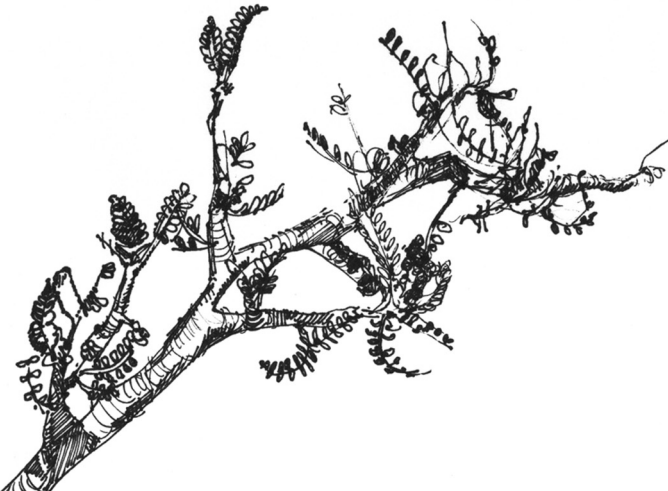

elephant tree

Chapman University



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Editors

Kristen Lim

Andrew Mauzey

Caitlin Mohney

Tiffany Monroe

Niloo E Sarabi

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Logan Esdale

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Cover drawing by Lara Odell

“It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.”

– William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

“To write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write.”

– Gertrude Stein

Welcome, dear reader, to the fifth volume of *Elephant Tree*.

As you explore the following pages, you’ll notice we decided to remove the poetry and fiction labels. We do not like labels. We like to defy them. Since contemporary creative writing often mixes genres, we feel that distinguishing between poetry and fiction is too limiting. Instead, you’ll find a collection that refuses to be categorized within the pages of this year’s *Elephant Tree*.

Editing this collection has been a joy. We think this issue is an illustration of the quality and breadth of the literary works of writers at Chapman University. We would like to extend our gratitude to all of the students who submitted their work for consideration, to Veston Rowe in the Office of Publications, as well as our insightful and fearless leader, Professor Logan Esdale.

So go ahead and read. Be amused. Be startled. Enjoy!

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VICTORIA FRAGOSO

Be Real, Girl

Play the bangle-dangle-jangles
On your wrist
And shake my lonely little music
Not even the rattle-snake can make it that good.

Go ahead and swing-ding-ring
The tiny pink ((inside your mouth))
And amplify the words I drew in sand
Not even the wind can blow them away now.

Keep hip-hop-tip-top-dip-dot moving
In and out
And erase the guideline-twine
Not even they would see this revolution a'coming!

Just twirl-whirl-curl girl
Circle me
And capture the dance in earth
The steam from beneath will be our cloud.

Fly-die-sigh-try girl
I said fly-die-sigh-try girl!
Be real, and realize that nothing will ever be the same
Once you've taken stand for your world.

Soothsayer

These inventions of you
keep my crush alive
while I haunt this stale replay,
pretending to buck and
crash under his sweaty fix.

Pound the nail and wait for rust,
tie a red ribbon around your face,
sprinkle cinnamon oil on the floor,
let the torn pieces of us drift away,
knowledge never stopped the night.

Nothing works anymore and
creeping up the spongy stairs into
her den of tattered cards and tapestries,
she shies from the word *cursed*, but
the less she says the more I know.

The Creation of Xtabentún¹

X'kebán² gave her body to sinful desires
But in life, love is detested and taunted by
Righteous women with iguana-like tongues
Whispering wounds to cut and slash ears.

Sweet mouths seldom turn bitter and hers remained still,
Silent like her humble eyes that grazed the ground.
A lover to many, perhaps, but blind minds never see hearts
Of pure gold, known to heal the sick and give to the poor.

The night the star anise followed the moon, she passed
Alone, her death unnoticed until a divine aroma
Saturated the village with a penetrating air,
Arousing fragrant feelings of overwhelming passion.

Lonely outcasts carried her to permanent rest as
Her wooden box leaked the pleasant perfume.
Flowers in the nearby fields twined their vines
Around her scented stones to bloom Xtabentún.

White buds offer a sweet allure
To all who savor her kiss.
Morning glory, bring me true goodness,
Let me taste her honey nectar on my lips.

¹ A liqueur from the Yucatán peninsula (Mexico), made from star anise and fermented honey that is produced by bees from the nectar of Xtabentún (which means “vines growing on stones” in Yucatec Maya.) Xtabentún is the flower known as the “Morning glory” in English.

² X'kebán is one of two women in the “La Xtabay” Mayan legend. X'Kebán had many lovers, but was humble and had a good heart. Utz-Colel is the other woman in the legend, and she was chaste, but had a bitter and cold soul. Utz-Colel subsequently turns into “La Xtabay,” a woman-serpent who comes out from the ceiba forest to seduce and kill men.

pooping at dawn

I had opened my window
to let in a new fragrance
when I saw you down below
gathering moon lilies
before the sun could eat them up
you were in that puce dress with the frills
the one I told you never to throw out
we shared a smile
the one that comes at the end of the film
and says "we really did it, didn't we?"
I don't think you knew that I was pooping
I'm telling you now
I hope it doesn't ruin the memory

DANIELLE M. WALTERS

Corpse of the Stone Dragon – The Reichstag

Berlin, February 1943

The great bones lie settled in an
icy grip of the storm—cold and stale.
A young girl—sixteen this month—
pauses at the grave,
 observes,
 reflects.

Ten years ago, her parents passed,
gripping her mittened hands in their
icy fingers as they watched the
seething dragon rage,
 engulfed,
 swallowed.

At least as she
 thought so then.

The lofty towers embattled rose
entrenched in a mist of smoke and ash
the fire-breathing monster swelled
with smoke
 — smoke that quenches
 visions of tearing
 flames and looming
 bones.

She wept then.
 She remembers now and thinks—

The brilliance of an age is lost, corrupted
in bitter Weimar schemes, that ushered
in the new life while cobwebs crept upon
charred crumbs of stone. Thoughts
reconvened quickly to other matters

and left the corpse to ruin in winter's grasp
still awful in its presence but ignored –
– stillness in ruins pervades.

And so she passes,
stung by the cold wind that
bites her eyes and cheeks –
a kiss from the Baltic for her tears.

* The Reichstag was burnt down by the Nazis on February 27, 1933.

Paris Ritz in Chapters

For Leslie

1. Jazz Age Jewel

in the heart of the city. Seat of *joie de vivre*,
bathed in Coco's elegance and Fitzgerald's fiction.
Proust's preference for tranquility in a vibrant metropolis

Chaplin and Valentino escaped prohibition,
Cole Porter began the beguine.

2. On the Eve of Liberation,

a sizzling August day, Panzer divisions departed.

Bloody Mary and Martini reigned at the Ritz
as Hemingway deposed Goering and Goebbels.

Do not let it fall unharmed . . .

Dietrich disobeyed, Paris's treasures remained
as black and gray scattered under the Arc.

Gorgeous girls in red lipstick kissed Eisenhower's heroes
while swinging in the streets to Glenn Miller.

Paris was burning in brilliant sunshine
on D-Day plus seventy.

3. Vacationers Placidly Pass

through the revolving door
on their way to stroll along the Seine.

Two temporary expatriates share a bottle of Champagne
in the Hemingway Bar, watching
wayward writers carefully consider each
word.

