed the cats.
He drives through Ghent, with its thick Victorians, and crosses the tracks

To the edge of Riverview where the same-styled homes stand,
Though the paint peeling from each shutter makes them seem ruined

Somehow. At the stoplight, he watches a transvestite slowly cross the street.
Her body hunched, protective, she is nursing a cup of coffee and the steam

That rises now, the soul of it, its warmth vanishes in front of her face.
He thinks of their son, newborn, sealing his lips to his mother's breast,

And it is this thought that he carries across the Lafayette Bridge, the cold
Water stirring underneath. At home, the cats lick their bowls clean.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

Three Palms

Sumitra Duncan

All she could think about was how young and bright they looked. Young people always looked bright to her. They seemed full of life and opportunity. Once, while they were watching people from the window of a café, she had tried to explain it to Brett, but he laughed and said “You’re young honey, you have no idea what it’s really like to be old. Why don’t you just try to live a little and maybe you’ll feel bright too?” All old people seemed dark to her. William, the bearded old man who lived across the street in the small park, was the only one who didn’t seem dark.

She stepped out onto the blinding sidewalk and slid her sunglasses down on her nose, the ones Brett told her were her “bitch glasses.” Cathy thought they were funny, and they were only five bucks. She took a few steps and had to put her shoes on because the balls of her feet were being burnt.

Maybe William’s awake, she thought. She crossed the street and was almost plowed into by a roller-blader who was going way too fast.

“No big deal,” she said. She smiled at him and walked on.

William was in the same spot under the palms when she came around the corner of her block. He had lived in the same spot for decades, long before she moved to San Clemente. Cathy had never seen palm trees like those three before, they had all grown into the same tree at certain spots. Each reached in a different direction, but met up with the other two in several places.

Cathy approached William with her usual look. Old men at convenience stores were constantly telling her to smile because of this look. She knew people thought she looked ugly or sad when she was deep in thought. Cathy’s third grade teacher had suggested to her that she “get rid of the ugly faces she always made at everyone...” She liked to mind her own business, but people always felt the need to mess with her because she kept to herself.

“Hey William,” she said, “How’s it going?”

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

“Fine. How were your danishes this morning, sweetie?”

“Good. I brought you one. Here.” William took the Danish and gulped it down in a couple of bites.

“Thanks. That was kind of you.” He said this while trying to shake the crumbs from his beard. “You know, people are nicer to you when it’s nice out like this. Hate the rain, makes everyone in a hurry. Same with the cold. Gotta be a sin to be in a hurry.”

“I’m never in a hurry... I have nowhere to be,” Cathy said.

“Me neither. It’s not bad.”

“William, do you believe that most people are happier when they’re younger? Like say, maybe, you know... almost brighter? Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Oh yeah, I know what you’re saying. I think that’s generally the way it goes. Like this tree here. It was probably just as happy when it was younger. It’s been here for seventy-three years, you know? It might have even been happier before. It wasn’t as dirty even ten years ago. But then they moved the bus route along here and made the stop right under it...and it just hasn’t been as happy since then. Nope. Not so contented as before. I enjoy the bench to sit on though. Cause now I don’t sleep on the ground.”

“What about people though? Do you think everyone gets tired and isn’t happy anymore by a certain age? My parents aren’t happy. They don’t have any friends. My sister doesn’t have any friends, and she hates her boyfriend. He’s a drunk.”

“Yes, you told me about that.” He lit a cigarette and exhaled a slow-moving cloud of smoke. “No, she’s probably not happy,” William said.

“But my parents, they don’t even sleep in the same room as each other. Not to say that means that they don’t like each other. And my grandfather, he’s just waiting to die. He hates everything. He rarely talks to me, but when he does, all he does is complain about being alive.” She sighed loudly and looked at her hands. The left one was clutching the right one, as if it were trying to choke the life out of it.

“I’m happy. Are you happy?” He asked her. He stared at her, but she wouldn’t look up from her hands. He

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

looked at her hands too. They looked older than they should.

She wasn't old, but she appeared to be at certain moments because she was so serious. The veins stood out abnormally high from her skin, criss-crossing around her hands like strands of over-cooked spaghetti noodles. Her fingers looked weathered like the gnarled branches of a tree after hurricane season.

"I don't know." She still didn't look up.

William listened to her silence.

"I used to think that I was happy. But what does it really mean? As soon as I really started to think about what it means to be happy, then I wasn't anymore. So... If I don't think about it anymore, then I'm really pretty happy," she finished speaking and then looked at William and gave him a weak smile.

Brett pulled the Explorer into the drive and pressed the garage door opener that he kept attached to the sun visor. He had his cell phone against his ear with his shoulder. His buddy had put him on hold.

"Jesus fucking Christ Cathy! What are you *doing*?" He had noticed her in the rear-view as he pulled into his side of the garage. All of his things were on his side. His golf clubs, his basketball, his boxes of private things. He kept most of it out here. He had it all arranged just the way he liked it. After dinner sometimes he would go out there for hours.

"Hey, man, are you there? Why the hell does *my wife* have to hang out on public streets talking to dirty old men? Why? This is what *I* deserve? How embarrassing. This is fucking embarrassing. She's ridiculous, I don't know what to do with her anymore. Maybe I should get her a babysitter," Brett said into the phone. "Yeah, alright, I'll talk to you later... yeah whatever, bye," Brett said and threw the phone down on the passenger seat and slammed the door.

Later in the afternoon, after Brett had gone back to work from their virtually silent lunch, Cathy climbed the stairs that went out onto the roof of their house. From the roof, she could see their garden, which was large enough for a handful of grass and two flowerbeds. The grass was

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

too long and the flowerbeds were over-grown with weeds. All of her flowers were dead, they had been dead a long time now. She sat down on the top step with her coffee cupped in both hands to warm them. Her hands were always cold, even in the summer. The toothpaste green paint crackled under her body as she sat down. She knew that it would flake off all over her, but she didn't care. She and Brett had sat on these same steps often when they had first gotten married. She wondered if he still remembered the times that they used to sit there for hours. They would talk until after dark and he would lend her his jacket when she got cold, and she always got cold. Often recently, when she was sitting on the steps alone, she felt like Brett was watching her. From his window, high up in his sky-grasping building. Looking down on her. Watching her. She felt like she couldn't go inside, where he couldn't see her, he made her stay. Once the sun had started to set, she got up to leave. What good did it do to sit in the dark by herself, she thought. But she stayed. It got dark. She got cold. But she stayed. She thought that she understood how William felt, always outside, nowhere to go.

"I went and spoke to someone on city council today," Brett said. She noticed that he wouldn't look her in the eye. She wasn't sure if that was because of the fights they now had every night or if it was because of something else. She had still made him dinner, and he was eating it with his mouth wide open while he talked.

"Really. What did you talk to them about exactly?" she asked, noticing his dressing coated, oily lips and chin.

"I explained to them that the bus stop area out front attracted criminals and it was negatively affecting the value of my property. I'm a voter, that's what I told them."

She glared at him. She felt like throwing up.

"I just explained that no one really used that bus stop anyway, and shady people are attracted to that tree. They've known that for years, they just needed some support to get anything done about it. You know."

"Sure." She stared at him for a second in disbelief. She started to cry. She didn't want him to know that she thought anything of it at all. Anything. She left the room

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

and crawled into her bed. She lowered herself down into the bed very carefully, her hands were shaking. She remembers the day they were married. All of Brett's buddies were at the wedding, but her parents weren't even there. Her parents lived in Vermont and her father was too ill at the time to travel across the country. Brett's friends all got drunk at the wedding. Brett had insisted that they get married in his parent's church in L.A. Cathy hated L.A. That city made her feel like she couldn't breathe, it made her want to scream. She thought about the café that she and Brett used to go to when they were first married. They would talk there. Cathy never wore her shoes in the morning, the sun hadn't yet heated the pavement. Brett always ordered a cheese danish and a café con leche for her and she sat in one of the oversized purple armchairs by the window. Brett had always refused to sit in the chairs because they left lint on his pants, but Cathy didn't care. Brett always had plain toast for breakfast. She had been going to the café alone in the morning for a long time now.

Brett pulled up in the driveway and saw that the garage door was wide open. Cathy was not in the garage. "Goddammit Cathy..." He turned around, but she wasn't with the dirty, bearded man, he was no longer across the street. He slammed his car door and stomped up the stairs two at a time. He threw the door open at the top of the stairs.

"Cathy?" he yelled. "Cathy? *Where are you, honey?*" There was no answer. Brett felt like his words were bouncing off the walls and flying back into his face. Maybe she's taking a nap, he thought.

The light was on in the bathroom and the door was slightly cracked. He stepped toward the door and grasped the handle to go in. He felt his feet squish and sink into the soaked carpet.

"Damn it!"

He went into the bathroom, "Cathy..." The bathtub was overflowing from its side. Several inches of water stood on the Italian tile. The water was still running. Brett reached over and turned the knobs off. Why would she leave the water running? Cathy always took baths in the mid-morning, long ones. It was five o'clock now, the water

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium m

must have been on all day.

Brett cleaned the water up, using every towel in the house. He waited for her to return. I'll fucking tell her, he thought. He was getting hungry. Brett paced awhile and then went into the living room to make a drink. As he paced around the room, his attention fixed on the French doors that led out onto their balcony. He probably hadn't gone out there in a year.

He went outside and sat down on the black iron chair. It was naked without its cushion and felt cold through his pants. He thought it could have been wet, but it was just the cold iron. He looked out at the ocean and he saw that the sun was about to set. California had the most beautiful sunsets, that was something that had attracted him to buying the house on the ocean. It would have been easier to get to work from somewhere else, but he liked the sunsets. He laughed a little, without smiling. He thought about how he never saw the sunset anymore. Why didn't he and Cathy ever sit here together, like they used to?

And where was she? She didn't have any friends in San Clemente, he thought.

Brett watched a flock of birds fly before the setting sun. He was hungry—his stomach churned. He placed his right hand over his stomach area, as if he were embarrassed that the sound had come from him, even though no one was around. He walked along the side of his home, on the wrap-around porch and watched the tail lights of a car just before it turned right, onto Victoria Lane.

He thought back to his achievement earlier in the week, of having the corner of his block cleaned up. He peered into the growing darkness below him, at the vacant spot. No grass has ever grown on the corner, because the enormous trees had shaded the area so much that nothing had ever grown there. It suddenly occurred to him that his block had been destroyed. Why did he have to do this? What had happened? He didn't know how things had gotten like this. That tree had made the block look nice and inviting. Now it was just a mangled stump buried in the soft, white sand. Staring at the stump, he remembered. Cathy had asked him to go for breakfast at the café that morning. He knew she wouldn't be home to make dinner that night, or any other night at all.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

Rub
Boz Bowles

The telephone rings. Rings again.
I don't answer. I lick a sloppy lick across the
gummed edge of an open joint and twist it into shape.
The telephone rings again as I toss the soggy doobie
to the coffee table to dry. I stuff the remaining weed into
the drawer on the telephone stand while the phone rings a
fourth time.
I answer the thing. "Hello?"
"Mister Burns? Is this Theodore Burns?"
"Who's this?"
"This is Irma Givins. I live next door to your
mother. I think you need to come down here. Now."
"Why? Who'd you say you are?"
"I'm your mother's next door neighbor down here
in Troy. I found her walking around in the street. She was
in her bathrobe and carrying the cordless phone."
"What's wrong?" I ask. "Can I talk to her?" I clamp
the telephone between my shoulder and my ear. I fish a Bic
lighter out of my pocket, flick it and wave it back and forth
under the joint.
"She seems okay physically, I guess. She won't get
up. Off the floor I mean. She just lies there moaning.
Barely talks. Something about your grandmother. And a
fire. I'm afraid I really can't tell you much."
"I see."
I light up. The cherry sizzles and glows as I inhale.
A howl cuts through the telephone line. A low
steady moan that isn't that loud, but it lasts a long time. It
almost sounds mechanical, except for a slight rise in inflec-
tion at the end of the poor creature's breath. It's Mom.
A gasp later the moan begins again. Long, low and
steady. The stranger on the opposite end of the line talks
louder and faster trying to be heard over Mom's pitiful
wailing. "You better come! You better come now!"
"Okay, okay, okay. Listen. Go into her bathroom
and see if there are any Xanax in the medicine cabinet."
"Xanax."

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

"If not, get her a tall scotch. Maybe both. I'll be
there as soon as I can."
The Givins woman is still talking on the other end
of the line. I don't listen. I shout, "I'll see you then."
I hang up the phone. Her voice seems to get higher
in pitch as I replace the receiver, as if she were falling down
a hole.
I take a slow draw off the doobie and shake my
head. A fire? My grandmother? If something was wrong
with my mother again, I would need to go to her in Ala-
bama. If it was my grandmother, I would need to go to
Atlanta.
I sit and finish the joint, thinking I might not be
having another one for a few days. I smoke it down to the
tiniest possible roach, burning my fingertips bad enough to
blister. Then I just sit, stoned.

The telephone rings a half a ring.
The person answering says hello before the receiver
reaches her mouth. All I hear is a breathless "Lo?" It's my
aunt.
"It's Mutt," I say. "What the hell is going on?"
"Theo!" She shouts my name like it means eureka.
"Mother burned her house down, and, well, Sis has lost her
mind. You need to go get her and come straight to Atlanta.
Mother burned the whole house down. It was on the news
and everything. I had to call Sis's neighbor. That woman.
She says Sis can't talk or move. Or won't. You gotta help
me out here Theo."
"My name is Mutt, Aunt Di."
"How soon can you be here?"
"Mom can move. She was walking around in the
street. And I know she can talk. I heard her moaning."
"Listen Theo-or Mutt or whatever you call
yourself—I've got my own mother to deal with. She's in
intensive care. Do you get it? She burned her house down.
I think you can help me out here with Sis. Don't you?"
"Goddammit! I'll leave tonight. As soon as I
pack."
I slam the phone on its cradle causing it to let out a
single ding.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

By the time I pack a bag, it's after midnight. Too late to take off on a four hour trip. I decide to set my alarm for early tomorrow. I drop back into the couch and reach for the telephone table. I pull open the drawer, pull out the baggie and start on another joint. I light a Marlboro to give me something to do with my mouth while I'm rolling. The first two joints I stuff into the pack. I puff mindlessly on my cigarette. Smoke keeps me company.

I don't hear the telephone ring, but it must have because Aunt Di's voice on my answering machine wakes me. I am still sitting on the couch with my packed bag beside me. There is an ashtray filled with roaches and cigarette butts. I slept through the alarm.

"Irresponsible! That's all you are!" Aunt Di is pitching a fit on my machine.

I jump up and rush out the door to Mom's house. I figure that if Di doesn't know if I've gotten the message, then she has less right to bitch at me, and therefore, I'm in less trouble.

It's almost lunchtime when I finally get to Mom's house. The front door is unlocked. There is no sign of Irma Givins. I light a Marlboro. Mom is still in bed, a Xanax bottle with someone else's name on the label sits on her bedside table right next to her telephone. I pick up the bottle and shake out a couple of Xanax for myself for later.

The pill bottle rattle makes Mom stir. In her first-thing-in-the-morning stupor I forget that she has lost her mind. I put the bottle back before she sees me. She seems normal as she squints her eyes and scratches her butt. But slowly her face twists. Her lips get thin and white as she clamps them shut. Her eyebrows dip in the middle. She tries to fight it, but insanity, like a drug, settles over her.

Her eyes settle on me and she starts. Again.

"It was on the news and everything. Oh Lord, what do we do now? Hello. We have to go to Atlanta. How have you been? Mama burned the house down. When did you get here? We have to go to Atlanta." She is crazy, I think. Mom.

I use her credit card to book the flight. A widow, she has plenty of money. The dead husband is not my father, but a different husband. His ashes sit on her mantle.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

We wait for our flight in the airport bar. Mom has a scotch and I have a beer. She holds the scotch hoping the weight of the glass will stop her hands from shaking. Instead she spills scotch all over the bar. When our flight is called, Mom doesn't want to get off the barstool. I pop a Xanax and wash it down with the last of my beer.