Cool rain dances on taxis and cobblestone streets
as undaunted Americans in jeans walk the Champs-Elysees,
fresh from viewing La Giaconda's sly smile
through ten inches of glass.

The Lass of Aughrim

Erasure based on James Joyce's short story "The Dead"

A woman stood near the top of the first flight,
In the shadows.

He could not see her face
But the terra cotta and salmon pink panels of her skirt,
Which the shadows made appear black
and white.

It was his wife.

She was leaning on the banisters, listening

A few chords struck on the piano, and

A few notes of a man's singing.

In the gloom of the hall,

He stood still, listening and

Gazing up at his wife –

graceful & mysterious,

As if she were a symbol of something.

If he were a painter,

He would paint her,

As her blue felt hat showed off the bronze of her hair,

"*Distant Music*," he would call it.

...

Moments of their secret life

Burst upon his memory like stars,

A wave of yet more tender joy escaped from his heart, and

Went coursing in warm flood
along his arteries.

He longed to recall to her those moments,

To make her forget the years of their dull existence together,

And remember only their
moments of ecstasy.

He longed to be alone with her, yet she seemed so distant.

He thought of how for so many years

She had locked in her heart,
The image of her young lover's eyes,
When he had told her that he did not wish to
live.

...

His soul had approached that region
Where dwelt the vast hosts of the dead –
dissolved & dwindled.

His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world, which
The deceased had once reared and lived in.

Outside it had begun to snow again,
Flakes, silver & dark, falling obliquely
Against the lamp light,
Falling on every part of the dark central plain,
On the treeless hills,
Falling softly upon the Bog of Allen,
And farther westward,
Softly falling into the dark, mutinous Shannon waves,
Falling too upon every part of the lonely churchyard
On the hill, where
Michael Furey lay buried.

It lay thickly drifted,
On the crooked crosses & headstones,
On the spears of the little gate, and
On the barren thorns.

His soul swooned slowly as he heard
The snow falling faintly through the universe,
And faintly falling like their last descent,
Upon the living & the dead.

Not Worth Reading

This is not a ~~story~~. There's no beginning and end, just the stuff in between (cliché sandwich, nom nom nom). It's not about anything really. It's most certainly not about someone who is distracted easily and self-loathing. SLF DBT. One time I met a mom, who told me, "You're probably not going to do what you think you're going to do when you get older". This is more or less about that. Probably less. ****

| WRITE SOMETHING HERE |

pretentious asshat

WRITE SOMETHING HERE!

Haro?

WRT SMTHNG HR^^^

siq diq

RTSMTNHUR

.....

ovur t.

Whatever I do end up writing for this "story", it's not going to be important because I will probably just rewrite it anyways. Something about charging pizza to my card and stealing his pen....

.REWRITE IT.

====>I REWROTE IT<====

What's important is what I DID write. I wrote, "I wanna be your shirt." Stupid.

I write my own history with my actions. "It's our struggles that define us". Somebody who lifts weights might philosophize that (whey protein sandwich nommer nom). I don't care about struggles though, just day to day life. One day at a time, short-term thinker, shortsighted w/ and sometimes w/o goals, call it whatever you want.

I am shortsighted and frankly, don't care.

I need to write the story so I need a chair. I have pillows to sit upright in my bed, but that just makes me all sleepy or want to have sex. So I find this chair on craigslist for twenty-dollars. There's a picture of it but its from one of the those digital cameras that doesn't work so I can't see it.

One more zero and it would have been a plane ticket that takes you to a girlfriend that likes anyone more than you. One zero less and it's the gift waiting for me when I sit down to eat on Thanksgiving from Grandma, a two-dollar bill complete with its very own case that says, "These are uncommon, but not really rare. I hope they make you feel special because all of my grandchildren are special to me". Grandmas<3. One time I cashed a safety deposit for all two-dollar bills and confused anyone selling something I was buying for a whole month.

The lady selling me the chair is wearing a Mickey Mouse crew neck sweater and acid wash jeans. These are no ordinary acid wash jeans. They are secured to this Mom's waist by an elastic band that uses no buttons or belt. Mysteriously the zipper is still present. Did her grandma give her two-dollar bills? At this point she begins to express her feelings on life and how I'm at that age where I discover the hopelessness of my situation. That situation being: a perpetual state of numbness where I don't like things I used to like because I figured out I can't do what I want to when I "get older". I assure her I am still head over heels in love with Puffed Cocoa/Cocoa Puffs/Cocoa Crispies/Chocolate Sphere'd Krunchies (soy milk obvi) and that no one want is doing what they want to. She decides to give me a break in the price and only asks for ten. The fuck? This stay-at-home Mom said twenty on the web, so in my wallet there is one bill. A twenty-dollar bill.

"Do you have change for my twenty-dollar bill?"

She answers with a resounding "no" and we sit idle, staring at the chair for way too long, floating through the this empty nothingness we call life, and wishing it was more like Point Break/Road House/Red Dawn at the same time. I am upset. I don't say bye but I do say I'll come back tomorrow.

~\$\$THE NEXT DAY\$\$~

I wake up to the Internet bill sitting on the chair-less desk. My share is twenty dollars. I'd rather spend money I don't have (plastic) and get this stpd chr I have my heart set on. <333chair<333 So, I ignore it and end up at the same stay-at-home mom's house. She might as well be wearing the same thing but I'm pretty sure the colors may have altered slightly and the jeans might have been turned around or something that doesn't make sense. Has she had her heart broken, like me? I put the chair in my car while she rambles about some little plastic thingy that supposedly goes on the chair somewhere but broke off when she put it together. It's a small plastic part that a child could choke on.

Give her 2 fivez and I'm out, late.

2 fives

two 5's

tewfeyeves

leyt.

Wait where did I get these?

So when I retired from my first try at getting the chair I realized I needed moar fuel. The plastic begged to be swiped in the card reader but I figure the Internet is already trying to make me homeless. The clerk breaks the twenty and gives me three fivez. One of which goes to a homeless person selling a battery-powered candle with a bow they hot glued to it. Two for muh <333chair<333 and the five I didn't get back goes right in the tank, accordingly. Another person counting money in their wallet to pay for gas ignores the candle salesman.

"BRING OUR TROOPS BACK"

I will never see this person at a protest. I mean, I totally heart their shirt and/or bumper sticker and when its time to vote I'm sure they make educated choices that correspond with their slogans. But do they come outside, hold signs, and shout stuff? 9/11 is SO 10 years ago.

I was done pumping a few minutes ago but the windows are dirty. I do the front one because I need to see. The back is dirty so I write something. Starting in the upper left side I push my index finger down. My finger will get all dirty if I do this but I don't care. "**I wanna be ur shirt J**", I write.

See, that wasn't so bad. But definitely not worth writing about.
WRITE. MOAR. HEAR.

.....

CAITLIN MOHNEY

MOTOR OIL AND CIGARETTES

When my parents got married he said he didn't want kids, that he'd be no good as a father. That didn't really matter because I came anyway, 7 weeks early to be born on the 4th of July.

He held my entire body in his arm from elbow to forefinger. My father: 6-foot 4-inches, in the Navy during Vietnam, rode an Indian motorcycle, two tattoos, two psychotic ex-wives, and a criminal record.

*

My father repairs Volvos with his eyes closed. All my life there has been a Volvo in the driveway or a Volvo in the garage that needed fixing. The sigh of an air compressor is the safest sound there is.