"Come on. We can't avoid this." I grab her arm and drag her to the gate.

Mom clings to my hand for the entire flight. She rubs my hand like she's trying to scrub away a stain. Only she doesn't notice that she's doing it. She just cries and rubs and cries and rubs. Slack-jawed, I stare at my hand. I wish I could have a cigarette.

The telephone at the nurse's desk rings and rings and rings. Nobody answers.

The hospital hall is lined by living skeletons. The old folks floor. They are all freshly scrubbed and lined up in their wheelchairs, eyeballs bulging against eyelids. They all wear bright polyester outfits. Mom clutches my hand and starts another round of thumb rubbing. Then we turn a corner and come upon my grandmother's room.

My grandmother's floor of the hospital reeks of smoke. The smell is more pungent and nauseating than I ever imagined anything could be. It is like a room full of wet ashtrays.

That sick, burnt smell swells out after us. Mom lets loose another long moan I will never forget. She drops to the floor outside the room like she's been shot. Her thumb starts going to work rubbing an imaginary hand. She is unable to speak. So am I. Only the digital yodel of the hospital telephone breaks the silence.

I watch Mom wallowing around on the hallway floor. She is hopeless. Gone. Completely fucked up.

I turn my back to her and walk into my grandmother's room. As I do, I glance back over my shoulder at Mom. She's looking at me. Mouth open. She doesn't howl anymore. Now she just sits in the hallway floor looking dazed. I keep walking into the room.

Aunt Di is sitting in a lazy boy chair beside my grandmother's bed. She doesn't speak to me when I walk into the room. But she looks at me like she's gonna kick my

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

ass. I'm the first to speak.

"What happened?"

"A neighbor who smelled smoke dragged her from her house. She's not burned. Breathed a ton of smoke though. She apparently dropped a cigarette on her mattress, then went into the kitchen to make coffee while the fire spread throughout the rest of the house."

I look down at the old woman I know as Grandmother. She is the source of the stink in the hospital. She is the reason my Aunt Di and I are here. She is the reason Mom is on the floor in the hall.

Grandmother's eyes are open but she cannot speak. She has tubes running in and out of her. She quietly focuses first on me, then Aunt Di, then back on me. Now her eyes get wide and frightened as a shadow darkens the doorway. It's Mom. She walks in as though nothing is wrong. She still looks like hell, but she walks quickly and upright. She doesn't pay any attention to Di or me. She walks right up to the bed, smiles and says, "Good afternoon, Mother. Good night, Mother."

Then, while still smiling at her mother, she reaches back toward my shirt pocket and pulls out my Marlboro pack. She reaches into the pack and unwittingly pulls out one of the two joints I had smuggled from home. She doesn't seem to give a damn about the signs warning that oxygen is in use. She doesn't realize what she's doing, but she takes a big toke off the joint. Her eyes widen as she inhales, recognizing at once that it is not tobacco.

She stares at the burning joint, expressionless at first. Then a wrinkle forms at the side of her mouth. She giggles a little. Smoke from the joint curls toward the ceiling, right up to where one of those little monitors blinks. Aunt Di and I stare at Mom.

Di shouts, "Sis, you have completely lost your damn mind!"

Then we hear a slight wheeze coming from the bed. My grandmother catches on and laughs. Her narrow chest bounces with each wheeze, but she is smiling.

Then the sprinkler system goes.

It rains in our hospital room. It pours. Mom stands holding the wet joint while we all get soaked, together, the water pouring around us like a storm.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Wait

Damon Tabor

I found myself
In dark woods,
the right road lost.
--The Inferno, Canto I

My father took me into the woods for the first time when I was ten. We hiked for two weeks into the backcountry of New Hampshire, across the humps and spines of the Presidential Range, and summited Mt. Washington, the second highest peak in the country, at the end of the first week. Going north we hiked out through a gradual descent of lesser mountains. He was young then, a struggling writer, losing himself in scotch, and sleeping with women who were not his wife. There was a French student at Middlebury College, a bartender in Manhattan, an aerobics instructor from Boston. He lived in a loft above a horse barn in Vermont. The other women were there for the tragedy, the slow burn of catastrophe that my father could not help being pulled into.

My mother had long since left, leaving him alone with this life he had chosen. I split my time between them, living with my mother and learning from teachers and books in the city, then leaving to stay with him on vacations. I'd get into his car at the airport, and he would ask me a flurry of questions about school, my life, Mom. As he watched me I knew that there was something beneath the questions. I'd tell him about the advanced science class I was in, the English teacher who liked my writing. He was feeling me out, seeing what kind of boy I was becoming.

We'd drive in silence the rest of the way home, listening to a Red Sox game and passing small towns that never changed--old barns resting on faith alone, silos reaching up, the arched blue sky pricked with birds. He would slap the steering wheel in anger when somebody dropped a high pop fly or struck out. I didn't know much about the sport, but tried anyway to match my joy or disgust with his.

I knew that one day it would be expected of me.

He wrote in the morning, sent his work to maga-

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

zines and waited the days. There was the staccato clatter and furious crescendo of keys being punched and words being pulled down into form. I knew instinctively to avoid the room where he wrote. He barked at me if I stayed too long or asked too many questions. It had a meager light, a wooden desk on which the typewriter sat, and in the corner a pew from a Protestant church. Against the north wall were old wooden bookshelves—Shakespeare’s tragedies, Jung, Hemingway, Joseph Campbell, Camus, an old collection of Greek plays.

Dad preferred that I roamed outside rather than shuffling about the house bothering him. I’d stack cords of woods for the coming winter, hating every minute of it. Character building, he called it. One summer I constructed an elaborate, teetering helix out of the wood that later nearly collapsed on him. He made me stack the wood in neat rows after that. There were days I spent playing in the woods, learning the tracks of different animals or playing war with boys from the nearby town. We’d smear dirt on our faces and creep on our bellies through the mud, the last one standing winning a chocolate bar everyone had pitched in to buy. At dusk, I’d sit on the granite rock fences, relics left behind when Vermont was all shepherd’s land. I’d eat sour green apples from the orchard until my stomach churned. Dad told me that all this land had belonged to the shepherds a hundred years ago, that they had built the fences and cleared the forests by hand. *These things will be here forever* he had said. The long summer days unrolling, limitless.

After writing, Dad would walk to the mailbox in a dragon-print silk kimono his father had brought back from Japan after World War II. I would watch as he left, his face expectant and eager, patiently waiting. The mailbox was at the end of a mile long dirt road, green farmland veined by the old fences and aspen clusters. He walked, robe flowing behind as if to battle.

He walked down this road every day to pick up letters from the vague, featureless men who did not understand that they were dissolving his life, that every letter was carving away at him. He held the letters up to the sun. In the light, a thin envelope showed failure, a thick one success. Thin letters came as the days passed. He would

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

return depressed and shore himself up with drink, the burnt-sweet smell of liquor on his breath. Days of fitful rhythm, Dad writing furiously and not bathing, locked in the dark cave of his office. I learned to avoid him these days and speak in measured tones, not knowing what would trigger him.

One day we went into the yard to throw a baseball around. He staggered, both a little drunk and trying to catch the ball I threw. They were funny, awkward throws. I was ashamed at how I threw them. Like a girl he would say, because my mother had been raising me. The balls begin coming fast and hard and I feel the sting through the glove but I cannot be the first to quit. It is near dark and I smell the copper of rain coming. I can’t see the balls coming. I drop one and return it where I think he is. It hits the ground and I hear it skitter through the grass. There is silence. I hear him grunt. The ball catches me in the chest with his full weight behind it, and the air won’t go into my chest anymore. I crumple to the ground. He is standing over me, and it gets dark.

There was a reprieve though, when the thick letters came. We would walk into the woods behind the house and he would name trees and rocks for me. He showed how birds popped from branches a minute or two ahead, no matter how quiet we were. We would drive into the village and go to the general store. At a table he would tell me stories, little pieces of life he had picked up.

“Have I told you about the Dolgan nomads?”

I shake my head.

“There’s a loose tribe of them up in Siberia. Some people think they haven’t changed in five hundred years or so. Really, all they do is just wander around alone but here’s the thing about ‘em. These guys are masters. The only thing up there besides ice and snow is reindeer.” I conjure up something vaguely based on the closest thing I know to ice and reindeer: Santa Claus. I picture fat dirty men with ice hanging from beards, men without thumbs, wandering around without blinking and eating raw meat straight from the bone. I picture them grunting at each other when they meet.

“So what they do to survive is live with the reindeer in a way that they both get something out of it. These guys

m. millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium

eat reindeer meat, drink reindeer milk, and wear clothes made from their fur. Even their houses are made from reindeer hide. They build 'em with slats of bone then stretch the skin over it. And guess who pulls their houses?"

"Reindeer?"

"Exactly, but here's the thing. There's no salt out there. Nothing. Only ice and snow. So at night when they gotta piss they go outside and piss in the reindeer's mouth. The reindeer have this long journey every day pulling the houses and they've got to have salt. Otherwise, they die." I'm not at all sure this is a good story or even true. I'm a little horrified, but try not to show it. I think of some man stumbling out into the dark with a belly of raw meat and bladder full of some strange, spicy liquor and wonder how the animal feels about all that.

"You understand? You see how clean that is, how pure?"

I hedge, not knowing which way to answer, and shrug. "Sure."

He looks at me warily, as if I could be someone else's son.

He wrote more, straining himself, but thin letters began coming. They were constant, and without reprieve. Drunk one night, he broke down the kitchen door and painted on it, in red, the inscription of Dante's hell, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." He lurched out to the end of the dirt road, ripped the mailbox from its wood post, and nailed the door in its place. He would climb other nights to the barn roof in bikini briefs and work boots howling like some tortured animal.

Autumn passed, the light long and breathing a prelude of wind holding winter. The country pulling itself inward before the snows came; farmers with chapped and bleeding hands gathered by the granaries; the prediction of the year's snow from the patterns of deer's track in the mud. The divination of a blizzard from a chestnut mare's breach birth. Dad curled to the belly of the wood stove in defeat with his scotch as the fire roared.

We planned the trip for weeks. I watched him grow happier, buoyed by the prospect of simple, pure movement. We began taking day hikes into the woods behind the loft as preparation. We'd find small, sheer rock faces and

millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium mi

scramble on them, training our muscles for what was to come. He bought topographical maps, and as if a tailor, measured and lay the entire forest down into neat lines. He gathered forecasts from the ranger huts in the mountains, divining the patterns of coastal Nor'easters and squalls to see what kind of weather awaited. He planned carefully what equipment to bring.

We are in the kitchen looking over the gear—bedrolls, tent, stove, dried food, iodine pills, chocolate, knives, water, wool socks, long underwear, rain gear, a journal. He pulls a cotton shirt that has made it somehow into the pile and throws it in the corner.

He grabs a book that I have tucked into some pants and frowns. He glares at me and says, *You only carry what's essential into the woods*. I swallow, look at the book and realize I am completely ignorant of this science.

There was a gun too, an old Smith & Wesson .45. It had come from his father's people in West Virginia. He had received the gift along with a promise that it would never be sold. It had belonged to a sheriff who carried it to his death. Dad carried it for the bears and big cats that still roamed the woods. He carried it because his father had carried it when they hiked out into the woods together.

Now I am out here on my own. It is the same mountain, the same wilderness. I am a few years younger than my father was when he brought me here. I have a bedroll, enough dried food for a few days, and a copy of Wolfe, weathered and beaten, from the boxed library I inherited after Dad died. It is a hardcover and weighty and has no business being carried into the woods. I am violating the one essential rule. It is not such a well-planned trip but it does not need to be. I carry the same gun. I cleaned it before leaving--its barrel, hammer, and each cylinder of the chamber--it smells of gun oil. I carry it because I do not know what kind of man I am. I too have come because it is necessary, because my mind is roiling. The bottom is near, close in the shadows.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

Intermission

Jon Pineda

The ballet dancers are smoking cigarettes
Huddled in the mouth of an alley, clouds
Rise in thin strands to a corner light
The way tulip stalks stretch into winter
There is no fear of withering in the frost
The crowd spills onto the sidewalk
Outside the studio, their breath floats
Like swans

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Water

Laura Brist

When I was ten I lived in paradise, and when you are ten and live in paradise nothing ever changes except the weather. I watched clouds. That was my hobby and job, lying out in the meadow, surrounded by dandelions and clover, looking up to watch the clouds. On days like that the sunshine made the grass warm and the bugs sing around me, and the clouds were white puffs across the sun. Some days were overcast and dark, then I would watch the rain come from the sky in great sheets, turning the water on the lake as gray as the sky. I liked the clouds that came before a huge rain, hanging clouds that hung down low over the mountains like great tear drops.

We lived in the mountains of Montana, by a lake where there were two loons and many Canada geese. Dad said the mountain behind the lake came out of the earth, and left the huge hole that filled up with water and made our lake. No one had ever found the bottom of the lake, so we all knew that surely a mountain once rested here. My dad knew all sorts of stories like that and was full of knowledge about the hills and the animals that lived there. Sometimes he took me out to the alfalfa meadows where the grass reached to my shoulder and showed me places where deer had bedded down, leaving oval circles in the grass.

Sometimes he found a fawn, all spotted and gold, still sleeping in the alfalfa and he would come and get me, and we would sneak up on the fawn and watch its breath rise and fall, its tiny ears and tail twitch off the flies. When we put up hay in the summers, I would ride on the nose of our 1935 Ford tractor and sit with my legs draped over the sides, trying not to let the exhaust burn my legs, and Dad would show me the killdeers. Killdeers were birds the color of earth that hid in the grass and had their nests there, and whenever the mower would come around the momma killdeer would fly up, saying, "killdeer, killdeer" in her plaintive voice, and hop around on the newly cut grass holding out one wing like it was hurt. Dad said she did this when she sensed danger so the predator would go after her and

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

not hurt *her* nest. We always tried to find the nests, and leave a patch of grass where the brown spotted eggs could hide unharmed. I usually went barefoot in the summers because it was nicest that way, to feel the dust go *paf paf* under my feet, or the cool grass of the lawn. That way, too, I could feel with my feet for hidden nests in the grass and I wouldn't smush the little eggs.

I knew we would live there forever because my dad told me so. I would see developments of Wal-Marts and apartments being built outside of town, and would worry about our farm someday being sold. Dad told me not to worry, because my grandparents had homesteaded this land and we would never leave. He said it was in our blood, although I didn't know what that meant.

We lived in an old farmhouse that my grandparents lived in when they were first married, but we worked on that house until it was like new. We started on the house when my little sister Natalie was two and I was six, and I remember when we finished the house Natalie could wear the paint-spattered shoes I had worn back when we started. My mom loved the "golden oldies" music, the Lettermen, the Beatles, Peter Paul and Mary, and Dad loved opera and musicals. So when we hung wallpaper, which was Mom's least favorite, we listened to the oldies. When we painted, which Dad didn't like, we listened to musicals, and he would sing—his voice filling the house like water, lines from "The Phantom," or "Carousel", and we would listen at full volume and sing even louder, because we knew all the words, and the rooms, empty of furniture echoed the notes.

They worked on the house in the evenings and in times when the farm was quiet, but never in lambing season or haying time. It took us a long time, and my little brother Addison never knew the house, the way it had been before, old and contrary. My mom loved that house.

I was awake a lot at night, either kept awake by the trails of moonlight across my bed, or reading a book, and Mom didn't know it, but I watched her sometimes. Late at night, when she thought we were all sleeping, she would go downstairs, turn on all the lights, then step outside. I'd watch her, her long graying hair shining like silver against her bathrobe, as she walked slowly around the house, now coming close to the windows and looking in, now going

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

further away to get the whole picture, and I can imagine what it was like, the gold light spilling out into the night, the house lit up, admiring how beautiful it all was. She would look up at our windows too, then just stand close to the downstairs window and look for the longest time. I liked her hair in the moonlight, even though I always like my momma's hair. She would let me comb it out for her in the evenings when it was wet from washing, and I loved the smell of water in the clean gray. I would twist her hair around my wrist tighter and tighter until I had a coil of gray around my arm, then I would untwist it and comb it again, letting it flow down her back and I imagined it was water.