I never complain of boredom to my father because he will surely respond with, "Only stupid people get bored. *You* can find something to do."

My father never lied to me about drugs or sex or God. He was stationed in San Francisco during the Summer of Love—he stopped dropping acid when it got boring and stopped getting stoned when he was over being stupid. God wasn't a man in a pulpit trying to scare or guilt you into good behavior. And people didn't go to hell for liking sex.

I told my father that I wasn't sure I'd ever want to have kids. "I quit smoking because you told me you wanted your children to know their grandfather," he replied. "You're having kids."

"You know I was thinking if I ever need to go to therapy, you probably won't be a major contributing factor," I said to my father. "Maybe just a footnote," he replied.

"I remember when it used to be as easy as telling you *Caitie, that's a duckie*. Now you don't need the stuff I know." "Dad there will always be things you know that I don't," I told him. "Yea but by the time you need to know that stuff I'll be dust."

A Man with Rabbits for Hands

I've seen a man with rabbits for hands. He wore a neat black suit with a metallic, grayish pink-purple necktie, covered in diamond shapes that had circles in them that were slightly lighter. His hair was neatly trimmed and he was clean-shaven. The rabbits' eyes were albino-red though their bodies were chocolate brown like the rest of the man. He sat at the office at his computer, and the rabbits would rabbit about on his desk, occasionally nudging and clicking his mouse or putting their forepaws on the keyboard. He stared intently at the screen as I stared intently at him. He looked up and said in a clear voice, "It's not a disability. I'm in complete control of my hands."

I was able to avoid him until a few days later, when I saw him driving in the parking garage. The rabbits hung adorably, forepaws dangling. Their little red demon eyes screamed helplessness. He waved, and the long feet knocked against each other lightly as the forepaws went up like the "Y" from the "YMCA" dance. I waved back.

The rest of the time I worked there, we were pleasantly civil. I'd been to his house for a barbeque or two and they were fun. He was really into giving hugs. I imagine that handshakes were uncomfortable.

Coparazzi

Serial murdering does not require fashionable hair—hence my current dilemma: My hair is of length for styling, yet I feel as though I'd be smacking my forefather's foreheads together, stirring the pot of the past counterclockwise. Gacy, Manson, Ridgway—all lived with the utterly wonderful custom of unkempt contempt atop their banner. Who am I to attempt a swirly-do or flippy bang thing? Paris welcomes my mess, yet I still gloss over gel, goop, and glistening glow. Craftsmanship, like murder, is not to be taken lightly, and with the surprising intrigue that this beauty boutique has provided, it seems the time has come to go with my heart. And so it is decided that, for the inevitable mug-shot, my mane will appear as an unscathed, bloodied testament to my genius.

Kérastase, Aveda, Nioxin . . . oh, the potpourri! But which to hold my hide to the highest of standards? I Bumble and Bumble in agony over which to apply until a French schoolgirl boy bumps my shoulder, causing a slight twitch in my right eye. The fun-boy grabs his crème de la crème without hesitation and goes about his merry way. I examine the container that he took and take it to check out. I wanted the clerk's soft, sure voice to steal the air; I wanted assurance of the cream's greatness! Poor timing, however, because when the clerk began her sell, I had already walked the stairs to my brain and put on the lovely ruse of staring, but not staring, nodding, but not nodding. I sat in my attic and I drew up a plan as my mind scrambled with wine and Disney coloring books.

You see? Nobody is here; the knife wants to slit her! Infamy calls! You need to stab her through the mouth and dump shampoo all over the body.

And waste all the precious shampoo? I need to be sensible with my purchase. And if I kill her in the shop I am sure to be found out.

Oh, but imagine the possibility! The mirrors, the products, the romance! Coax her into helping you choose a hairstyle!

Clerk Simone couldn't have been happier to sit me down and garnish my hair with an array of different products. I relished the caring hands rubbing and tending to my head. A sensuous day-dream of sorts! A moan nearly escaped my mouth from the sheer pleasure of the situation.

NOW! NOW you fucking pussy!

Intense red shot across the checkered floor and my imagined moan matured into her agonizing groan as I stabbed and stabbed and stabbed.

As I took in the scent of oozing flesh and Sephora fresh, I caught a glimpse of my bloodied face in the mirror. I had never looked better.

Naturally, the police rushed to the scene.

"Listen up you sick fuck, you have 'til the count of three to get away from that body before I blow your fucking head off!"

"Can you at least take my picture first?"

First Step

It didn't end with ham and cheese crepes on Sunday morning, but that's when she knew it was over. Finally, after all that time, he had said it; he did not want a child then, and for the first time, he said he never would.

And the morning went on. Matthew finished his brunch; the homemade crepes, crispy on the edges but not burned, perfect without asking. He tried the new roast; a tad bit overpowering, he said, knowing Kat drank coffee only after meals, but a good complement to the crepes. She agreed, after finishing her meal then went in the kitchen to do the dishes.

"We're good, right?" she heard him say from the living room, speaking loud so she would hear him over the hot water.

"What?"

"I said, we're good right?" He spoke even louder.

"I know, I heard you; what do you mean?"

"I mean are we good?"

"Of course," Kat said. "Don't I seem good?"

"Sure," he said. "You're just a little quiet."

"Oh," she said.

By the time she had washed, dried, and put everything away, he had finished the Arts Section and was moving into Business.

"So," he said, hand on his stomach. "Ready to walk some of this off?"

"Can't today, sorry." She sat next to him on the couch and pulled on her sneakers. "I've got to go to work. I've got that pitch tomorrow."

"Oh," he said. "Okay."

"I shouldn't be late."

"Okay."

She grabbed her keys from the table near the door.

"Don't forget your jacket; it's breezy."

"Already in the car," she said.

"That's my girl," he said. "Bye."

"Bye." She closed the door.

Kat parked in the carport next to the rusted car. The wreck stank of burnt rubber under its canvas tarp. Two white plastic chairs were on the lawn, facing the busy street. The grass was littered with beer cans. "Junk?" Bill had said, the first time she saw the rusted wreck. "No-way, Jose." "A project, that's what it is," he said. "Something to pass the time," and he added, "worth a lot more than you think."

The metal storm door slammed as Kat entered the house. Her mother sat on the couch; her stepfather slept in the recliner, both were still in their church clothes.

"Kitty!" Her mom smiled. "You surprised me." Her mother stood and the smile vanished; she squinted at Kat. "Sweetie, what's wrong?" Her mother ushered her to the couch, arm around her waist, and they sat. Kat did not cry, but still buried her face in her mom's denim jumper. "There, there, Kitty; its okay."

They held together and swayed on the couch; Bill snored softly in the recliner. After a minute, Kat raised her head and leaned back, her mother's hands still on her shoulders.

"I don't get him," Kat said. "He was so matter-of-fact, like it wasn't a big deal."

Her mother sighed. "Again? Kitty, did you tell him it was a big deal?"

"We've talked about it before."

"I know, but did you?"

"He knows it's a big deal."

"I'm sure he does sweetie, but sometimes men must be told," she said.

"I know."

Kat slumped onto the couch, her eyes on the ceiling. Her mom squeezed her leg.

"Kitty, are you hungry? Do you want something to drink?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I've got cookies."

"No thanks."

"Swiss Miss?"

"It's August."

"I know, but—"

"Do you have Diet Coke?"

"Yes." Her mother smiled. "I'll get it."