The summer when I was eleven there were no clouds in the sky for me to watch, no mare's tails to watch, no mare's tails to sit in the sky with the streams from the jets, not even thunderheads or puff clouds. The streams dried up and so did the slough, which always used to have water in it. We all had to help Dad that summer, setting up and moving the irrigation pipes morning and night, Momma carrying Addison in a pack on her back and Natalie and I pushing pipe, our irrigation boots making squishing noises in the black peat of the meadows, frogs sometimes gushing out of pipes and plopping at our feet to our delight. The meadows were the only green thing in our mountains except for the evergreen pines, because everything else turned brown. I stopped going barefoot because of the grasshoppers, they were everywhere and it wasn't nice to hear them scrunch between my toes. The leaves on the cottonwoods curled up and died. After we got the hay in, we stopped irrigating, then the stubble in the fields became prickly and when you walked the stubble would crunch. We herded the sheep to the mountain, where it was cool beneath the pines, where there was enough grass still alive to feed them. The county road that ran by our house became so dry that every time a logging truck went roaring past, a great cloud of dust would rise up and settle on our meadows, and hang there, suspended in the breathless air, making the goats cough and putting layers of dirt on the furniture in the house.

We haunted the lake. Natalie and I played in the water and Momma sat with Addison on the shore, and sometimes Momma would stare off at the hills, and I won-

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

dered where she had gone. I knew Dad was worried. He became a night roamer too, because I would see him outside in the dead of night, looking at the sky like I used to look for clouds, but he didn't see any, because the clouds didn't come that summer.

We first heard about the fires in July, and soon the only thing people could think about was how dry it was, and how quickly a fire could get started. The Smoky the Bear sign at the bottom of the road by the highway said that the fire danger was EXTREMELY HIGH. In eastern Montana, the prairies were burning up, one grass fire after another, but so far there were no fires in the mountains.

In August the fires began in Idaho and down in the Lolo mountains, and we would read about them in the paper, how one man wrapped his entire cabin in aluminum foil-like stuff, and saved his house. Soon the governor issued a Class Five fire danger alert, and every area in the Flathead Valley was soon closed, even Glacier Park was closed. We couldn't take the four wheelers through the hills to herd sheep, or drive our cars in the woods or meadows. The land was like a tinderbox and I began to lie awake at night, praying there would be no fires here.

Smoke hung on everything, mixed with the dust and made it so thick we couldn't even see the mountain behind our house. The lake matched the gray in the air. Smoke permeated everything, and when we would take out clothes to wear in the morning they would smell like campfire, and when we washed our hair it smelled like smoke. There were fire crews coming from all over the nation, from other countries too, coming to fight our fires. One fire began about fifty miles from our house when that happened Dad and the neighbors began building fire fences with the big Caterpillars, bulldozing firebreaks with the soft peat earth all around the buildings of the farms. The smell of fresh dirt mixed with the dry dust and smoke, and when I went down to the firebreaks to take my dad water, I could see the snail shells in the black dirt, and I wished the land around us was still one big lake.

One night there was a storm, but it came with wind so hard Momma had to hold onto Addison when she went to do the chores, or he would be knocked down with the force of it. Momma's face had wrinkles at the corners and

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

she didn't smile and she looked at my father when he wasn't looking. She looked hard and I knew she was trying not to be scared. That night she wound her hair up tightly in a bun and got to work. I could tell by the set of her jaw she meant business. She started packing. Clothes. Photos. A little food. Diaries. A few dolls and toys. Blankets. Shoes. Grandma's jewelry. She didn't talk and neither did Addison, who sat in the corner and put his thumb in his mouth, his eyes wide like a calf's eyes. Natalie and I tried to help and not get in the way, and then Momma packed things I had never seen before, old letters and postcards, stacks of them. Dad was on the phone talking to the man who owned the logging land by our house, and when he was done he told us he was going to go help look for fires. He didn't say anything to Momma, just looked at her for a long time before he left and I wished for a hug to calm down the jumping inside of me, but he was gone into the windy night and we continued packing and loaded up everything into our old blue Econoline van. Then we just waited. Momma put us all on the couch and Natalie and Addison fell asleep on her lap, and we waited for hours and the jumping didn't get better, it got worse.

In the morning light we saw it. Smoke was billowing up from behind the south mountain and the smoke was swirling. Dad soon came home, red eyes and stubble and told us he was getting the Caterpillar to make stronger fire breaks. Then there were people at our house, and a fire crew with strange accents got coffee from Momma and by now her hair fell in threads about her face. I heard we were the first farm in the line of the fire, and it was getting stronger and headed toward us. I knew I couldn't do anything but Momma got me pails of water, and sent me on the four-wheeler to where the men were working. I had a wet bandanna covering my nose and mouth to cut the smoke, and I brought the water to the men to drink, and changed my father's old bandanna for a new one. His face was sweating and the lines of his face collected dust and dirt and sweat, and back and forth I drove, with water and food from the house, my arms tired from holding the water, but I kept going.

We saw the red from the fire and heard the shouts from the firefighters. We heard the droning of the bombers

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

over the mountain. Then the plane came nearer and we saw the plane dump the retardant in the path of the fire, and soon helicopters were dipping water from the lake and dumping it on the firebreaks and on the fires. I couldn't breathe. Neither could Momma and we put Addison and Natalie in the van and we waited.

They couldn't stop the fire.

The red grew redder and the sky turned red and ash was falling like snow. What would the killdeers do? I knew their nests were either plowed up under the firebreak or would be destroyed with fire. Where would the deer go? Momma left me with the kids, and in response to shouts, from Dad she ran to the barns, letting the sheep and goats and cows run, and they ran by us, a white sea of wool. I could see their fear and they ran and ran to the west until I couldn't see them anymore. Then I saw the deer. They were running. Running and running, they bounded and leapt over fences and across the firebreak, running to the west, running from the fire, and soon we saw the great elk and moose running in their uneven gait, powerful and strong, the geese and cranes flying above them, everything was running away. Dad was in the van now, the fire was coming faster now and the ash rained. We drove away on the county road and from the back seat I could see my Dad's eyes in the rear view mirror, red lined with black, straining to see the road, and then I saw a bobcat running beside us, its muscles smooth beneath its coat of spots, running at the same speed we were driving. I could hear the roar of the fire, but it wasn't as loud as the roaring in my ears, and I kept looking at the tufts of fur on the bobcat's ears, watching them go up and down in the rhythm of his gait. He would run and run until he was safe, miles and miles away, in a new place, where the killdeers didn't sing.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Scar

Traci Wood

Spin the wheel, hit any place you've marked on your flesh, it still tastes the same. Longing. The sight of your skin dropping open. You wait for the stars, the blood that wells to the surface and beads along the skin in a pearl necklace, pretty along your legs and between your thighs. You feel the yellow ball of yourself crawl through the cartilage, through the nerves and tendons of the body. White girl, too thin, muddy brown hair in knots. Lovely and scrawny and pale. White girl crouching in a torn black T-shirt. You're wearing flowered cotton panties. The colors have all run together with the sparse black hairs that curl along the edge of the flowered panties. See the thighs, hatch-marked with wavering faces. Watch the blade come down and open red cracks in flesh, like a quieter sunrise.

Exhibit 1—the one you paste in your notebook—looks nothing like that though. You're not sure how to reconcile the images. A kid, this is you and this is you, right? A Xeroxed photo pasted in a notebook in mottled tones of gray and black. A blank white face obscured by dark hair, a thick black halo. In front of you, a cake with long slender candles. They remind you of fingers. The Xerox is cool and safe. And you think of the cat, the one you read about in science class. The cat trapped in its box, the physicist waiting, wondering which cat image would prevail—living or dead—when the lid was finally lifted.

The Xerox cool and safe, but the body tells another story, the triumphant return of Jesus into Jerusalem cut into the skin, scored into the flesh. He rides his donkey along your thigh, his face a knot of scars. Angels soar across your belly and breasts in frenzied flight. Golgotha waits between your breasts, crosses erect in the thin skin. This is what you've been etching into your body for months, ever since you got thrown out—discharged—from the big white house surrounded by twisting chestnut trees. Seven months in the white house and it was still the trees you knew best, stretching their silent faces, wrapping their smell around the house. Old men and women whispering your name

m. millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium

through the triple panes of locked glass.

Inside, too much sitting around, the smell of blood every month. Ten girls in harmony. Ten girls sitting in a circle. Everyone fucked by someone—Granddaddy, Daddy, Daddy’s best friend, brothers, cousins, uncles, the mailman, Mommy. Ten girls peering out from beneath thorazine veils. Haldol. Lithium. Needing the walls and vinyl furniture to hold them up, the drugs were that good. Ten girls sinking, sucked beneath the surface of the sharp blue world outside the windows, ten girls locked inside pulsing pink walls eating eggs with plastic spoons, coloring with crayons, howling gospel music while Nurse Bell accompanied on the guitar. Bullshit, of course. Then there was *group*. Fat Nancy overtaking the puke-green sofa with her massive ass and thighs, screwed by two brothers and a father the year she turned ten. Jackie, red hair short and spiky, balled in a chair talking about butter knives; we all knew, but didn’t mention the seven operations it took to put her back together again. Patty and Melba and June, cool distant girls in their own private nightclub. We all ran together. Ran is a funny word though; the outcome was always the same, nurses selling forgiveness like the apostles.

Got kicked out though, didn’t you? The letter was the beginning of the end. Group assignment: write a letter to the offender, practice forgiveness. You’ve saved yours, taped it alongside the Xerox in the notebook. Exhibit 2:

Dearest Grandfather~

One day you will swallow your dick, detached from your body, sliced into bits and sprinkled with cumin for your culinary delight.

Love Eternal~

Your sweetest

It was your turn. You read the letter. No response, at first. Then from beneath a reproduction of *Water lilies*, you hear a muffled “shit, right on.” Then louder, another voice—“Yeah, fucking make him eat it.” Then still louder—“stuff it down his throat!” Finally, from Jackie who’d come uncurled and stood shaking in the middle of the room, “No, wait, stuff it up his ass and then stuff it down his throat! And cut off his balls!” She runs to the window, shaking, undone, a bird smashed against the glass, screaming. “Let

millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium mi

me the fuck out of here!” She beats her fists against the glass. You watch her knuckles bloom into bloody stems, watch the blood smear arcs across the glass. You remember everything. Nurse Mary presses the button. Orderlies come to subdue Jackie, the big dark boys. They carry her out between them, her arms twisted in angles behind her. One dude, bald heavyweight, has her by a clump of hair. He pulls her head down to disorient her. Over and over again she screams, “fuck you” as they take her to lock down, permanent time out.

The other girls cowered, sheep huddled in the corner of the rec room. Nancy cried quietly, her whole body shaking like jello. Nurse Mary wandered around the room, touching each girl, each girl except for you, as she passed. “There, there girls... see... anger never gets anyone anywhere.” She shoved the inner-child doll into Nancy’s lap. Nancy stroked its worn, bald head.

The next day, man, you were out of there. Discharged. *The patient is hostile towards the therapeutic process and represents a threat to others.* Out of there like shit, like yesterday’s news. They can do that in the ritzy places. Pack your leather bags and call you a cab. Out of there baby. The only things you miss are the drugs and the trees.

Here you are now. Nestled in your fermenting apartment, nestled in the center of the Polish district—Alphabet City. Back to the floral wallpaper peeling in the corners, the sink piled high with food-crusting dishes. Back to the family money sent in cash to cover the rent, living expenses. But you are smart. You let the landlord fuck you with his fingers—that’s all he ever wants to do—for the rent, and you keep the family money in a mason jar under the sink. And every night you lie awake. You wait until the phone call comes—no voice, just the rasp and wheeze of air. His asthma seems to be getting worse.

You lie around for a week digging the smells that drift up through the open window—ripe bananas, rotting vegetables, weed, exhaust, steaming pavement. You lie around listening to the voices from the street below—“Hey mommy... you look good mommy... give me some of that sweet thing.” You are alive outside of the pink walls, far

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

from the hospital. You lie around for a week listening to old Mr. Marcello waltz by himself in the apartment above, bumping into furniture. You danced with him once, let him whirl you around his shabby room, let him put his cigarette-thick tongue in your mouth, run his hard hands around your neck. You let him push you into the sofa. It had reminded you of home.

You lie around for a week smoking cigarettes, rationing the last of your stash, using the same needle, thinking about Jackie's fists drawing sharp red lines across the hospital glass, dreaming about butter knives and deformed children.

Then you take a bath.

Witness the toenail, exhibit 3, flattened between the pages. There you were, floating in hot water up to your chin, watching your skin turn pink. You are so high, nodding nodding. The white tub is soft, like marshmallow. You can barely feel your spine. Dim light hisses from the bulb above. Bugs burn when they touch the glass. You can even hear their bodies pop, tiny explosions. You float in the hot water, close your eyes. Nodding. So easy to drown, to slip down and down into the drain. Slide along the mucky pipes, picking up speed as you travel to a destination beneath the streets. Nod. You sink down into the water, feel the sweat bead and run down your face, taste salt on your lips. Nod into soft red rooms. Halfway there though, something brushes your face, sharp. Something sharp in the soft red room. You open your eyes, something unrecognizable, thick and yellow, floats in front of you. Your toe stings like the needle. You look down and realize the thing floating in the tub is your toenail. Hey, what the fuck have you done now, toeing the faucet hole? The nail's lifted off completely. Nothing left but puckering white skin. The skin glows, clean, better somehow. You reach down and with a razor and cut the cuticle. Barely any blood, any pain. You put the nail in your mouth, roll it from side to side. It tastes sweetly metallic, like something else.

With a razor you could do anything.

Your mind clicks through the possibilities. Years in Catholic school paid off. Bible images of Jesus and company remain newer in your brain, technicolor. You remember everything. Jesus entering on palms into the

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

city. Jesus clearing the temple. Jesus healing the grotesque, the whores, the deformed, the possessed. Jesus hung torn and bleeding in a black and orange sky.

Purification. The body altered.

Jesus could perform such miracles. Chewing on it, you knew the toenail was a sign.

Days pass like water. Exhibit 4. The enactment of the miracle. Start with an image so whoever is left will be able to see, to understand. In the notebook, an elaborate drawing inked in black marker. Shadowed in pencil. The lines fast, intersecting along his brow. Jesus entering the city, a nice jaw, head raised immaculate into the sun, dreadlocks, hands still, silent along the neck of the stinking donkey. The city awaits the coming of its savior.

Initial procedure.

You sit on the floor. You clean the razor with alcohol. You clean the skin with alcohol. You press the first incision, the only one that scares, hurts, like the jamming of a needle. Glass dragged along the skin. Breath held, you watch the blood bead and run. The blood is filled with poison. Second incision. Deeper this time. The skin parts and you are moving closer to the center of the thing. You no longer lift the blade from your skin. Instead, you carve in elaborate curls, carve in strait lines from a point just above the knee, slowly, along the pale flesh of the thigh. Your hands, your skin, are sticky, like the time you ate cotton candy. There is blood on your panties, your hair. There is blood on the floor. When you are finished, the razor glitters sharp in its coat of hard red crystals. You wait, soaked in sweat, smeared with blood. You wait in the night heat, look out of the open window into the sky. You know there are stars there, sure. You are like the stars the physicist said, the geek in his chair, made of the same luminous molecular matter. You know they are far away, far above New York, already cold and dead long ago, but flashing electric white light in the darkness, like the savior. Go to them.

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium

Plum

Traci Wood

Silent, breath held—watching
the familiar curve of your spine.
I stand quiet,
like the water-smoothed stone
pressed tight in the palm of my hand,
pink-veined memory from some trip
or another—
some lake, river,
or stream
we had visited.
And you, remote angles
on your heels, back bent and fingers thrust deep
into the sallow light of our ancient icebox.
You say, without turning,
“I need you
more than you will ever need me.”