Her mother stood, smoothed the front of her skirt and walked toward the kitchen. She stopped at the recliner, and gave Bill a shake.

"Wake up Billy," she said, and left the room.

In a moment, Bill sat up. He stretched his arms.

"Holy mackerel, that was a nap," he said.

Kat was silent; she still stared at the ceiling. Bill rubbed his eyes with the back of his hairy hand.

"Hey there squirt, how's it going?" he said.

"Fine Bill."

He picked up the remote and cycled through the channels. "So what's new in the land of the Kat?"

She took her time to answer. "Not much."

"That boss of yours still dragging you over the coals?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Thanks."

In a minute, Kat's mother reappeared carrying a white plastic mug clinking with ice cubes.

"Here you go Kitty; sit up though, or you'll spill." She handed her the perspiring mug.

"Billy, could you give us a minute?"

"What?" he said.

"Kitty and I need to talk."

"Oh," Bill looked from the TV to his wife. "I see." Bill folded the squeaky recliner and stood. "You ladies take all the time you need." He straightened his belt. "Hang in there, squirt, and keep your nose to the grindstone."

"Thanks," Kat said, and Bill left the room. She sipped her drink.

"Tell me exactly what he said."

"Exactly?" Kat said. "I can't exactly. You want his phrase?"

"Yes," her mother said.

"'Why do you want one?' he said. Just like that; 'Why do you want one?' Like flat, like nothing, like doing the laundry." Kat spun the mug on her knee and made wet circles on her jeans. "Like I'm wrong to want one."

Her mother put a hand on her leg. "But you do."

Kat nodded, and then her mother nodded too. Her mother took in a deep breath.

"Kitty, do you remember when your Dad met Bill?"

She nodded again. "Dad still tells the story."

"Tell it to me now."

"The story?"

"Yes. Please."

"All right." Kat set her mug on an old magazine. "I guess you two hadn't been divorced for that long. I was really little and Dad had come to pick me up. He was late, and Bill was early, so they met and were making small talk while you got me ready."

"Keep going," Mom said.

"Bill was looking at the paper and Dad asked him about some article. Bill tried to read part of it aloud, and couldn't pronounce some words." Her mother nodded. "And what did your Dad say?"

"He said Bill should borrow my grammar book," Kat said.

"That's right; but Kitty, do you remember who picked you up from your Dad's later on?"

"Bill?"

"Yes. And can you guess why?"

"You were busy?"

"No," her mother said. "Guess again."

"I don't know."

"Sweetie, who coached your Bonnet Ball team?"

"Bill."

"And who taught you to drive stick?" her mother said.

"Bill. Okay, I get it."

"No you don't. Kitty, can you tell me why I love Bill so much?"

"He's reliable."

Her mother shook her head. "No, Kitty.

"I don't understand."

"Listen to me, Kitty, its important. For years, I tried to make your dad happy. I tried and tried and tried, but no matter what, I couldn't. But with Bill, it was different. Sweetie, he tries for me."

"Oh."

"Now do you see what I'm getting at?"

"I guess."

"No guessing young lady; do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think I get it." Kat nodded her head in agreement, and returned her mother's fixed gaze. "Thanks."

They hugged. Her mother smiled, relieved. "Good, and don't forget it."

Kat popped the heavy brass deadbolt and entered her apartment. Matthew was on the couch, his arms folded and sitting up, but asleep. She bent over to pull off her sneakers.

"It's late," he said, eyes still closed.

"Sorry."

"Finish the pitch?"

"Yeah, just barely." She softly dropped a sneaker into the wicker basket by the door.

"Good. I'm hungry. Let's go out," he said.

"Okay."

"What sounds good?"

"I don't care," She said, and dropped her other sneaker in the basket. Kat walked toward the bedroom and Matthew opened his eyes.

"Hey, come sit with me a sec; then we'll go," he said. "I haven't seen you all day."

She sat next to him on the couch. He raised his arm and she quickly slid underneath, tucking closely and perfectly into the groove of his body. He kissed her on the top of her head.

"I missed you today," he said.

"I missed you too," Kat said, sitting perfectly still, her head resting on his chest. She shut her eyes and slowed her breathing. For a few minutes, it was quiet in the apartment.

"Are you ready to go?" he said.

Kat hesitated.

"Yes."

On Love and Poetry

I decide to fall in love with the first boy I see in my introduction to poetry aesthetics and inner-workings of diction and rhyme class. I haven't fallen in love for two and a half years and the words I choose for my poetry brood and the poems themselves are about dark cliffs and bitter chocolate. It's the beginning of the second semester and it is also time for a fantastic change in my life so the first thing I do on Monday is I take a shower and I shampoo my hair not once, not twice, but three times. I play songs off of my Happy Hannah mixtape while I sort of shake my hips into a loud skirt. It's orange and I feel light. My mother has been sending me these e-mails concerning all-organic recipes since a few weeks ago, she too re-invented herself. I print out an e-mail and make myself a wheat-grass shake and whole-grain hummus sandwich. Happy Hannah is on track six, so I finish my body re-inventing breakfast to "My Girl" and make sure my poetry book, as well as a light sweater, are in my purse. My room-mate Roxanne is asleep with her boyfriend in the other room as I shut the door; my hand lingers on the knob so that the door doesn't slam. However, it does anyway because it's frightfully windy and I laugh because when you are in love, being woken up is not something to become angry about.

I begin to fantasize about the boy I am about to fall in love with. I hope he writes me poetry with substance and that he has sideburns. *No, that's asking for too much*, I think. I hope he washes his hair at least twice a week and doesn't wear a trench coat. Walking past buildings and trashcans and lovers, I realize that tonight I will be going on a date. That's what happens when you fall in love, you go eat at an Italian restaurant and pray to God or Buddha or Allah that your breath isn't foul after your plate of Garlic Chicken Pesto Pasta (with a twist of zesty lemon and red peppers!). I debate back and forth between the payment issue plan; rumor has it that chivalry has filed for bankruptcy and quite honestly, I consider myself a feminist for the most part. We'll split the check. He'll want to pay for me, but I'll just wave my hand at him and say, *Don't you worry about it! We'll split it*. Because I'm flexible and this year, flexible is sexy. Walking past those old buildings and dented trashcans and happy lovers, I take out my

poetry book, flip to Shakespeare and whisper, Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? I take a deep breath as I walk into the English Department with inspiration, hoping love will be like how I remember it being: tremendous. Turning the knob to room one hundred and eighty-four my eyes meet a pair of green pebbles behind glasses.

"Hi, my name is Hannah."

But he doesn't reciprocate with as much enthusiasm as I. I learn that his name is Zachary and that he's not even supposed to take this class. He wanted to get into an Engineering class but it was full so he figured a poetry class would boost his GPA and simultaneously fulfill a GE requirement.

"Do you want to go to grad school, is that why you're so worried about your grades?" I ask.

"Well, yeah. That's the plan."

My lover is cold and desolate. In class, the professor reads us Keats, Whitman, and Cummings with a devoted voice and asks us the themes illuminated through these poems. I say, *The idea of a romanticized spontaneity and freedom is portrayed in Whitman's "Spontaneous Me."* And the professor tells me, *Very good.* I glanced over to see if Zachary had heard my insightful commentary but he is flipping through a biology textbook.

The second part of class requires us to pair up with two other people and discuss a Rita Dove poem. While the professor is explaining the directions and type of response he wishes to extrapolate from us, I pray to God, Buddha *and* Allah that Zachary will pick me. I hope he walks over and sits on my desk. I hope he walks over and smiles and reassures me that I've made the right decision, that he is indeed, my man. I look over desperately, but he sits and waits for students to choose him for their group and there is no way I'm going to go through that sort of humiliation again. A girl with purple hair looks at me as though her mother packed her the tenth consecutive trout sandwich that week and so we pair up unwillingly, waiting for the third team member to wash up to shore. Meanwhile, two girls have chosen Zachary to be in their group. Livid with a newly-birthed jealousy, I compare myself to these harlots. One is wearing Daisy Duke shorts and a tee-shirt that says "Afternoon Delight" across her breasts. The other I'm not so worried about because she is overweight and already asking if she could borrow a poetry book. That's right, she is *obnoxious*. I am so worried that Afternoon Delight will seduce my man that I don't pay attention to my team members.

"Hello? So I mean, Dove is okay," the purple hair girl says.

"What? Yeah,"

"Did you even read the poem?"

"No."

It doesn't matter. Poetry doesn't matter. Rita will wait. My group consists of only two people and I wasn't even paying attention to our professor's directions. He looks over worriedly to our pathetic little convention and I want to tell him, *It's not my fault. It's not my fault.* The girl in the purple hair starts talking to some other girls and they come to the conclusion that Dove is revolutionary and poignant. They share this with the professor and he says, absolutely. I look over to Zachary and he is laughing at something Afternoon Delight is saying. Perhaps she is making a joke about grad school and high GPA's. Perhaps she is taking this class because she too wanted to take Engineering but the same situation occurred. It was booked so the two of them were here not under their own conditions, but the school catalog's. Afternoon Delight and Zachary were meant to be together, and I accept this as sadly as I place my poetry book back inside my purse.

A strange thing occurs as I set my keys down on my kitchen counter. It is dirty because neither Roxanne nor I wanted to clean this weekend, but nevertheless, I take out a notebook and begin to scribble and these scribbles become words and these words become thoughts. The poem needs work, undoubtedly, but there isn't a dark cliff or whiff of bitter chocolate in sight. Oprah is on the television and she is telling me that I don't need a man to be happy, but aerobics lessons instead. Her big face insists that as women we have some sort of duty to read at least one Amy Tan novel. I know what she is trying to sell me but I cleverly extract the essential and important meaning behind her show today. I look up to see Roxanne, wet from the shower, in just a towel and she sternly asks why I slammed the door this morning.

The Banyan Goblin

Goldfish are very good listeners, Evie decided one afternoon as her pets swam around their small bowl.

It must be, she thought, because they have nothing to do but swim and eat. But they did have each other, which was more than Evie could say.

"I like our new house, especially the frosted windows and the old grandfather clock in the hallway," she told them. "Did you know there are twenty paintings of trees on the first floor? Weeping willows, pine trees, maples, redwoods, oaks, evergreens! I imagine it's because the backyard doesn't have any." Evie sighed, "But I'm lonely here. I haven't made any friends yet."

"Evie?" A woman chirruped from the kitchen.

"Yes, mother?" Evie scurried to her bedroom door.

"Are you talking to the fish again?" Her twin brothers chorused.

"I'm just telling them about my day."

"Did you tell them about the grand staircase with thirty-two steps?" Rupert asked.

"Or the white piano in the living room?" Demetri questioned.

"What about the crystal chandelier or the gargoyles outside?"

"Oh! And the other children in the neighborhood? Like that weird kid next door – what was his name?"

"Bur-something –"

"At any rate don't forget to tell them about the game of hide and seek we played today!"

"How you sat in the bushes for an hour –"

"Long after we had gone inside!" The two laughed at Evie while she clenched her fists. Their mother interrupted them.

"Just finish up soon because dinner is almost ready."

Evie scowled at her brothers, slamming her bedroom door behind her. She sat in front of the fish tank, quickly recalling the day's events so they would not be in suspense while she was away at dinner. If they appeared bored or sleepy she would tap on the glass and continue with her story--

"And the raccoons are such funny fellows! They were playing dress-up with Mr. Dunn's – *tap tap* – trousers and chewing on Mrs. Dunn's

nightgown in plain sight!" Evie giggled. The goldfish fluttered their fins with amusement. "I couldn't help but fall; you see I was laughing so hard until Mr. Dunn opened the window and yelled –"

"Dinner!" her father shouted down the hallway.

Evie took a breath. "Well, I suppose I'll have to continue this after dessert. Mother made apple pie to celebrate our first night here!" The goldfish bobbed their heads. She beamed at them, giving a little curtsy and a wave on the way out.

Dinner was a grand event. Rupert and Demetri had set the table with new dishes and Evie was excited to put out the new silverware. She handled them with care and would only take a few pieces at a time to avoid dropping them. Unfortunately, she had to make several trips to the kitchen, because as soon as she went to get more spoons or forks, the ones she had already put down had disappeared!

"Stop it!" Evie whined after returning for the third time with more spoons.

"Oh come on, Evie, it was a joke," Demetri sighed.

"Besides, we don't need spoons; we're not having soup!" Rupert rolled his eyes.

"Humph!" Evie crossed her arms and took the spoons back to the kitchen.

After the family enjoyed their first meal in their new home, they went to the living room to relax. Evie's father started a small fire in the marble hearth. It crackled as Evie settled in a plum-colored armchair to read. Mother sat down to work on a book of crossword puzzles while Demetri and Rupert set up a race course by the piano. As Evie looked up from her book, she spotted a painting above the mantelpiece that she had not seen before. She walked to it, examining the unusual tree it pictured.

"Vroom!" roared Demetri.

"Neeeeeeeeeeee!" screeched Rupert. They both crashed their cars into a block building, causing the pieces to fall at Evie's feet.

"Mother, what kind of tree is that?" Evie asked, ignoring them. The tree was large and twisted, with millions of tiny tear-drop leaves. But the strange thing was that it had more than one trunk! *Of course a tree could have many branches from the same trunk*, Evie thought, *but how could a tree have many trunks from the same branches?*

Her mother peered through her reading glasses, took them off, and blinked. "I'm not quite sure, Evie. Perhaps a camphor tree?"

"It's a banyan," announced her father from behind his newspaper.

"A banyan tree?"

"They come from India." He shuffled his newspaper as he turned a page. "In Hindu religion the banyan tree is considered sacred, although I don't remember why... I suppose it must've given good luck to travelers or something like that. What's remarkable about the tree is that its seeds are only the size of a peanut, but it can grow over an acre wide."

Evie didn't know what an acre was, but it sounded extremely large.

"That's cool!" remarked Rupert, gathering the fallen blocks.

"I bet redwoods are bigger." Demetri responded, rebuilding his bridge.

"Maybe," her mother replied, putting her reading glasses back on. "But Evie, please don't stand so close to the fire. You'll get smoke in your eyes."

Evie sat down, still staring at the tree. She wondered what it might be like to build a house in it. *Perhaps a little door at the bottom, a flight of stairs from the branches there, and hanging off the lofty branches –*

"Evie, darling," Her father glanced at his wrist watch. "I do believe it's past your bedtime."

"Oh my, it most certainly is!" Her mother gasped as the hour hand settled on nine and the grandfather clock chimed.

The twins' heads shot up. "What about us?"

"You may stay up for another thirty minutes *if* you agree to be quiet." Their mother went back to her crossword puzzle. Demetri and Rupert nodded eagerly.