Silent, memorizing
your fist, your face
bloodless, white
as you emerge from the dimming light.
You hold the last summer plum,
purple skin beaded and damp.
Our eyes meet along the wet-velvet skin,
and retreat.

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium mi



Planting Potatos
Kathleen McLaughlin

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium



After Funeral
Kathleen McLaughlin

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium mi



Untitled
Amitra Corey

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium



Enemy of the Sun
Bruce Wilhelm

57

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium m



The Jefferson Hotel
Bruce Wilhelm

58

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium



People
Bruce Wilhelm

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium m



That Last Supper Looking One (Ghandi)
Bruce Wilhelm

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium



Untitled
Amitra Corey

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium m



Spring Storm
Kathleen McLaughlin

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium



Shepherd
Kathleen McLaughlin

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Saturday for a Straight Line

Alex Andrews

I walk in straight lines now. I count the steps. It takes twenty-eight to get from my door to the front door. I turned right this morning—thirty-four to the corner. I always go to the right on Saturday. The McDonald's opens a little later, but the corner booths are empty. I would sit alone and stare out of the window, drinking my coffee and thinking. I thought about my short time in the army, my shorter time in Vietnam. I tried to figure out where the kid took the wrong turn and wound up as me. I remembered waking on Saturday mornings when I was a kid. I was seven, maybe eight. The older men in the family had already risen, washed and left for work. The women and us kids—and man, there was always at least six or seven lying on couches, cots and roll-ups—were still sound asleep. Except my mamau and me. We would wake before them. Truth be told, I was awake even before the men. I don't know why I didn't get up. I just couldn't.

Once the men had all gone out the back screen door and I heard the truck engine turn twice, I would slide out of bed and shuffle out to the kitchen. If it had been a particularly good few weeks, the warm kitchen would smell of fried bacon fat and coffee, with cream. If not, it would smell heavy of cigarettes and black coffee. The ashtray in the kitchen was more full than the one in the truck. My mamau would fix me a half of a cup of coffee, darker than she was, and stir in a small spoonful of sugar. I never spoke. She talked, I listened, and watched that spoon spin.

"Don't tell your mother, now. But a little spoonful won't hurt, right? And besides, you're a good one with those big brown eyes. Never cause harm. Mind yourself in this world, and let others worry about themselves, you'll be all right, sure." She would lay her hand on my head and slide it down to the back of my neck and squeeze. I could feel a soft flower in the palm of her callused fingers. May through October you knew the kitchen would only be cool through mid morning, noon at best; by June you wouldn't be caught dead in there for more than a few minutes.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

Mamau only came out every few hours to check on a clothesline or take a minute or two for herself. When every-one else was gone, she thought no one would see her. She would walk over to the pump, take her shirt off and fill the small pail hanging on the post. I remember watching her pour the whole bucket over her head. Her big soft back and breasts shook off the cool water. Her eyes shone.

It was still early. I walked down the city blocks. Always west in the morning. I looked up for a street sign, but someone must have ripped it down. It didn't matter. The sign clasp was bent out and down. One rusted fastener hung by a snagged corner. I pushed it through. It made me feel good. One hundred and sixty one steps, block to block.

I glanced at my wristwatch, for what, I don't know - nothing on my wrist but a small bump from the watchpin rubbing against it. No more watch. The last watch I owned was pawned for a fix. Because of my habit I lost track of time. Because of my habit I lost a lot of things. The army figured it caused me to be classified as psychologically unable to perform my duties. I was given a medical discharge and sent back, but not home. They used to say, in the VA, that a part of the body not worked out would begin to atrophy. Man, premature rigor mortis all over. I remembered guys in there, sitting in their standard issue chairs, drooling all day long, gagging on their own spit at night, if they got over on their backs. Sometimes we would just let them go on until they woke up, or not. I could still move around.

In the afternoons, from four to six, on Saturdays, and two to four, on Sundays, volunteers came down to the house. House my ass. The nice sweet house bosses called the "Reintroduction Home." The nasty ones simply pointed to a board and said, "You fuck up and you go bye-bye." The board had house rules. We would sit in the group room, smoke cigarettes and wait for the volunteers to start creeping cautiously into the cloud. One by one, we all engaged in our sincere heart-to-hearts with these volunteers. They asked us what we had been doing lately. They stuck to real general questions. I think the program supervisor gave a rundown of do's and don'ts on the bus ride from the hos-

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

pital to the house.

- 1- Never bring up the past.
- 2- Don't ever mention family.
- 3- Don't offer or agree to outside meetings.
- 4- Bring nothing for them, as it may conflict with medications.
- 5- And on.
- 6- And on.
- 7- Ad infinitum.

You could always see a pathetic curiosity behind their dull eyes. I never figured out if the pathetic part was for them or me. Inside their heads they all had the same question, "How the hell did you end up here?" I could tell when they began to snap back out of their thoughts, by the jolt my dead bored expression gave them. *Who's the pathetic one now? Go on home, your momma's calling you.* I would sit and think to myself, smoke circling around my head. What would they want to know? I could tell them all kinds of things, for nothing. Why don't I try and be like I was before? Before what? Should I make small talk and tell them these were the same clothes I wore last time I was in jail. How about the venomous orderlies on the graveyard shift at the VA? The night I was angry from my dreams. They came rattling through the door with a set of restraints to let me know what was what. They knew the locked door kept me from getting to them. They also knew they could come through the door and get to me, if they were so inclined. Yeah, that's what I'd talk about. Or maybe, one of them had a story to tell me about their modest garden back in the suburbs. "And, you know, gardening can really be...well..."

"Therapeutic," again, to myself.

"Well, really, actually quite relaxing."

Morbid bastards. I think they really believed their two hours a week was changing the world. I could look right through their heads at the clock on the wall. It spins and spins. They chattered on, checking watches with more frequency as the awkwardness of nothing to say settled in on their spines. I just sat. I can do that well. I have been waiting in line a long time. Food, medication, showers, lineups, getting on buses, getting right back off. It doesn't

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

end. You start to count things, floor tiles, steps, seconds. I just get stuck in circles if I'm not moving. I feel detached. Stand in a bathroom, with mirrors in front and behind. Push the edge of one just enough to get a fragmented image of hundreds of yourself going all the way out. Sometimes I feel like the one way out, where the reflection starts to get dark.

By five-thirty or quarter to six, they all began to stir and zip coats. The ladies grabbed purses that were laying against their legs. I guess they felt a little too self-aware if they clutched the bags in their fat soft lotioned hands for two hours. I could have been up to my room for the sunset. The view was a benefit for being the senior resident. The last guy who stayed here was collected early one morning by two state troopers. He never came back.

The last drag of my butt burned down into my lungs. The last of the volunteers pulled themselves back onto the bus. They nodded approvingly to each other. I saw that smile. They all had it. Like they had really done someone a favor. I flicked the burning cotton filter out of the window and watched it fall three stories towards them. Three and a half seconds.

I woke up sweating. Christ, I didn't even know I was asleep. Mamau had come to see me. She was the only one to visit, other than the volunteers. I took off my shirt and pressed my chest and stomach against the cool painted cinder block wall. Once that patch had been warmed I went to the other wall and pressed my back against it. It helped me to bear the heat. It helped my head. Sleeping in the daytime was the worst. I would wake right before dusk. Waking up to a darkening sky is just not right.

I sat and smoked a few more cigarettes and waited until it grew dark outside and quiet inside. The front and back doors were locked at eight on the dot. But a small man could shimmy out through the trash hatch. The guy who had the room before me showed me one night. We weren't supposed to be in the kitchen, but we weren't supposed to be shimmying out of the trash hatch either. Staying close to the walls, in the shadows, I made my way down the alleyway. Seventy-two quiet steps, one breath, then another.

I had made a few dollars, clipping lawns, hauling trash, doing whatever. It was nice to be able to feel a few

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

bills in my pocket. The nearest store was five blocks away. I bought a quart of beer and another pack of cigarettes. I went up onto the hill overlooking the city. I sat there for two hours and eighteen minutes. The clock above the Korean market was missing numbers, but I could still tell. I just thought about filling in the cracks. I walked over to the market for another quart. I clipped a pack of smokes. That's when I ran into Melvin. He was the guy who was in the room before me. He looked ashy. He looked like a ghost.

"Hang tight, hang tight. I'm glad I saw you man. I want to talk with you a minute," he was always rushing around, scheming. I had forgotten about the pack I stole. He came back out and tugged my sleeve so I would walk with him. He moved around like he was some bigshot with some new secret news. He turned his head and glared a big grin at me. He flashed a set of yellow teeth. When he smiled it made his eyes squint so they looked like two inverted crescents, kind of yellow.

"You got forty bucks? How about twenty? Hell, man, how much you got?"

He never let me answer one question without throwing another at me. I stuck my arm deep into the pocket of my pants. The inside of the pocket was still damp with sweat. The bills I took out were even more ragged than before.

"Damn, man, what, you go and take a leak all over your cash? Naw, naw, I'm just playing man, it's cool."

I tried to look under the creases masking his face. I felt a little embarrassed. I didn't know why. I was thinking about that afternoon. The embarrassment washed out. Melvin and I sat back on the hill and downed our beer. He told me all about this guy he ran into earlier that month. This guy was the reason Melvin was picked up. I thought I should thank this guy if I ever met him. Melvin said we should head over to his place after midnight. He had a little surprise.

We walked seventeen blocks, averaging one hundred and fifty-five steps per block. Melvin talked. My head was starting to tighten up. Melvin talked about meeting this guy in city lockup a few months back. Fencing, drugs, he just talked. Then a bottle came out of the darkness and shattered next to us, silencing Melvin's voice. Broken glass

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

sprayed onto his shoulder—I figured he would have gone off. But he just made some grumbling remark at the porch above us. A voice came down. It was soft and apologetic, “Yo, sorry about that, I accidentally knocked it off.” But I could hear a couple of people laughing.

“What was that?” someone said.

“Nothing but a couple of section eights.”

It all blended back into the laughter and the music. I felt offended they were listening to Bird. I heard Charlie Parker play back in fifty-five, the year he died. Shit, I was still a kid, not even eighteen. We used to spend our nights going from jazz club to jazz club. There were nights in Boston, in Southie. We would spend the early morning hours in the upstairs of some all night shebeen, shooting horse and listening to his records with a bunch of nodding micks. Melvin tugged on my sleeve again. He was ranting about if he didn’t have something better to do he would have done something else, I’m not really sure what he was saying. Things vibrated in me with an uncomfortable heat.

“Anyway,” he said to me, “we’re here, forget those lousy mothers, we can go back later if you want.”

I handed Melvin the wet cash. He went through a door. I sat on a trashcan, smoking another cigarette. I don’t even remember what I gave Melvin the money for. Had he even told me? He came back outside. It had taken him seven hundred and fifty-five seconds. I counted. Back on line.

I was paying attention to the cherry as it dropped into a small puddle. I was aware again. I was very clear. All the lights had the rainbow sparkles around them. I could hear and feel the grinding of alley grit under my strides. I wanted to chew it hard between my teeth. I had never even noticed Melvin pulling out his works. His hands were too full to pull my sleeve this time. He just nudged my ribs gently. Was I that skinny? He nudged again, harder this time.

“Man, where are you? Those VA people keep your brain in a jar somewhere? Here, hold this.” He handed me the needle. “You go on first, you look like you need it more than me.”

He lit the small flame. I twisted his rig in between my fingers, to warm it up. Funny thing is, I did this with my

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

smokes sometimes too. He popped his thumb off the lighter and flashed me that black and yellow smile.

“Here we are. Just the trick, just the trick,” that smile again. It was the same one the volunteers had as they got on the bus to take them back to their lives. “Just a little spoonful, hey, no harm in that. Just what the doctor orders.”

I started getting weird about a block down. Melvin was already nowhere to be found. I slumped down against an old section of chain link fencing. A tree had started up through the crack in the asphalt lot on the flipside of the fence. It had managed to grow through the wire diamonds. I laid my head against it. The bark was smooth and cool.

I remember thinking I would probably lose my room. I remember thinking I wish I could talk to Mamau over a cup of coffee. I remember thinking I wanted to go out in the yard and dump pails full of water over her head for her. I remember thinking; I can’t remember how many steps it was back to the line, or to anywhere for that matter. I pulled my head forward and grabbed the back of my gritty neck.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

Andre The Giant

Robert Widdicombe

More than half the stuff we brought in never made it anywhere near the floor of the thrift store, and monster console TVs were about the most fun thing to destroy. It took two of us to lift the simulated woodgrain cabinet up the side and through the open top of the giant crusher dumpster. Then I tripped the compactor button and the other drivers and helpers stopped unloading and watched as the TV slowly got pushed in farther and farther until it disappeared and the picture tube blew. It went *tump!*—loud but muffled and bassy, like catching a medicine ball at close range, the reverb going to the center of the chest. We cheered like wildmen and then rated it: “Eh, pretty good one.” Right after that the new guy came bounding out through the bay door and onto the unloading flat.

“Wow!” he said. “What was that?”

Nobody answered him. I was getting back up into my box truck to fight off a queen-size mattress and the rest of my junk.

“Need some help?” the new guy called up, switching his cap around backwards and squinting at me.

“Naw,” I said, waving him off. “I got it.”

I sumo wrestled the mattress to where it was half leaning on my back and tried squatting under it, but it got top heavy and started to slide off. Right before it lost me my balance, I lunged it forward over my head toward the edge of the truck box. It spilled over and flopped out flat on the ground right at the new guy’s weird dress shoes.

He looked down at it then back up at me and smiled. He had big white teeth. They were perfectly straight.

“Nice mattress!” he said. “My name’s K-Low.”

“Phil,” I sort of nodded, wiping my hands on my tee-shirt and turning to the headboard and bedframe I needed to un-bunji.

The new guy picked up one side of the mattress and heaved it up against the brick wall of the store and went

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

over to try charming the other guys instead. He bounced when he walked, a real suburban cowboy. He wore way too big brown plaid pants hanging halfway down off his ass and a red windbreaker with a checkered racing flag on the chest pocket. I could see some purple and bleached hair coming out from under his baseball cap, which had an Andre the Giant patch on it, but I couldn’t tell if it was because he liked Andre the Giant or if he was making fun of him.

Next morning Dale told me I had to train the new guy on the bag route. He sprayed me with his cranky orders like it was still ‘68 and we were surrounded by jungle, though no one knew if he’d really been there and no one ever asked him.

“And I want you training him on zones tomorrow,” he cranked, “so be in half an hour early.” When he was done, he ceremoniously smoothed back what few strands of gray and black hair he had left up there, and I wondered if that was where the rainbow film across the top of his coffee came from. Dale was the kind of guy who would stir sugar into boiling hot coffee with an index finger but never wash his hands.

The new guy climbed up into the cab like he’d never even *seen* the inside of a truck before, not even one of these half-pint foreign jobs. When he finally stopped looking around, he strapped on his seatbelt like a good citizen and sat there, all eager and ready to go, sunshine and crystal. He smelled like deodorant soap.

I lit up a cigarette and said, “Mind if I smoke?” Then I turned the radio on full blast.

K-Low rolled his window down a couple of inches as I warmed up the truck with some heavy revving, the little diesel motor whining like an injured chicken.

“Whatever, pal,” I said, but he couldn’t hear me.

The radio played commercials the whole way to my house. I parked out front.

“Look,” I told him, “I don’t use the bathroom at the store and I got to release some hostages, so wait here.”

“Sure,” he said. “No problem, chief.”

I went inside and sat down on my red foam captain’s chair and took a bong-hit, kicked back on the Mexican pillows and flipped on the TV. I looked at the

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

square shaped talk show furniture on the screen and tried to imagine it as the furniture there in my living room, but it wasn't orange enough. Then came this completely tripped-out little German expressionistic art film, all wacky angles and spirals with some Dr. Caligari-looking dude, but it turned out to be a car insurance commercial. I shook it off and went to fire up a pot of coffee, one that for sure wasn't going to taste like it was made from water *du toilette* like Skinny Janine's at the store.

My buzz had already started to wear off when I got back to the truck, and K-Low was just sitting there in the cab staring out the windshield. I climbed in and settled back into my seat and started looking at the route paperwork, but I wasn't reading it. After a while I started the truck, the radio instantly blaring, and we headed for Castlestone Harbor Groves.

Even when he wasn't smiling, the new guy's mouth was always sort of open. You could still see half his teeth. He just sat there staring out the window looking at everything, like he was commanding his own personal space capsule.

"So, where'd you ever get a name like 'K-Low?'" I yelled over the rock station.

"My name's Kevin, but my friends in high school started calling me 'K-Lowrider.' Now I'm just K-Low without the 'rider' part!" he yelled back.

"*Tch*," I said, loud enough for him to hear just how unbelievably retarded I thought that was. What the hell was wrong with *Kev*?

When we got close to the first bag route street I turned the radio down and cleared my throat real loud.

"Arright," I told him, "the deal with doing the bag route is, you never know which houses are gonna have a bag--and remember yellow, it's a yellow bag--so you got to look at every single house. It's not like the specials route or when you're on zones where you got the addresses already. On *this* route we have to cruise down every street, hunting for yellow bags. And watch out for any big piles of junk with the folded up bag just taped up to it somewhere, 'cause the crew puts the bags out like a week in advance, giving them plenty of time to clean out their attics, the

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium mi

crazy bastards." I lit a cigarette and turned the radio back up, loud. "Got all that?"

"Yep," he said. "Sounds good."

"What?"

"Sounds good!"

"Okay then," I came back, "what do you do on the zones route?"

"Uh...I don't know. Pick up the donations? They didn't tell me about that yet."

"*What?*"

"Nobody told me about that yet!"

"Well," I said, "I'll be telling you about that tomorrow, 'cause that's the one we're doing tomorrow."

I turned onto Castlestone Harbor Groves Way West and saw a long dotted line of yellow where almost every house had a Vets bag out front, and I could already see a couple other houses that had more stuff along with it. That meant every freaking Joneses-wannabe resident in the subdivision probably donated something, even if it was a brand new pair of socks, since they saw their neighbor doing it and so on and so on, *ad jonesium*.

Fan-fucking-tastic, I thought, another Hell Day and training a new guy.

"God!" I said. "I wish they'd make my life easier and start using the damn yellow bag for bathroom use only!" I laughed.

K-Low looked at me with the wonder look.

"Arright," I said, "you grab the ones on that side and I'll do the left. And I'm moving the truck up every five or six houses, so you got to keep up with me."

The yellow bags of clothes started piling up in the truck pretty quick. Ten or twelve houses had extra bags of clothes, big-ass lawn'n'leaf bags full. One house though had a pretty cool toy fire engine with a ladder and a real unrolling hose.

The driveway of one pre-fab rancher offered up about ten bags of rags, a set of particle-board bedroom furniture, two old floor lamps, some picture frames, a walnut spice rack with some other kitchen junk in a broken up plastic laundry basket, a stack of vinyl LPs of some southern rock, weird violin jazz, the usual polka, and *The 1812 Overture*. I checked out the orange metal file box and

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium

judged the cat piss smell to be coming from the nasty throw rugs. There was also a fat brown vinyl easychair with its yellow foam popping out everywhere and duct tape all along the seams from before they gave up, and a huge round green plastic kiddie pool covered with cartoon fish and a three-foot crack straight down the center. The pool sat up on its side with its bottom leaning against the chain-link fence a few feet away from the main pile. There was a piece of yellow legal paper taped to its rim near the top that had scrawled on it in big sloppy magic marker strokes: "VETS, TAKE THIS TOO."

"Man," K-Low said, "this is awesome!"

"What, *this* trash?" I laughed and started grabbing bags, throwing them onto the truck as hard as I could, some of them busting, the clothes all coughing out. "You'll get over it."

Later we hit the motherlode of garbage, a mountain of nothing but one-hundred-and-fifty percent dumpster-bound yard sale crap. The pure junk they couldn't give away at the end of their dumbass yard sale. I backed the truck up to the mound as close as I could, but I really wanted to just run over it and flatten it into the ground: a rusted hide-a-bed with a stained mattress, a couch with *its* stuffing all hanging out, two bulky-ass clothes racks, a wind-up baby swing, bags of womens' shoes, an ugly but semi-cool gothic mirror, a bunch of bad Seventies light blue vinyl suitcases with broken handles and ruined zippers, bags of old magazines. K-Low was gazing at the stuff like it was golden, and I'm talking bald car tires, a puppy-chewed wicker clothes hamper filled with lawn darts and half a croquet set, board games with pieces falling out of them, a mortally wrecked ten-speed with the grip tape unraveling in curls from the handlebars, paper and plastic bagfulls of clothes, everything, tons of it—the entirety of the contents of hell. And there was also about a dozen boxes of something, probably heavy damn books.

"I can't fucking believe we have to pick up this crap!" I screamed, kicking the hide-a-bed frame, its tiny

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium m

piece of masking tape well overpricing it at three dollars.

"If it's all trash, then why do we have to take it?"

I looked over at the new guy and kept on looking at him, his goofy eyes blinking.

"Cause one humongous dooron," I started, "wanted to get in an argument with a lady about picking up her two-hundred pound sleeper sofa with only one cushion. I mean, nobody's going into a thrift store to buy *that* thing, right? We just have to throw it away. And we are not garbage men. We pick up this junk and sell it so the vets can get wheelchairs and medicine and liquor and stuff. We're not a goddam trash service! So Lawrence just flat out refuses to take this couch, and the old lady gets a bug up her ass and calls the store and starts screaming about how her husband got his face blown off in Korea. So when Lawrence gets back to the store Dale, now Dale's a real vet, I mean, if you call working at a warehouse in Germany being a vet. He was a marine, though. Anyway, he makes Lawrence go back to the lady's house, pick up the sofa, apologize to granny *and* her husband with no face, bring the sofa back to the store." I started cracking up, "unload it and crush it in the dumpster...and then Dale took him in his office and fired him!" I about ruptured my bladder laughing, but K-Low was just picking through the junk, wowing over it like he wasn't paying attention.

When we had about half the pile loaded onto the truck, I noticed a strange looking black case in with the suitcases. It dropped in a weird angle at the top, like a typewriter case might, but it was too big to be a typewriter. And it wasn't all destroyed in one way or another like the luggage, but it was pretty beat up. I guessed it at around twenty-five pounds and flipped the latches, opening the case just a little.

A whippy breeze was making the sunlight jump in and out through the sputtering leaves of the trees, making the light shoot on-and-off straight down into the case, flashing on it like a silent movie: a glimmering, perfectly mint, deep-red mother-of-pearl forty-odd-year-old Hohner Tango II accordion. And it was a big one, full-size, with two long red leather straps hooked to the sides and dark orange fur lining in the case. It looked like it had been

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

played maybe three times.

"Holy red letter *day*," I sang to myself, closing the case up real quick. I grabbed one of the bigger suitcases, unzipped it at the top, pushed the accordion case down inside, and zipped it back shut. All while K-Low was facing the other way piling junk up in the back of the truck.

The rest of the bag route turned out to be a big pain in the ass. Some old lady totally stood at her kitchen sink and watched me taking a nature stop behind her neighbor's shed, and K-Low kept wasting a bunch of time up in the back of the truck trying to organize the load. Every time I clipped a good left, or right for that matter, it all came exploding down again, but he had to keep trying to rebuild the pile every third stop. He'd learn, I told him. He'd learn when he saw how much of it got condemned to the *Dumpster of Death* at the end of the day.

We finally finished the route and cruised out of there, stopping at the One-Kwik for a coke and peanut butter cheese crackers and smokes. K-Low didn't want anything and stayed in the truck. On the way back driving I wolfed the crackers, even though pure dust cakes would have had more flavor, and I chugged the coke and chewed all the ice in my cup.

The new guy just stared out the window again.

"Hey, man," I said, chewing the last of my ice, "I'm expecting a real important call...so I got to stop at my house...and check my messages."

"Sounds good, chief."

We turned into the alley and I backed up to the gate.

"This shouldn't take too long, there, Lowrider-Guy," I said, and hopped out. I went around to the back of the truck and unlatched the rolling door as quietly as possible, lifting it about three feet and scooping up the accordion, the orange file box, one of the floor lamps and some Allman Brothers and Molly Hatchet albums all from right there on the edge of the truck box. I made it inside in one trip.

I accidentally bumped the accordion case into the Farfisa organ when I was setting it down, knocking the bongos down onto the xylophone again. I stuck the floor lamp opposite one almost exactly like it by the Forties gumball machine in the hallway and put the orange file box in the living room on the little red Chinese tea table. I let

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium mi

off a "woowie!" for having found another piece for the orange theme and thought about how it would work as a weed stash. Then I packed the orange bong with the last little bit of shake I had left and smurfed it up, holding in the smoke until I blasted it out coughing and had to loogie into the standing Vegas ashtray. Got a beer from the little fridge behind the tangerine fake-bamboo mini-bar, flipped on the hanging frosted globe lamp, sat back in my captain's chair, loosened my boots, lit up a smoke, and turned on both TVs.

When I got back up in the truck I lit a cigarette and yawned.

"Did you get your call?" he asked, blinking again.

"No, um...I'm supposed to call them back."

"Yeah-uh-hu."

"Whatever," I said, trying to stare him down, but he wasn't really looking. I cranked the rock station, made sure to blow some smoke on him, and floored the diesel pedal. The truck bounced as I thundered through the potholes in the gravel alley, and he almost hit his head on the ceiling of the cab. I laughed like I'd never seen anything funnier.

At the store I backed it up to the unloading flat and told K-Low to get inside the truck box and hand me stuff while I stayed down on the ground and packed it onto the big steel-mesh rolling carts. When we were almost finished, he started poking around in what was left of the junk instead of throwing it to me.

"What are you doing!" I yelled.

"I was just wondering where that accordion was."

My heart skidded up into my neck.

"Umm..." I said, "we already unloaded that. Yeah, we got...it got rolled inside already."

"Really? That's weird, I didn't see it. Who do we go to about buying stuff? Is it that girl Janine?"

"You play the accordion?" I fake laughed. "Tell me another one!"

"Uh..." K-Low said, starting to flare up, "I play banjo and *drums*, but I've been wanting to get an accordion for a while. You play music?"

"No," I said. "Hand me that hide-a-bed. That shit's going straight into the dumpster."

We finished unloading my truck and two of the other guys' trucks and pushed all the rolling carts of junk

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

through the bay door and into the staging area in the back. We dumped the pool, the bike, the lazyboy, the couch, the gothic mirror (which had cracked *en route*), and a bunch of other wastes of time into the super-dumpster and crushed it all, but there were no TVs to blow up.

The second we were finished, I could tell K-Low wanted to start hunting around for the accordion, so I parked the truck as fast as I could and high-stepped it into the back.

He was over in the sorting area where the redneck ladies unloaded and priced everything.

"Hey K-Low!"

"Yeah?" he said, smiling and bouncing up to me.

"Lookie here, hoss. I'll track down that reccordion thing and get them to hold it for you. It's around here somewhere."

"Awesome, chief! I really apprec--"

"Go on up to the front office and ask somebody about filling out your time card, like, how to do it, and oh yeah--do me a favor and take the Thursday clipboard and make three copies each of the route sheets and hang them back there on the driver's board when you're done."

"Yeah, no problem," he said. "Thanks, man."

"Cool deal, K-Low."

He went through the swinging doors onto the sales floor and headed up toward the little front office.

I busted ass to the TV cage behind the staging area, unlocked it with the key no one knew I had, and grabbed a twelve-inch black'n'white. Then I went and looked across the big back room to the cracks around Dale's office door to make sure his light was still on. It was, so I headed toward the bay door, out across the unloading flat and into the parking lot. All clear.

I walked up near K-Low's sticker covered pick-up truck and then veered by it, setting the TV down in the back of the bed like I was dropping a gum wrapper. I never stopped moving and half-circled around the parking lot, shot back inside and flew across the sorting and staging areas straight up to Dale's office. I pounded on his door like I was trying to blow it down with heavy artillery.

"What, is the goddam place on fire?" he said, with a wet cough to go along with it. "Come on in." Dale's little

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

office was a death box. No windows and the reeking air was thick as blankets. He was sitting there reading an old Executioner novel and smoking. Dale chain-smoked filterless Pall Malls and every thing in that room was permanently stained piss-yellow, even Dale.

"Hey there, Dale," I said, closing the door quick behind me.

"Hey, Phil."

"Dale, I don't know about this new guy, K-whats-his-name. I definitely saw him snag something when we were unloading it and put in his pick-up."

"Slow down, slow down, son. Now, what happened?"

"I'm not a thousand percent sure, but I think it was probably like a TV. He swiped it, Dale. I mean, *man*—you should come out here and look."

He made a weird wheezing noise as he hefted his gut out from where the lip of his desk seemed to be lodged in it and slowly raised up out of his chair, shaking his head. Then Skinny Janine had to show up and start squeaking at Dale about exactly how she was supposed to call in the day's receipts to Cleveland or wherever the hell the head office was, and all about some lady who was so mad that nobody would mark down the price on some giant terracotta elephant planter, she cussed out Skinny Janine and everybody else in the store and then tried to push over the whole rack of old magazines.

Dale just looked at her like *who cares*.

We left her there and walked through the back to the bay door and I stopped.

"Hey, Dale, wait a minute," I said. "I think I'll hang back in here. This whole thing just makes me sick." Then I pointed out into the parking lot to K-Low's truck. "That's his pick-up right there—the brown one with all the stickers on it."

Dale waddled out across the pavement and I went back inside. New Guy was bouncing around the bench where Belinda the boutique lady sorted all the fancy junk. In his right arm he was holding a big toy monkey dressed in red and gold vest and fez like an Arabian bellhop or the

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

organ grinder's assistant.

"So, how'd you like your first day there, stick?" I asked, walking up to him.

"It's my second day, but yeah--it ruled! I love all this stuff. I've been coming to this store for like a?"

"Cool deal," I said. "Listen. Dale wants to see you in his office about something when he gets back. Better wait here for him, it sounds pretty important."

"Allrightie. I hung the route sheets back up on the board there."

"So, K-Guy, tell me, are you an Andre the Giant fan, or do you just wear that 'tarded-ass hat?"

He looked at me with a crease between his eyebrows like he was thinking hard about something.

"Actually, Phillip," he said in some bizaro British accent, "he's my twin sister's great uncle." Then he smiled and went back to American: "Totally. Got all his records too, and the official Andre the Giant floor lamp. Ah yes, and I found the empty suitcase the accordion wasn't in, thanks to my new monkey friend here."

"Sorry I don't have any gold medals to pin on you right now, cool guy." I shook my head at him and snickered, "*Tch*." Then I walked over and said goodnight to some of the redneck ladies and went home.

Skinny Janine was bent over her desk setting up a cash register drawer when I slipped into the front office next morning.

"What's up, Madame Janina!"

"Hey," she barely said, not looking up from her counting.

I shifted my weight back and forth a couple times waiting for her to come to a stopping place, but right away she started on another stack.

"So...what happened with the new guy?" I said.

Skinny Janine stopped counting bills and glared up at me from behind her huge stop-sign shaped glasses.

"Dale is *over* you drivers stealing donations!" she snapped.

"Well, top-of-the-morning to you too, Little Miss--"

"No, listen! Dale went off. He is sick of this whole people-taking-stuff-thing and he's cracking down on it! For

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium mi

good!"

"Excuse me," I said, "is the Tirade of the Day over yet? Because I--"

"*And* he wants to see you in his office!"

"Okay, okay. Jeez. Whatever."