"That's not fair!" Evie crossed her arms, although she was very tired. "I'm seven and five months old now! I should get to stay up, too!"

"*Well we're nine,*" The boys chorused, trying to count how many months they had been nine for.

"Now, now, don't make such a fuss, Evie," their father said, returning to his newspaper.

"You heard your father; off to bed with you!" Mother shooed, taking Evie's book and setting it on the chair.

"I hope you don't get too scared going down the dark hallway all by yourself, Evie," Rupert snickered.

"Watch out for the goblins!" Demetri added.

"What goblins?"

"The goblins in the trees, of course," Demetri shrugged.

"There aren't any trees in the hallway," Evie rolled her eyes.

"Didn't you notice the paintings?" Rupert asked before the twins laughed. Evie's eyes widened.

"Boys!" Father put down his newspaper and shook his head. "There are no such things as goblins, Evie. Now go on to bed."

Evie was too tired to argue.

"Goodnight," Evie grumbled, kissing her parents. She stuck her tongue out at her brothers before turning on the hall light and shuffling off to bed.

Hours later, Evie awoke with a great thirst, but was too frightened to walk to the kitchen.

"What if there are goblins in this house that only come out at night?" she whispered to the fish. "My brothers told me lots of stories about goblins that live in trees. Maybe they live in the paintings!" But the fish only pouted their lips in response.

"I suppose I'm just being silly," Evie shrugged, glancing at her bedroom door. "Alright, I'll do it. I'm not afraid!" So Evie tiptoed to the door, opening it a crack so she could look down the hallway. It was dark, but silent. Demetri's red toy truck was lying on the floor.

It looks safe enough, she thought. I'll just have to be careful that I don't trip on anything.

Evie stepped out into the hallway. She dodged her brothers' toys, glancing suspiciously at the paintings on the wall. *If I see any goblins, Evie thought, I'll just run to Mother and Father's room.*

But there were no goblins in any of the pictures—at least none that dared to show their faces—and Evie made it to the kitchen safe and sound. As she filled up her glass with water, she remembered the book she had left in the living room.

I suppose I could just go get it, Evie reasoned, the living room isn't very far from here.

So Evie set her glass in the sink and tiptoed toward the living room. Her brothers' race track was still set up by the piano and her book lay on the chair by the fireplace. The house was as still and as quiet as could be and Evie wasn't scared at all!

Until, out of the corner of her eye, Evie spotted something moving in the fireplace.

A tiny, gnarled foot stepped out onto the carpet—and then another! The creature's skin was rough and brown, and it wore baggy green pants. It had a leather belt around its waist that looked like one of her father's

and a blue shirt that looked identical to one of Rupert's. She shut her eyes and tried not to move.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. My, my, my, what a mess I've made!"

Evie heard the creature grumbling as a cloud of ashes flew in every direction.

"ACHOOO!" Evie sneezed, causing the figure by the fireplace to jump.

A voice whispered frantically to Evie, "What in the name of Marcus Fiddlegump are you doing?! Do you want to wake the whole house up!?"

Evie covered her eyes and wished with all her might that she was back in her bed.

"Hello? Hello? Hello? Excuse me, miss!"

It did not work. Evie uncovered her eyes, ready to see an enormous, hideous creature waiting to gobble her up. But the figure's head didn't even reach the mantle.

"Little goblin? What are you doing here? Did you get lost in the tunnels?" The creature asked Evie.

"Goblin? Why I'm no goblin! Goblins are short and I am most certainly taller than you!" Evie exclaimed.

"Humph! Are you calling me a dwarf, child?! That's the most insulting thing I have ever heard in my life!"

"Well you could be a leprechaun," Evie suggested, "Or perhaps an elf or a gnome or —" Evie gasped. "*You're not a goblin are you?*"

The creature stepped out from the fireplace and bowed.

"Hermes Wendlestone, banyan goblin, at your service!"

Evie was shocked! Hermes was a real, live goblin! He wore a small brown jacket over his bright blue shirt and a crooked scarf around his fat neck. His eyes were wide and green, almost covered by a gray, puffy cap.

He doesn't look evil to me, Evie thought, and it might be rude to ask him if he eats humans....

"Well what are you, if you're not a goblin?" Hermes asked, taking a step closer to Evie.

"My name's Evie and I'm a girl. I'm seven and five months and I like fishes and dolls."

"A human!" Hermes took a step back. "You're not going to scream now, are you?"

He looks frightened! Evie thought, watching the goblin's worried face. *Now I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to eat me.*

"My mother would make me wash dishes for a week if she found out that I got caught by a human!"

"What are you doing here, exactly?" Evie asked.

"Me?" Hermes twiddled his thumbs, "Well, I was just here to find a toy for my baby sister. I know you humans consider it stealing, but it's her birthday tomorrow and my mother took away my allowance for bringing a raccoon home last week. I just wanted to get her something special."

Evie giggled, "You mean the one that likes to play with the Dunns' laundry?"

"The one and the same," Hermes grinned.

"Hmm... Well, I think I might have the perfect gift for your sister," Evie smiled.

She bent down to find one of her brother's small red cars. Evie had been eyeing it for months, but her brothers had scoffed at her, "Cars are only for boys!"

"Here you are, Hermes," Evie said, placing it in the little goblin's hand.

"Y-you're giving this to me?" Hermes stammered.

"Yes, because you're a good brother," Evie nodded. "I hope your sister likes it."

"I'm sure she will!" The goblin replied, "May I come back and visit you again sometime, Evie?"

"I'd love that!" Evie beamed.

"Until next time then," Hermes bowed, smiling.

Evie curtsied back and the little banyan goblin stepped through the fireplace and disappeared.

The Construction of Mrs. Dalton

The new pieces had arrived. Henry would pick them up after the staff meeting. He would drop by the grocery store on his way home, pick up a few items, then ask to see the “special delivery.” The kid working the butchery would lead him back to the walk-in freezer, no questions asked. This arrangement worked. No comments, no judgments. Just picking up a new cooler, like he had done the month before. This month’s shipment, however, was cause for more excitement than usual. It meant that he could soon bring her to life. After all, people say that eyes are “the window to the soul.”

He had imported the green eyes from a little Russian town named Myshkin. The previous owner had been a seventeen-year-old prostitute named Svetlana. Henry discovered after doing some research that she had died in the toils of her profession, compelled by a local bank manager, Mr. Kozlov, to perform while having her head engulfed by a plastic bag. He had promised her the equivalent of seven hundred dollars to do the trick. Maybe she had thought old Kozlov would finish soon enough, before she suffocated, before she fell to the ground in convulsive paralysis.

The blue eyes were American, from a local schoolteacher, who had died while visiting her brother in Wisconsin. The two had gotten drunk together, and she had attempted to drive his motorcycle while he rested his head on her back. They lasted only twenty-two minutes on the 43, just north of Milwaukee, before someone called 911, reporting an accident. Henry heard of the accident from his cousin Bonnie, who was a nurse at the hospital they had been rushed to.

The brown eyes were Mexican, although they had been obtained in America. Maria Luz De Los Santos, age forty-three, had been working for a family in Arizona. While the family was out having lunch with some friends from church, Maria’s sister had come over to the family’s house. The two of them went into the master bedroom and took some painkillers. When the family came home from lunch, they found Maria’s sister sobbing in the kitchen, cradling Maria’s lifeless head.

Henry Dalton rushed home with the cooler. It was small, red, and generic, the kind most people often bring along for afternoon picnics or summer cookouts by the neighbor's pool. Yet this cooler had transported the eyes, her eyes, the final touch on his masterwork. From picnic accessory to *ark of the covenant*.

After he locked himself in the basement of his home, he analyzed each pair of eyes. He took a magnifying glass out of the top drawer of his work desk, and examined their shape, their color, their glow. He had once visited *The Jewelry Palace*, and had there learned how to be meticulous in evaluating the quality of diamonds. He figured he could appraise the eyes in a similar fashion.

"It's all about the C's," Mel, the assistant store manager, had said.

"Pardon?" said Henry.

"You've got your color, your cut, your clarity, and your carats."

"Which one is most important?"

"It's like love and marriage - can't have one without the other."

"But what makes the diamond, you know, special?"

"Depends what kind of lady you're shopping for," said Mel. "If she's flashy, go for carats."

"She's not flashy - she's just an honest girl, trying to make sense of the world."

"Oh, I see."

"She knows what she wants, and isn't afraid to ask for it."

"I think I know just the stone," said Mel.

"Thanks," said Henry.

#

The difficulty level increased with every part Henry acquired. The arms had been fine, the legs easy enough. But when it came to organs, Henry needed to think creatively. After three months of establishing a friendship with the head nurse at *St. John's Memorial Hospital*, a divorcee named Carla O'Donnell, he took enough notes to fill five notebooks.

"Hypothetically, if someone wanted to break into the hospital and just cut someone open..."

"They'd have to be goddamn nuts," Carla said. "But I'll tell you what - security always slacks off right after Thanksgiving."

"After Thanksgiving?"

"You've got all those food poisoning incidents on Thursday, with a few stragglers on Friday. By Sunday everyone's back in front of the damn TV, watching the Packers."

Carla proved to be an invaluable contributor to the project, her small and cynical insights serving as bare bones for some of Henry's future strategies. The first post-Thanksgiving raid provided Henry with two kidneys, a liver, and a small intestine. Three for three. It would take him the next six Thanksgiving Sundays to complete the list, from gall bladder to lungs.

He ran into Carla several months after his first raid. She stood right outside a movie theater, accompanied by a much older man. Before Henry made eye contact with her, he had seen the man with his arm around her. Carla looked more comforted by the man than aroused by him, but Henry was glad to see that his own abrupt disappearance from her life hadn't yielded melodramatic results – she *had* mentioned suicide once.

"Hello, Henry," said Carla.

"Hi."

"This is Stan."

"Pleasure."

The two men shook hands, Stan's grip a little firmer than Henry's. Less than two minutes later, Henry was on his way home, his movie ticket crumpled in his pocket. He couldn't take chances. Carla's aggression couldn't – wouldn't – turn into suspicion. He told her, after all, that he had always been curious about hospitals. She had no right for expectations, for resentment. He had been clear from the beginning that he was only interested in friendship.

#

Henry often spent the entire day in the basement. He would wake up at 6:45, make himself breakfast, wash his dishes, collect the morning paper, and check his mailbox. He would then put on his overcoat and head down to the basement. He always checked the temperature before entering. It needed to remain at a steady 30 degrees.

While weekends gave him time to work more proficiently, on weekdays he could spend no longer than thirty or forty minutes there, massaging her arms or moving her feet in a semicircle. The last thing she needed was muscular atrophy. The arms and legs were starting to show signs of aging.

The arms had belonged to a twenty-two year old college student named Christine. She was waterskiing with some friends during her spring break, and naturally alcohol had been a vital part of the lake party. Some frat boy took control of the boat after she fell into the water. He must have just been trying to scare her, to impress her with his daredevil antics. The motor boat propeller amputated both of her legs, the muscles torn to jagged pieces. Hours later, Henry drove home, Christine's arms tightly packed in the trunk of his car.

#

At work, Henry was timid. His co-workers stopped by his desk countless times just to make sure he didn't want to join everyone for happy hour. He would, in turn, politely decline. Either his mother was sick, or his brother was in town, or his niece had a recital. He learned that they never persisted. They asked him to come along because it relieved them of the guilt they felt in disliking him. Henry's boss, however, reasoned that Henry did not have to be the life of the party, not if he kept his numbers up, not if he kept clients happy. His boss was a man named Donald Denby, or "D.D.". He built the business from the ground up, and he was proud of his achievements.

"I started this company to inspire people," D.D. said once at the Christmas lunch, a few years back. "Every single one of you is part of that inspiration."

In a moment of self-augmented grandeur, D.D. named the company *Gravitas Enterprises*. *Gravitas* marketed products for third parties by giving them thirty-minute paid advertisements on local cable TV. The reception area rang with cacophony all day long: "*Gravitas* - how may I direct your call?" or "*Gravitas* - please hold." Despite the petty annoyances that came with the day-to-day routine, the company afforded Henry with the opportunity to be anonymous. The chance to get by making an honest living, budgeting for infomercials about hair growth products and natural male enhancement pills.

#

Henry's brother and his family would come to visit him every so often. Most holidays were spent with the wife's family, so when they came to visit, it was usually on a slow Sunday, most likely in the NFL offseason.

"Do we *have* to go?" Henry imagined his niece and nephew saying. "He's your uncle," Henry's brother would probably respond, as if their blood relations could somehow spontaneously awaken fond feelings in them.

Henry was wary whenever the children were around. They asked too many questions – why is your house so small? Why does your kitchen smell funny? How come you don't have a TV? The last visit, however, proved to be far too much for him.

"Uncle Henry?" his niece said.

"Yes."

"Can I ask you something?"

"I suppose."

"Will you promise not to get mad?"

"Why would I get mad?"

"Can you just promise?"

"Fine – I won't get mad."

"Why do you keep your basement locked?"

#

Henry pulled the cooler out from the basement freezer. He hadn't yet been able to choose her eye color. Each color had its benefits. He tried placing each pair of eyes right above the empty sockets, but this ended up just making her look grotesque, like the cartoon wolf whose eyes would bulge out every time a Marilyn Monroe lookalike walked by.

He needed to combine her eye color with her imported Japanese hair. The hair had been the hardest find, the most expensive, and it required an appropriate pairing. After some Internet research, he found a "hair dealer" based out of Osaka. Their clients were mainly cancer patients who wanted more than just a wig. Mr. Sakamura, the man who had first conceived of the idea of a soy-based scalp adhesive, was making his fortune by capitalizing on others' diseases. Henry's first phone call to Mr. Sakamura was all it took to convince him that Japanese hair would be the perfect fit for her.

"Yes, I am interested in buying some hair," said Henry.

"What kind you want?" asked Sakamura.

"Long, straight, soft."

"How soft you like?"

"The softer the better."

"Japanese hair is very soft, very nice."

"So I've been told."

"I have new arrival this week. Very soft – girl was very beautiful. When the girl is beautiful, she take very good care of hair."

"How beautiful was she, exactly?"

"I can email picture."

Once Sakamura emailed him the pictures, Henry was sold. The listed price for this particular hair package, along with the scalp adhesive, would come out to \$7,500 – three times what Henry had budgeted. But this wasn't a mere wig, made from strands of hair once belonging to a woman in Calcutta, selling her hair to put food on the table. This was top-of-the-line, prime hair, stripped from a striking Japanese woman who had tragically died in a freak swimming pool accident. This woman would have wanted her hair to carry on her legacy. Her hair would still receive compliments, it would still stand out in a crowd. Henry knew this was the hair for his beloved.