I stepped out of the front office and onto the floor and walked out into the middle of the giant store, half lit and quiet since it wasn't open yet. I looked out over the stale clothes racks and beige metal shelving units stuffed with hats, pillows, lamps, wigs. All the mildewed mattresses, retired stereos, tricycles, dartboards, ashtrays, swirly silver paintings of matadors staring down bulls across black velvet, yellow plastic snack platters glazed with faded scenes of Vacationland, dancing ceramic elves with "one-ninety-nine" wax-penciled on their foreheads, all smelling of that one same rotten wet basement smell that filled up the store like a gas. My apartment was starting to reek the same damp, moldy-ass way. I could take all of it, I thought, all of it together and pile it up into one big exploding purple and orange bonfire and climb to the top of it and lie down on my back and close my eyes and go to sleep. Sleep late and sleep as much as I wanted.

I walked through the store and went into the back, headed for Dale's office, wondering just how hard he was going to make me eat floor when I saw it--the little TV from the night before, the one I had set on the new guy's pick-up. It was sitting on a flatbed cart near the toy sorting station and it had a big white tag hanging from the antenna that said: "Hold for K-Low."

I kept on up to Dale's office and when I got closer I could hear K-Low's enthusiastic voice in there, bouncing around the yellow walls like a big stupid beach ball. It sounded like he was telling Dale his whole happy-go-goddam-lucky life story. I was almost up to knocking distance, but I just kept going, on past Dale's door and u-turning back across the sorting area.

Then I saw Skinny Janine. She was standing just inside the swinging doors, her stick arms folded across her smock and a satisfied, smirking smile pinched between her

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

cheeks.

"Are you following me?" I said, stopping by some empty rolling racks.

"How come you never told us you play the accordion, Phil?" she mocked. "Say, do you know 'Rags to Riches?'" Then she started singing it in a paint-dissolving screech:

"Shut up," I said, but it came out like milk, dribbling down my chin. I barely even heard myself saying it."

I tried to pretend she wasn't there and walked past her, through the bales of rejected clothes and stacks of day beds and baby cribs and down the back hallway to smoke a cigarette in the bathroom. That bathroom always reeked and I hated to go in there, but I needed to clear my head.

So here I go to rags from riches...

Even the constantly running swish of a busted toilet and the close whine of a diesel engine running outside couldn't compete with the trails of her voice, still echoing off the sick pale tiles and rotting plaster of the Veterans Family Outlet employee men's room.

I lit a cig and leaned against the towel dispenser, watching my smoke float up in slow, wavy curls toward the open window, the song's chorus now playing itself over and over on its own, automatically in my head. *So here I...* Then the rancid cheese odors in there started up, getting ready to gag me as I took a mental measurement of the window. The sill and frame looked pretty rough with their jagged boat-sized husks of curling lead paint, but I guessed it to be just maybe wide enough if I scrunched my shoulders together, if I scrunched my shoulders together hard as I could.

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium m

Girls Sounds

Kelly Gerow

Hillary and I lay on my bed watching television with the husband cushion positioned comfortably behind us. We rested against each other, her head on my shoulder. I could smell her hair dye.

"Are you going out later?" she asked.

"Am I going out? I might go out and bring the cat inside. Why, are you?" I knew she was. It surprised me to have her by my side at night at all. I thought it would be just me and the cat Francis again.

I felt her head nod. "With Amiee." I could tell that she specially pronounced the unnecessary vowels in her new girlfriend's name. They met at a costume shop. Hillary was looking for antlers to wear, and Amiee helped her find them.

"You two getting pretty serious, eh?" I asked.

"It's incredible. She and I just . . . I don't know.

We happen together." Her knees knocked into one another repeatedly as she stared at my ceiling fan. "The three of us should hang out sometime. Girls night out."

I concentrated on the TV screen at the end of my bed. She was trying to break our rule about not ever hanging out with our significant others together.

We were watching a movie that evening. We both liked the leading guy. Hillary still talked about attractive men with me, and she liked to hear about my sex life whenever I had one. She mentioned hers in detail, and I would listen, trying to find the appropriate level of interest. I wanted her on my side sometimes, dealing with parts that fit. That would only make me comfortable, I supposed.

"Amiee said I look like a classic lesbian," Hillary said. "You know, while we're on the subject."

"What does she mean?" I asked. "What do you look like to her?"

"I don't know. She thinks I look dirty. No, not dirty. Gritty."

"And you have a bad haircut. Now that's a lesbian

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

for you," I joked.

She put her head up and blew a raspberry at me. "You're the one who cut my hair," she said. "She says you're obviously straight. You're very proper. I can't say much about your haircut since you haven't had one in years."

"I'm just waiting for the right time," I said.

Hillary put the movie on pause. "I'm very nervous about Amiee," she said. "This is getting to be something. I might have to bring her to meet my parents. That's a very awkward situation, so I don't do that with every woman I date. And she's a vegetarian. I might have to give up chicken. I'm close to letting her know me for real, and I'm afraid that she's not going to like me."

I sat up in bed a little – my sincere pose. "Hill," I said. "You're a beautiful, fun person. If Amiee doesn't fall in love with you then there's something wrong with her."

She sat up, too, but only because we heard Amiee knock on the door.

"Oh, beans," she said, "there's my ride."

Before I fell asleep I made sure that the dead bolt was unlocked and the porch light was on. Hillary had keys to the door and the dead bolt, but I knew it made her feel safe to not spend the few seconds to deal with the big lock. We had the same fear of something being behind us at the last moment before security.

I woke up later that night to the humming noise of my television's blue screen. I pushed the power button off with my big toe and rolled out of my bed. As I shuffled my socked feet into the kitchen for a glass of water I saw Amiee and Hillary tangled together on the couch, sleeping. They were both wearing boxer shorts and bras. I covered them with a quilt. They had empty mugs of cocoa on the coffee table. The "World's Greatest Dad" mug I got for Hillary at a Goodwill had lipstick marks on the rim. Amiee must have used it. I shuffled back to my bed, with Francis under my arm for forced companionship.

Dan sat next to me on top of the picnic table while we waited for snow to fall. We wore matching wool hats that we bought at the Dollar General. His gloves had the fingertips cut off and my gloves didn't match. He noticed

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

that the backyard needed to be raked, while I noticed that Hillary's bike was gone.

"How's the girly action at your place?" he asked.

"Swell, I believe," I said.

"I take it Hill's figured out what lesbian sex is," he said.

"And then some." I made noise with my coat zipper and wished again that I hadn't told him of Hillary's love-making dilemma. Every time they saw each other my face got hot as if I knew that whatever he would say next would involve the words "lesbian sex." He never said anything, though. Dan and I were in a relationship for almost two years during college, and I still didn't know what to expect from him sometimes.

"When are you coming out?" he asked.

"What? I'm not," I said.

"You have to. You're ruining the law of who gets to have the token gay and lesbian best friends. Straight girls and lesbians aren't friends. Straight girls go with gay guys and straight guys get the lesbians."

"Says who?" I said.

"Tell me one TV show that has the homo and hetero girl thing," he said.

"Tell me one TV show?" Dan, please."

"She was a lesbian before you met her, right?"

"I think she was figuring it out during the time we met at camp, like six years ago." She and I had shared a bunk bed. We bonded immediately because we were the only girls in our cabin who didn't like horses. She taught me how to do hand stands. Once she was gone for a whole night and I had found her sitting in a tree the next morning.

"I think I'm gay," she had told me.

"I think I have poison ivy," I had told her. We were both right. We dealt with our issues together. I had stood by her while she endured verbal abuse in the mess hall and she had let me use her Calamine lotion.

"What's the new girlfriend like, anyway?" Dan

asked. "Is she hot? Does she have hairy legs?" Dan asked. "Is she hot? Does she have hairy legs?" I watched a snowflake fall onto his hat. "Remember when you and Tracy started going out and you stopped calling me and hanging out with me?" I asked.

"That's not what I remember most about me and

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

Tracy.”

“That’s what I remember. I’m terrified that Hillary’s going to do the same thing.”

“Tell her you love her,” Dan said. He stuck out his tongue to catch the snow, which wasn’t falling enough to stick.

“Will you go to prom with me?” I asked Hillary as she got ready for work. She put in her earrings and looked confused.

“Say what?” she asked.

“My sister’s prom. I’m chaperoning. I know you didn’t get to go to your prom because you couldn’t bring your date, so I thought you’d like to come. We can wear those fancy dresses we bought at that yard sale.”

“It’s kind of early for prom, isn’t it? Aren’t they usually in May?” She looked around for her other shoe.

“You know her school. It’s weird like that. The prom’s in two weeks,” I said, pulling the shoe from under the couch.

She sucked her teeth. “Two weeks? I think I’m camping with Amiee.”

“Isn’t it kind of early for camping?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think so.” She stood at the door, about to leave. “You can always ask Dan to go. You’ll have a great time.”

I slumped over the armchair and watched through the window as she slipped inside her car.

I woke up to a different distracting hum that night. Francis stirred when I sat up and I accidentally knocked him out of his position. My TV was off. The faint, unrecognizable lull was broken by a loud gasp.

I rolled my eyes and turned on the television to drown out the girly sounds from the next room.

Wednesday night I watched our show alone. When it was over I separated our laundry in the bathroom hamper. Her clothes were littered with Amiee’s dog’s hair. I put my clothes in a basket and sat it outside of my room. I made a phone call to Monica to ask what she was doing and if I could come along.

“I might go to a club,” she said. “But you don’t like clubs.”

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

“No, I’ll go.”

She came over later with three possible outfits for her to wear. They all hugged her slim body. She liked to wear either red or black clothes. She said the colors went well with brown hair and curves. She talked like women’s magazines read.

I tried on one dress that she discarded.

“It makes your thighs look big,” she said. She had crimped her hair earlier in the day.

“My thighs *are* big.”

She shrugged. “Then go with it. It looks fine.”

I wore my hair down and Monica put makeup on me.

“I can’t believe you don’t know how to do this by yourself,” she said. “Every girl should at least own foundation.”

I put on an eye patch and made pirate noises while she slathered her face with foundations and powders and whatever.

“*Arrr* you ready?” I asked.

“Don’t wear that at the club,” she said as she blotted her lipstick.

About two hours later I came back home. Monica found a guy to nuzzle with and I was tired of dancing badly with people I didn’t know.

I walked around the apartment trying to find Francis to put him out for a minute. He was sleeping in Hillary’s open dresser drawer. Hillary had a stack of my books by her bed. She used to get through at least one book I recommended a week. She had a dirty glass on top of the pile.

After I let Francis back in and shut the door, I turned off the porch light and listened to the satisfying click of the dead bolt lock.

Hillary sat at my table, eating my Lucky Charms.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She smiled. “Hey. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” I sat down beside her and poured myself a bowl. “How’s the missus?”

“She’s good,” she said. I munched on my cereal.

Hillary smiled, tilted her head to the side and put her spoon down. “I think I’m in love.”

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

"I think the blue marshmallow ruins the whole experience of eating a bowl of cereal." I said.

"Love is the best feeling."

"I know."

"Who was the first to say 'I Love You?' You or Dan?"

"Dan," I said. I stopped eating.

"I think I might tell her." She picked up her spoon again and ate a heap of Charms. While she ate she said, "Man, this is great. I love my life." She spit a piece of oat and it landed on the table. I got up, rinsed my bowl in the sink and went outside. It took her too long to come out and join me.

"Are you okay?" she asked. She sat beside me on the table.

"Fine." I pulled my hat from my coat pocket and rolled it over my head. The band made my eyebrows itch.

"No, you're not."

"Am, too."

"Is this about Amiee?"

"No, Hillary, this isn't about Amiee. It's about nothing." I looked her in the eyes. They had changed from brown to hazel. I thought I should grab her and kiss her like in movies. Maybe I was supposed to be on her side. She looked away before I did and I pulled the hat over my eyes. "I'm not going to tell you I love you if that's what you're expecting."

"I'm not."

I heard her slide off the table and go back inside. I sat there, pathetic and blind until I heard her car leave the driveway maybe twenty minutes later.

She didn't come home that night, but I didn't expect her to.

"You're not easily replaced," Dan offered when I complained of losing my best friend to another girl.

"Why would she need a straight girl best friend when she can have sex with the gay girlfriend best friend?"

"I have no idea," he said.

"That's not what I want to hear," I told him.

I noticed that things had been missing from our home. Small things, like her hand weights and her bike

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

helmet. She left things behind, like the puppets we made from tampons and the picture she had of me going down a slide. When she came home she brought laundry, when she left she left with more small things. Our moments together sounded like the blue television screen. Overwhelming nothing.

A few days later I found her looking through our movie collection, separating mine from hers.

"I'll have the money for the water bill tomorrow," she said. She moved to the couch and sat down.

"Okay," I said. "Are you going to mail it to me, or what?"

She fumbled with the coaster from the coffee table. "No, I'll bring it." I sat on the other side of the couch, a middle cushion separating us.

"I'm moving in with Amiee," she said. "I'll still pay rent for next month. If you can't find anyone to come here, then I know a few girls who need a place."

"You're moving in together?" I asked.

"Yeah. I think it's going to work out."

I wasn't sure what to say to her. "Maybe you two will last longer than you and I did," I said. "You know, as roommates."

She laughed a little. "Hopefully." She put the coaster on the empty cushion. "I mean, you and I will still hang out, right? I know I haven't been around much and we haven't talked lately, but you know how exciting and busy it is to be in love."

"I guess." I put the coaster back on the table. "But if you knew what it was like when I was experiencing it then that's because I took the time to be around you then. I still knew where you were. So we know whose fault it is if we end up not being friends."

"I don't know what to tell you," she said. "Things are different."

"Things were always different," I said. "That's what was great about it."

I was walking to the diner where Randall, the guy I was seeing, waited for me. I proudly waved my new matching gloves in the air as I walked. I put my hands in my pocket when I saw that Hillary was standing on the

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

sidewalk in front of the diner.

"Hello," she said when I came closer.

"Hey," I said back. "How are you?"

"Good, thanks." She smiled pleasantly. "How's the new place?"

"I like it. It's not far from here, actually. Across the street from where the good video store used to be."

"Oh, yeah. In the green building?"

"Yeah. That's where I am." I wanted to extend an invitation to her, but instead I just said, "That's me." I pulled my hat off my head and scratched. "Well, I'm meeting someone. A guy."

"Oh, right," she said. She stepped toward me, and then hopped back. "Amiee and I broke up, like two weeks after I moved in. So I had to move again."

"Oh, that's a shame," I said. "Well, I'll see you."

"All right." We locked eyes. Hers were brown again. We separated there on the street. I went back inside and she stayed out.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Margarita

Amy Nunis

I remember when my best friend's boyfriend died and how small she looked folded into a fetal position in the middle of her bed, twisting a loose thread around her finger. "We had a fight," my best friend said. "I didn't follow him home."

She said it had started to rain hard, just after she left him there, and as she drove home the lines in the road seemed to be washing away under the water. She told me that he would have gone straight to the D.M.V. The stickers had expired and he would need new plates and to register the bike. She continued to look down as she talked. "I was supposed to follow him," she said, and I noticed the loose thread she was twisting beginning to unravel the pattern on her bedspread.

He was just here, I thought. Last night. He was at the kitchen counter wiping up margarita salt he had spilt while reaching for the blender.

I looked around for the newspaper and wondered if her parents had a daily subscription or if it just came on Sundays. I hoped she hadn't read the accident report.

I noticed a photograph on my best friend's nightstand-- she and Michael standing in front of an army green tent. One corner of the picture looked blurry, and I remembered I had a similar picture, and the blurry spot was part of the campfire that didn't come out. It had been raining a lot before that weekend, and all the wood was soaked and wouldn't burn. Michael had a can of lighter fluid and kept squirting streams of the stuff on the pile of branches to keep it burning. Later we roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. I remember not telling anyone how mine had tasted like lighter fluid.

My best friend didn't look at the picture by her bed or at me; she continued to stare at what seemed to be an invisible spot on her bedspread, and twirl the thread around her finger. I remained by her bed not talking. I remember how her room looked that day, the brown bottle of prescription sleeping pills on her night stand, yesterday's jeans and

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

tank top thrown over a wicker chair, her bag on the floor beside it. The closet door was cracked, revealing a pile of shoes in a laundry basket. I got up to shut it, but it popped open again. I picked up her clothes, folded them and put them back in the chair. I began putting loose cassettes back in their cases, and started to alphabetize them on the shelf. I turned around and she was asleep, balled up in the middle of the bedspread.

Later that week, I drove her to the First Baptist Church. The parking lot was filled with familiar cars from school, and a police officer in a blaze orange vest directed me to park on the grass. Inside, the sanctuary was already full, and I felt like I had stepped into a dream. I had never seen that many young people at a church service before. Everyone from school was there; the hippies, punks, jocks, and cheerleaders, all sitting together surrounded by sunlight stained glass. A leather-faced old man handed us each a program and waved for us to go down the stairs to the fellowship hall. The sanctuary was full and we would have to watch the service on monitor.

We found two chairs near the front, close to the TV monitor. I could hear the jingling sound of bells on long skirts as girls shuffled in. The humidity in the basement made me feel sticky and I was glad I hadn't worn pantyhose. The smells of incense and herbal perfume oils were beginning to filter through the stuffy air. The leather-faced man hobbled down the stairs and turned the monitor on, which portrayed the upstairs sanctuary. Because it was on TV it felt at first like I was watching the funeral of someone famous, who I didn't know. Then I saw the casket, closed, with a framed picture, Michael's senior portrait, propped on top.

The minister, a heavy crater-faced man that looked like a politician, had a way of using his Southern drawl to linger over certain words for emphasis. He began to talk about Michael metaphorically, comparing him to a wayward sheep that had wandered from his flock. He used hand gestures I remembered seeing on TV during the presidential campaigns, pounding his fist repeatedly on the pulpit and waving one hand from side to side methodically.

"To those of you who only knew Michael these past

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium mi

few years, when he had fallen away from the church, you did not know the real Michael," he said. "He had been a faithful Christian all of his life, active in Sunday school and later lead the youth group to the annual Baptist youth conference at our sister church in Bedford. He tried to live his life in the shadow of Jesus Christ's perfect image and had only recently fallen in with the wrong crowd and became lost, as so many young people are today."

I heard the rustle of clothing behind me and the scuffle of chairs, and realized that people were walking out. The faces of those who remained looked in awe, as if they were wondering if they had been tricked. The minister kept talking on the TV, but I was no longer listening. I took one last look at the screen--the minister's face--shiny sweat settled into the craters on his skin--and I walked out.

My best friend held her face in her hands as we walked out of the church, as if the sudden change of light might burn her eyes. We followed the procession of cars to the cemetery. It was the same one I had come to with my grandmother during summer vacation, putting silk flowers in the vases by my relative's headstones. My best friend and I walked down the hill towards the grave, keeping a careful distance from the row of folding chairs that were for family only. Most of our friends stayed at the top of the hill, sitting in and around a Volkswagen van. At the family seating area, a large woman began to sing, "When we go to meet the father, he'll wash our sins away," and I noticed the row of dark covered figures, their heads all hanging down, shuffling.

This was not for Michael, but for them, I thought. We began walking up the hill towards the van. Someone put in a tape, some underground funk music, and turned the volume up, but not too loud. We sat on the neatly clipped grass and passed a joint around, smoking and listening to music Michael really liked. After the service, a dozen of us went to the apartment of one of our friends, and agreed not to cry. We made frozen margaritas and climbed up the fire escape to the sticky, tar roof of the apartment and began drinking in the afternoon sun, weeping anyway. A girl I did not know pulled out a bunch of little umbrellas from her bag, opened them and floated one in each of our cactus shaped glasses. She then put a little umbrella in her hair,

m milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium

went off by herself to a corner of the roof and began twirling around, dancing. As she spun the bottom of her long skirt flew out over the edge of the roof, teasing the sky. My best friend got up from her seat near the fire escape, walked over to the dancing girl, and also started to spin near the edge, her face turned up to the sun, spinning.

milleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium mi

Cheyenne

Dave Sterner

The smell of promise and late nights hangs on her body
showered in sweat and age and feminine deodorant spray.
I can swear she means what she's preaching,
down from the plywood and linoleum-covered stage.
Punctuating sentences with thrusts of her pelvis. Up close
so close, I'm deafened. Another dollar gone
another to follow.

I want to hear more about her boots.
The ripped up leather boots with the heels filed down.
The ones she rests up on my shoulders.
The ones that cover the dark veins
that run from her feet to her thighs.
The boots she bought to pay the bills, years ago
when I was still hiding porno under my mattress,
and she still had life left to kill.
Those boots have seen the thousand yard stare
on a million faces.

The bottom of her heel sweeps past my eyes,
as she brings her leg straight and graceful
up to her chest, and licks her thigh.
I flinch and she tells me that
A good dancer always knows where her legs are.
She grabs the rail and pulls herself closer

a boot on either side of me.
She takes my head and drags me forward.
I close my eyes, hold my breath and listen.
I look up and she's mouthing the words
to the song playing on the juke box.
Then it's over.
This is where old dancers come to die.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

At Arm's Length

Patrick Egan

I opened the door and whistled twice, high and sharp. Our shepherd dog Samson tramped in from the kitchen and sat at my feet, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth.

"Paw."

We shook. I released him from my grip and noticed there was no television, no music, no signs of life. Then, I found my wife.

She was cradled into the far side of the couch, as far as possible from the door, staring at some distant view well outside the walls of our house. With darkness winning out over daylight in our living room, it wasn't so easy to see that the floor lamps were no match for the burgundy rug, the old oak armoire and the earthy couch.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She bowed her head like an altar boy and shook it, putting her hands beneath her thighs as if they were cold.

"Come on," I said.

"We need to talk."

I sat down on the floor and leaned against the couch, looking over my shoulder and twisting my body so I could look her directly in the face. I wanted to see what she was about to tell me.

"I'm confused," she said. "I'm alone, I'm confused and I'm sad and I don't think I love you anymore." She looked down into her lap and her chin began to crinkle like a baby. "I don't know when it all started, but and you don't need me and you haven't for a long time, and I want you to need me. I have to be needed and I'm not. Not by you."

"Wait..." I said.

"No, I need to fix this and I don't know how because there isn't a magic tool or a perfect how-to book. But I need to fix this."

We breathed.

I turned away from her and looked off towards the spot she had focused. I tried to imagine what she saw, but it was beyond me. I turned back and touched the bottom of

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

her jeans and my hand stopped on her shin, but I pulled it away.

"What about at Shannon's at Christmas?" I asked. "In the bathroom, we...I mean, don't you remember?" I did. I remembered how she followed me upstairs, almost chasing me, slamming the bathroom door, maybe a little too loud, as she followed me in. We were drunk. We fooled around. I touched her breasts, but that was as far as it went and it was better that way. It was a springboard and we wanted to go home, sprinting, to finish and find out where it would end. So we did.

I remembered other things. A wedding where we danced and danced. Her parents' house where we had to be exquisitely quiet. In a car, no, a cab, in Chicago, knowing it wouldn't matter. A vacation where we hardly spoke. And when we drove home from a friend's she drove so fast just so she could be away from me. And now.

"It's not about that." She brushed away her hair and looked at me, for the first time. "I'm having problems putting it into words and I don't know if I can make you understand right now," she said.

"For Christ's sake, try me. Six years, you know."

And this went on and on. I babbled about ruts and true love and cold spells. I sounded like an idiot. She talked about the past year and a need to spread out, to be free. I saw these conversations in movies, but the directors made it sound more poetic and more passionate. They left you with hope.

I needed air. I stood up, grabbed my winter coat and left.

I walked and walked and walked. I looked through the windows of the row houses and I could see things. I saw televisions turned on, feet propped up on coffee tables, heads cropping up above the backs of couches. I could smell burning wood from a fireplace. I missed that smell. We didn't have a working fireplace so we got a fake gas log. There was no hearty aroma or crackle. Instead, the fire was blue and made the sound of endless air escaping a bike tire.

A man and woman passed me walking their puppy. I turned and watched them walk. The puppy looked like a

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

mutt. He was spry and excited, chasing after the leash his owners held. He clamped down on it with his teeth, shaking the life out of it, almost challenging his masters. Then, he let the leash drop and he smiled at them. He darted through their legs trying to separate them. The man whacked the dog on the ass, but it was affectionate and the dog loved the feeling because he was part of the action. I wished I had my dog with me.

My wife and I always took walks with our dog and I felt free to grab for her hand, knowing where to find it, knowing she would grab back. It was reinforcement, telling me that we were together, on the same plane, and, if everything was right, I could expect sex later. We might even pick up our pace to get home if it was close to bedtime. She'd bury herself under the covers, her long hair bunched up around her face, and pretend to be asleep. Her smile gave her away, but there wasn't really anything to give away because we knew we would make love.

I'd pick a twist, something different I could do or we could do together to make the sex shine. Eventually I ran out of twists. She became the more frequent aggressor and it put me off because I wasn't as interested. I was too effective at communicating that feeling. Marriage sex was so different from girlfriend sex, too much of a quota. Before you were married, each time felt like a little conquest.

I got back to the house. I could almost feel a shield of negative energy, like a bubble at the threshold, and I had difficulty getting my legs to move forward just to get through the door. She was almost in the same place as when I left, but she was crouched over a cheese pizza, half-way into her second slice, the crust discarded in the box on the table in front of her. She was hungry. I could tell by looking at her that she felt better.

"Do you want some?" she asked.

"No, I'm not hungry." I dawdled, unsure what I should do. I sat down, but it didn't work. "I'm going to bed."

The alarm screeched. I tried to breathe in, but my lungs didn't want to cooperate. I concentrated and tugged the oxygen out of the air like weeds from the ground.

I was in the blue room, where our family and

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

friends stayed when they visited. It was stylized storage space with a twin bed. I hadn't slept in a twin in years and I felt like a boy. Samson came when he heard the alarm and rested his head on the bed, waiting for my affection. I stared at him and he stared back, like nothing was wrong.

I showered and shaved, put on a gray suit, a lightly starched shirt, a tie, and I went to work. All morning, I kneaded my head and my face like dough, hoping it would wake me out of this fog surrounding me, making me feel like I was watching myself on television. Later in the morning, I left my wife a voicemail on her pager, speaking in half sentences, scrambled globs, to let her know where I was and how committed I felt to fixing our problems. I think I told her I could do whatever it took, anything. I hung up the phone and stared at it for a couple minutes. I wanted to sleep forever so I went out to my car. It was torture. I squirmed and wiggled, searching for a supple position. Finally, I gave up, walked outside and got a couple hot dogs from the guy on the corner who wore the same baseball cap everyday, no matter what the weather. I got back to the office, ate, and then let the phone calls ring on all day.

I drove home slowly that night, patient but eager, uncertain about what would be waiting for me. I hoped the hours apart might have soothed some of the distress between us. I drove around the block twice. I parked and made sure I had everything out of my car, even cleaning some junk from the back seat. The house was dark, but I could make out Samson's face at the window in the door. He was waiting for anyone.

I found a note.

My head is churning and I thought we could use some space. I went to my sister's. I'll be back on Monday. We can talk more.

I pitched the note into the trashcan and slumped into a seat at the kitchen table. I looked at the refrigerator, littered with friends' pictures, invitations to past and future parties, a calendar with appointments, and it looked like someone else's, like none of it belonged to me.

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

The blue room wasn't so bad. The bed was firm and the old blankets passed down from one of our families, I couldn't remember who's, were musty but comfortable. Lying down, I could see a flashing red light through the window, perched on top of a local television station's tower, flashing to warn airplanes of its location. The light became my distraction from the cold in the room. Eventually, the light lulled me to sleep like a sweet tune.

I woke up in the middle of the. I went downstairs and lay on the living room rug with a pillow, my hands clasped behind my head. There was a picture on the mantle, a picture we took on a beach, right after we got married on our honeymoon. I had extended my arm out with the camera pointed back at us, her chin resting on my shoulder and her salty hair splashing on my back. The hotel was in the background. We were both brown as berries, smiling, our teeth milk white against our tan faces. That was a long time ago, but I could remember those seven seconds like yesterday.

I kind of forgot what she looked like so I closed my eyes. I could see her sleeping, her mouth forming a nearly perfect circle. There was a slight snort to her breathing, not offensive, something that I couldn't call snoring. I could almost smell the stale, cigarette odor seeping from her lungs as she exhaled. When we slept together, I would fall asleep first, minutes after turning out the light. She was amazed at how fast I could sleep. She was probably disappointed, too.

I called some friends on Saturday. They were the resilient singles, almost defiantly now, as we were all clearing our thirtieth birthdays. I could count on them being out that night, roving from bar to bar like a pack of dogs. These were guys who were looking for that chance encounter, that feel that something good would happen quickly.

We agreed on an early meeting time, to lubricate. They picked me up. We drove to BAR. That was the only name we knew for it. It was a bland building with beige-colored stucco exterior that might have been white in another decade. A plastic, white sign extended from the building, three black letters printed on it: B-A-R. Nothing else. The sign lit up on some nights and, on others, it didn't. But BAR was always open.

We found this place one night at the end of a real

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

bender a few years back. Since that time, we had used BAR as both a launching pad and a crash site on a number of excursions. We got to BAR around nine and found a booth, one with a little jukebox that listed ancient songs. The knob on the side of the jukebox, the one for flipping the panels to see all the selections, was rusted tight.

A waitress, plump, blond, with lips like a clown, approached our table still blowing smoke from the cigarette she left at the bar. She swiveled like a dancer between the empty chairs and tables crammed into the room, amazingly flexible in shrink-wrap jeans.

"What can I get you boys?"

These guys were pros and they reeled off their ointments fluently. They were successful in their jobs and felt sophisticated so they didn't think beer was appropriate any longer. When they planned on getting drunk, they wanted to do it fast. Whiskey, vodka, gin, whatever.

We just sat for a minute, like the liquor was our license to talk. There weren't more than ten people in the place, all of them sitting at the bar except for us. Besides the waitress, there was only one other woman and she was asleep on some guy's shoulder as he sang along quietly with the stereo that filled the musical void of the crapped out jukeboxes.

The waitress came back with our drinks. My vodka was cheap and it scraped its way down my system. I felt the warmth spread through my stomach, smoothing it like a varnish.

I felt like a student, a medical student, in an observational watching doctors work in surgery. I had to keep quiet and take good notes. I wanted to learn.

"You are so weak, man. Just call her."

"Who was at Mo Mo's last night? Was that red head working the bar?"

"Patterson doesn't know his left from his right and I don't expect any type of protest from him."

"Why do you keep smoking those things?"

"Nonsense. Absolute bullshit."

"So I said, 'Hello, nurse,' and she got all uppity on me. Forget it."

The volleys went back and forth, floating like the soapy bubbles kids blow, ultimately popping and leaving

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

nothing but air. We pushed through round after round and the bubbles churned faster and faster with each new drink, disappearing just the same.

The next stop was the Algonquin. It was a converted row house, the width of a doublewide, but with high ceilings that spawned drop-down fans. The owners decorated the walls with pictures of Native Americans from all tribes, not just the Algonquin.

We rushed to the bar at the Algonquin, not wanting to miss a beat, ordering drinks from a delicious bar maid in black jeans and a tube top. The room was crowded with hips and elbows, smoke and attitude.

I was ready to burst from the drinks, so I went to the bathroom. When I was done, I returned to the bar for more. I tilted my head back and drank deep and the taste made my throat tighten. I turned from the bar to face the masses and I bumped into a girl. She smiled, unfazed. As she tried to turn away, another person spun in the opposite direction, jostling her elbow and causing her to dump her drink on my arm.

"Oh, I am *so sorry*," she said, touching her hand to mine as if I'd been wounded. She put her drink down and reached across my chest for the cocktail napkins on the bar, grabbing them as you would a cat's neck. She began to pat my arm dry. "I think it's a sign."

"What kind of sign?" I asked.

"A sign that I need to stop drinking. It's my birthday, though."

"Nice, nice. Let me guess...twenty-four?" I knew she was older.

She smiled and put a hand on her hip and said, "Smooth. Very old school. I applaud the effort, though." And she resumed drying. "Actually, I'm twenty-nine in less than an hour, I think. That sounds dumb. I know I'm going to be twenty-nine, I just don't know what time it is. Do you?"

"I don't," and we both turned into the bar looking for a clock. Our bodies formed a triangle with the bar and I knew we were still talking.

"Your name isn't Mark by any chance?" she asked.

"Nope. Who is this guy Mark? Is he a jerk?" I laughed a little. "Some people say I look like a jerk."

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

What's this Mark guy like?"

"He's nice, I think," she said. "It's been a while since I've seen him."

We talked for a while. She was a social worker. Leona. She kept tropical fish and used to tap dance until she was fifteen. She asked me about my job and where I lived and everything I told her was true. Two or three time, when she wanted to emphasize a point, she put her hand on my forearm. I glanced down to see how it looked.

Another girl came up, whispered something in Leona's ear, and then walked away. Leona turned towards the bar and swallowed the last of her drink. "We're going to Hippo's down the street. Why don't you come with us?" she asked.

"Hm, I probably could, but I came with some friends," and I scanned the bar.

"Well, they can come, too," Leona said. "I have lots of friends."

"Yeah, you know...I can't seem to find them," I said. I finished off my drink with a big gulp and really wanted another one fast. The empty glass was soaked on the outside and I lost my grip and dropped it as I tried to put it on the bar. The glass shattered. People stopped and looked over, but there was nothing to see.

"You know what?" I said. "We're waiting on another friend. Maybe we'll meet you."

"You should," said Leona. She lingered for a second.

I reached out my hand, "Hey, in case we don't catch up, it was nice talking to you." And she shook my hand and left.

I sat at the bar and ordered another drink. When it came, I just let it sit. One of the guys eventually came up.

"All right, sir, I've been watching you. You can't work those moves anymore," he said.

"Just talking, man. Just talking. Actually, I think I'm going to bolt."

"Really? It's early. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just dandy," I said.

"All right," and he clapped me on the back as I got up to leave.

I took a cab home and Samson was waiting at the

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

door. I opened the door and he darted out, looking for approval to scale my body. He sniffed BAR and the Algonquin on my clothes and jiggled his rear from the joy of my company. I scratched him hard behind the ears and he leaned into it. We went inside and I grabbed the leash. His whole body started shaking and shimmying. He sprinted outside and I decided to leave the leash at home. He'd have free reign tonight.

The lights were on when I came home Monday. I picked up a bottle of wine, but I left it in the car when I walked in. I could see her, back in the kitchen, cooking something up. She was wearing a short black skirt and a matching top, business dress but sexy. Her clothes were tight enough to accentuate the curves in her body and I wondered for the millionth time how she could look so great without exercise. I walked with my head up, a smile on my face. She heard the door shut and looked my way and she seemed glad to see me. I reached her and began to lean in for a kiss when I noticed her extended hand.

I pulled back. We shook.

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

Under Golgotha

Nicole Anderson Ellis

When Robin opened her eyes she found hemlock boughs, snow-softened and hung with open cones. From where she lay they looked like little black roses. Behind them rose the rock face from which she'd fallen, a line of stone against sky. Robin closed her eyes and lay motionless while the Earth sucked out her heat. When she opened them, the sky had shifted to winter dusk, deep gray, and a man moved black against it. In silhouette, broad-shouldered and faceless, he bent over her.

Blackness. The cold was gone. A strange blanket scratched her chin and Robin knew, without testing or trying, that she would not rise from that place for a long time. Then a pain came. It struck hard, shocking her. It lent devastating colors to the darkness, iridescent waves like oil on the sea, and she moaned, and heard moans echo on invisible walls.

The pain rested. Robin took two breaths and heard a noise beside her, close. It was not an echo of her own groans. It was a scrape, the sound of shoes on rough ground. Robin tensed like prey and the renewed pain rushed back from within her broken body. The scraping sped, shifting in the darkness, but she took no more notice.

There was light on her lids, and the pain, awake already, clanging for attention. There was someone. Someone touching her. Her head was lifted. She was offered water that sloshed off her lips, wet her neck, her ears. Then a man's throaty cough. Fingers touching her mouth and pushing their way inside and she gagged on the pills they left back on her tongue, but she cared about nothing as long as she might lie down again. As long as the pain might end.

When she stirred again she kept her body still in the blackness. The fire in her spine was there, but distant. Like driving through Phoenix in her sister's well-cooled car. Air conditioning. Baby in the backseat. When her sister gave birth she'd drawn blood, fingernails deep in her husband's

m. millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium

palm. *Hurt like fuck, Robin. I had no idea. You can't breathe yourself out of that shit. They ended up giving me an epideral, straight in the spine. And even that didn't really make it stop hurting. It just made me not care.*

Robin was lying on a cot that squeaked in the darkness when she took a deep breath—a sharp squeal that shrunk off in the stagnant air. Rock-cooled air. Dank and interred, with a sharp scent of urine. A drug-weakened panic stirred briefly, then quit. She could only wait, so Robin blinked her eyes until she forgot where her lids lay. Open or closed. She was seven, visiting Alcatraz island. People paying money to walk the damp concrete and spend twenty seconds shut in solitary confinement. Pure black. They'd said prisoners would dream without sleeping. Their nightmares swimming out of the darkness.

The last time Robin had seen the sky it had been stormy. The trail was steep and slick with snow, but each time she rested the crying came, so she pushed on. She'd reached the summit winded and weary and wrapped in snow. She was supposed to see into three separate states but it was just a curtain of white. The world was erased. She'd dropped her pack and felt her vertebrae separating, felt tall. Stretching her arms overhead, Robin kept moving around the bald to keep her muscles from tensing. She walked slowly through the snow, amazed at how completely it blinded her, and then one of her steps just never touched the ground.

A bubble of pain surfaced through the sedation. How long would the pills last? How long would she wait for some light? She listened hard for a hint of the man's return but there was just silence, and the concentrating sent more bubbles. She tried to relax. *Just lie there and relax. Deep breaths.* That's what the nurse had urged her. Relax. Relax. Pretend you're not here. You are not in this clinic. They are not carving you out. There is no metal table, no pressure inside, no wailing machine that sounds just like your mother's vacuum. She'd just lain there under the office lights waiting. Deciding then, as it happened, that next week she'd go away.

When the light came back it was blazing. It forced her eyes tight, brought the pain roaring in. She listened to movement with her eyes closed. She waited longer, let a

millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium millennium m

few rays through her lashes, and the glare rang in her ears and her pinpoint pupils took in the room.

She lay at the end of a six-foot wide stone corridor. Ten feet up, a lid of matte graphite, scraped in furrows like field rows, stretched away into the blackness beyond the fierce glare. Its source, a military issue lantern, sat on one of a half-dozen wooden crates lining one wall. Its light was violent white, searing away all but the most prominent shadows—under a table, beside rusted metal shelves, between Robin and the wall, at the feet of a man.

He was tall and he was moving and talking, coming closer. He said something, repeated it, and she struggled to understand. *I won't hurt you.* That's what he said. *I won't hurt you.* It crossed her mind to say thank you, but instead she began to cry. That made the man stop short and turn awkwardly away. Robin slid one hand under the covers, under her sweater, onto her warm and empty ribs. She looked through her tears to watch the stranger move around her.

He walked back to a pair of hard plastic jugs, knee-high and broad with handles and top-spouts. They were olive green and sloshed noisily when lifted. They didn't spill, but the sound of water repeated, fading away against walls, as he carried them into the circle of light. He wore a beard, which made it hard to guess his age. Thirty-five? Forty? Two shallow creases crossed his brow. In his navy turtleneck sweater and quilted flannel shirt he looked like a wildlife biologist, or a logger, or her brother-in-law.

He removed the cap from a water jug, bent it forward and filled a small tin mug. Immediately Robin realized her thirst. "Oh thank you. Wait, no..." The man froze in the act of lifting her, one hand under her neck, the other steadying the cup above her. But she was too afraid of the pain to be moved, so he poured sips into her mouth with a mother's slow aim. The water was cold and sweet. No bitter iodine, like she'd added to her bottles up on the mountain.

"It's from in here." His voice was soft and proud as he nodded past the lantern light, down the shaft into nowhere. Robin swallowed a mouthful. She swallowed two more pills and tried to picture a spring without sunlight.

m millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium

“Where is here?”

“It was a copper mine.” He was seated on a metal folding chair, watching her from a few feet off. “Closed way back.” The medication was dissolving through her blood. She could already feel it softening her. She could have slept again, but he was saying something more. He spoke slowly, each word low and elongated in the way of small town men. “The Lord provides for his servants in their time of need.” He stopped, suddenly self-conscious. How long had it been since he’d heard so much of his own voice. He turned to a row of shelves and, after a moment, raised a hand and began to touch the items stacked there. He let silence reclaim the space while he counted. He counted cans of corn, and pork-and-beans, and black plastic envelopes of military rations Robin had once thumbed through at a surplus store. There was row after row of six-volt batteries, heavy and square-topped with conical coils. There were shelves of books. Books piled in columns on the floor. She couldn’t make out titles; couldn’t focus. Didn’t care. He was cradling a blank one, a notebook, and marking in it. Taking inventory. She watched him recount the same shelf twice. Then do it again.

The next day, the day the fever came, Robin recognized him. It was after her first meal, chalky bites of what he called eggs, which he spooned into her mouth, cold. He walked to the foot of her cot. He pulled the blankets to her knees, asked her to push her bare feet against his hands. He poked them and tickled and pinched and asked Robin to tell the difference between the sensations. She couldn’t. He looked down at her wasted legs and something in his somber expression made her remember. The last time she’d seen his face it had been gazing at her from a gas station T-shirt rack back near the trailhead. She’d been standing in line and he’d been a face on a T-shirt. *Avenging Angel*, it read. *Obeying God’s Law*. Between the words a silk-screened picture of her caretaker. She knew him. There was one photo of him outside in the sunshine—clean-shaven, no smile—that all the papers had. Sometimes it was cropped in close and big to show the wanted eyes. She had seen it a dozen times. More. Those same eyes were locked on hers now. His pupils were clenched in the lantern light

millenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillenniummillennium m

and she knew what his crime was, and he knew she knew.

He covered her feet, slowly, and with echoing steps turned away to the table. Sat down on the metal chair. He lifted a book resting there. Fat and black, he cradled it open in his lap, paged through. Robin watched. It wasn’t hard to picture him pulling a trigger. She could imagine his slaying a deer and gutting it, bloody to mid-arm. *An avid hunter. Expert with firearms*. He had killed rabbits and squirrel. Maybe hundreds of them. Black bear blasted from pine to fall with spine-snapping weight. Fox and ky-oats and possum and coon. All those images fit. But she couldn’t see him placing a rifle bead on a doctor’s balding temple. She was trying to picture that act when her body began to boil.

In her last dream Robin was pushing through forest. She had no trail. She had no light. Just low boughs snapping and stinging her neck. Her hands were filled with a baby. It squirmed, shifted in her grip, twisted like a puppy. Robin knew that the baby would fall. She was tearing through the woods, racing to get there, anywhere, before she dropped it.

She awoke feeling thick and on fire. Her eyes were pooled and blurry with sweat. She blinked and blinked and then, in the glare of the lantern, she saw him arrive. He stomped in, red-faced from cold, and threw down a worn-out purple pack. Her pack. He glanced over at her and she remembered that the dead doctor had three daughters and a wife. She’d seen them at the funeral on TV. Three daughters. One mother. One murder. A crescent of snow slid off the nylon bag and Robin wanted to eat it, hold it clenched under her chin, melt it against her fever. She knew she’d never see a cloud again. She moved her hand over the canvas and springs of her cot and rested her knuckles against the inside of a mountain.

Robin stared at the crossbedding in the walls. Pre-historic ocean floors. She remembered waves. How they felt when they pushed against her stomach. How they could spin you and crush you against the shore, fill your swimsuit with sand that didn’t appear until hours later on the bathroom floor. She missed wind. And she must have mumbled it into the tunnel because he turned toward her

m millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium

and whispered, "I miss fires. Campfires."

Robin slept and the lantern was always burning now as he waited. One time she came to and her extra sweater, and fleece and tarp were folded and arranged in tight squares like tiles across the shovel-smoothed floor. Beside them lay her pocket knife, her tin plate, cook set, paper envelopes of instant oatmeal, instant soup, instant mashed potatoes, a tooth brush, first aid kit, grey plastic Nalgene bottles, cook stove, aluminum canisters of white-gas, wool socks wrapped into balls. Her caretaker was standing there above her effects. In his hands was a spiral-bound sketch book. Her journal.

He started at the beginning and read every entry aloud. He read about Robin's move south, about the new job that sent her to Atlanta, Savannah, Chattanooga, Mobile. He read about her thirtieth birthday spent alone, unpacking; about her Grandmother's death; about the car accident she shouldn't have walked away from, but did. He read about Evan. Evan in the New Orleans office. Evan who made that sweating city something more than just another tangle of taxis and conference rooms. Evan who sent beignets to her hotel room. Then a bottle of wine. Then came there himself.

Through the hesitant drawl of the man's voice, the cavern echoed with memories of spicy food and tequila shots, shameless crowds, Voodoo queens, Jazz Fest, joints, sunburns and midnight sex in some dogwood-shaded courtyard.

Stuck on the New Orleans runway. We've been here an hour. It's raining hard and I keep picturing Evan watching the lightning from his balcony, or Evan making the bed for the first time all weekend. I wonder if he can't stop smiling. The woman beside me wants to talk but I just want to sit here and remember how soft Evan's palms are. His mouth on me...

He read straight through. He didn't go for water or count cans or trade the hand-written stories for his tissue-paged Bible. He only stopped once. He stopped, the book open on his knees, his face flushed with dis-

millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium millenium m

gust or lust or rage. Robin lay there before him, Robin whose name he finally knew from a letter, an apology written on yellow legal paper and never delivered, just folded and tucked in between her private pages. She lay there before him, this sinner, deep in the clutches of judgement, and he couldn't hurt her or have her, so he just read on.

His voice, worn from rare use, began to waver. He swallowed hard and read about Robin's drive over state lines, meeting a plane from New Orleans, letting Evan take the wheel as she stared out the window at a winter world, infertile and frozen. He read about the waiting room, and the other women, and the couple's silent drive home.

Then he stopped. He lifted his gaze from the page and saw her staring at him, unseeing. His hands trembled in his lap. His voice was cold. "Why did you bring her here? What am I supposed to do?" He clenched the journal then, shaking it before him. "I turned my back on temptation. I gave up everything. I gave you everything. Now what am I supposed to do?"

Robin heard his voice rise and fall. She heard the sound but it had no meaning, only a resonance that meant she was not alone. The lantern light shifted as she watched him. The walls became pliant and soft, and his voice bounced off them, repeating the words again and again and this tickled her.

It was her laugh that finally broke him. He threw her journal so it clattered against a row of steel cans. He looked down at his empty palms as if the book had left its mark, blisters on his skin. His breath came hard. He glanced about, red-faced, but there was nothing to comfort him. Just this used-up hole. Just this woman, slipping away even as he looked at her. He turned away, hands still lifted, palms facing him, fingers splayed. He jerked his gaze around the room like a mad man and then he saw it. It was there on the table, the heavy black-bound Bible. He clutched it up, held it with both hands like a weapon, and then he began to wail. He shook the cave with calls for repentance, but it was too late. There was no one left to save. Just him and the mountain that threw each verse back. Swallowing

m millenniummilleniummilleniummilleniummilleniummillenium

them. One word by one word. *Before I was born the
Lord called me...*

...was born the Lord called me

...Lord called me

...called me.