He glanced at the three pairs of eyes again. The brown were too predictable, he decided. The dark hair and the dark eyes weren't exquisite, but commonplace. Now it was between blue and green. He picked up the blue pair and carefully examined each eye once more. He reached into a nearby drawer and removed his small magnifying glass. He scanned the eyes, looking for any flaw that would deem them unusable. After a few seconds he stopped.

There it was. He hadn't noticed it before, but how it had somehow slipped his attention he did not know. It was small, but it was definitely there: slight discoloration next to the pupil. The blue lost its purity the further it crawled towards the center of the eye. Like a photograph that is only out of focus at certain points. He placed the blue eyes back in the cooler. He closed his own eyes now, imagining his bride-to-be, greeting him at home after work.

"Hi, sweetheart," she would say. "How was your day?"

"Productive."

"I made lasagna."

"That sounds wonderful – I'm starving."

"I think that after dinner we should make love in the living room," she would say, looking into his face with her big green eyes.

#

There had only been a few close calls, in the nine years since the beginning of the construction. He began building her shortly after the birth of his niece. He remembered holding the infant, overwhelmed with the possibilities of personhood, the magic of life. He was light years away from progeny, further still from reciprocal love. His own virginity had been sacrificed in the name of lust, as a prostitute named Tricia no doubt provided a fuller sexual experience than after-hours masturbation.

He spent hours in the library, devoting his time to the study of organ preservation and new developments by Norwegian researchers, who claimed that limbs could retain full functionality if stored properly. He bought subscriptions to women's magazines, reading articles like "Five Ways to Keep Your Skin Fabulous" or "How To Stay Wrinkle Free!"

The next year was spent working on the basement. His inheritance money from his father's death allowed him to finish it without taking out any loans. Nearly a month after the basement was completed, the arms from the college girl's lake accident were sitting neatly in the main freezer. The first tangible sign of his love, his own American flag planted firmly into lunar soil.

The closest call had occurred when an electrician came over unannounced. Henry had opened the door to a man in a jumpsuit, the sewn-on nametag reading "Fred." Fred the electrician asked to check the breaker since some of the houses in the area were experiencing electrical problems.

"Oh, everything's fine here," said Henry.

"Do you think I could just take a look?" asked Fred.

"I was about to leave."

"It'll just be a minute."

"I suppose that's fine."

Fred entered the house and followed Henry to the kitchen.

"Do you live alone?" Fred asked.

"Yes. It's just me."

"Nice and tidy for a bachelor. Should've seen my place before I was married."

"I do what I can."

Fred stopped at the kitchen table, crouching to get a closer look at a sketchpad that rested on a chair. When Henry realized what it was, he nearly snatched it out of his hands. Instead, he watched as Fred looked at the drawing. The night before Henry had fallen asleep at the table as

he readjusted her dimensions. He had widened her waist by half an inch, and rounded out her buttocks.

"She's a beauty," said Fred.

"So she is," said Henry, holding his breath.

Fred looked up at Henry, the look of a curious child stamped across his simple face. All of Henry's pre-planned reactions to this very scenario now escaped him, as he quickly tried to formulate new ones. *It's not what you think. I've been lonely my whole life. I am working on a secret medical research project for the CIA.*

"Looks like you're building yourself a woman!" said Fred, his expression caught in a strange purgatory between glee and chastisement.

"I - ..."

"If only," Fred said. He then laughed, expelling the tension from the room, exorcising Henry's fears. Fred left the house minutes later. Everything was indeed fine with Henry's breaker.

#

Henry got home early from work with a bouquet of white roses in hand. She was a sophisticated woman. She had taste, and she knew what she liked. Daisies were too infantile, azaleas were too dramatic, and red roses were plain cliché. Her tastes were as exquisite as she was, a lovely amalgamation of features gathered from across the globe. Henry knew her, knew her every thought and desire.

He unlocked the basement. He walked quietly down the stairs, trying not to startle or disturb her. He wore his best suit under his overcoat. It was the suit he had bought for his father's funeral, years ago. He'd taken it to the dry cleaner two days earlier, and had even purchased a brand new tie. This was *the* occasion of his life, his own rebirth being made possible by the woman he himself had created.

He walked over to where she lay. She was a vision of beauty, complete and fully constructed. Her measurements were flawless. Her body was femininity, every last feature a perfect anecdote on womanhood. She was Eve, before the Fall of Man.

Henry knelt by her side and pulled out a small box from his left coat pocket. He opened the box and brought it close to her face, waiting in nervous expectation for her reaction. Her eyes, her green eyes, remained

closed. Maybe she just hadn't seen the diamond glistening in the fluorescent basement light.

"We've been through a lot together," said Henry. "These last few years have been the best years of my life."

He pulled the ring out from the box.

"I never thought I could feel like this, but I know, I just know, that you're the one."

She was quiet, calm, even as he pulsated with anxiety.

"And it would be my pleasure, no, my greatest joy, if you would spend the rest of your life with me."

He slid the ring onto her finger. The diamond was the perfect size for her hand – it didn't overpower her. If anything, it only enhanced her own beauty. He waited for joy to overtake her, for love to animate her to life. She had been so quiet all these years, but never *this* quiet. Never had she been so quiet that all he could hear, deep down in his basement, was the monotone hum of the freezer.

The Muttering Reflections of Elliott Saunt

“...walking upon the sealing of the sky,” muttered the forty-something Elliott Saunt to himself as he passed by Lafayette Square. It was a curious summer morning that proposed an oncoming thunderstorm. Had Elliott been less absorbed in his own reflections, he might have noticed the vicious clouds gathering above him. He might have additionally noticed that by now he had walked three times around the perimeter of Lafayette Square. Instead he continued, “sealing or ceiling? No, the second only provokes feelings...”

A crack of thunder startled Elliott from his reverie. His confusion stifled him for a moment long enough for the ensuing shower to dampen his book and form water beads on the shoulders of his flannel suit. He soon recovered his senses. Tucking the book under his coat, he ran across the square into the nearest café.

He had never stepped into this particular café, but nothing seemed unusual about it. It had a pleasant atmosphere, a pleasant name—Café Mira. It was not unusual that Elliott had never noticed it before. He was at all times absorbed in his own thoughts. The truth was that Elliott tinkered. One day he had invented an extraordinary patent. No one really understood what it was and it was never sold. However, one of his less notable patents had sold very well on the market and made him relatively wealthy. With his increased financial comfort, however, came increased eccentricity. While it could be argued that he had never had any normal social interactions, the result of his financial position eliminated any existence of it, save for minor business transactions.

Upon entering the café, Elliott hurriedly threw his book on a table. He hung his grey coat on the antique rack near the entrance. The damp coat sagged alone on the rack. None of the other customers would have thought to carry jackets on account of the sultry summer weather. Now taking his seat at a table near the door, his thin figure framed by the limp grey rag behind him, Elliott Saunt took up a menu. Since it was 9:13 in the morning, the café was only serving breakfast, so he ordered himself a coffee and croissant.

Turning from the waitress, he glanced for a moment out the window at the square. It was filled only with a plethora of miniscule water droplets. He solemnly turned back to the restaurant and was startled to find a lanky elderly man standing abnormally close to his table.

"Would you mind if I joined you for a moment?" said the stranger, giving a slight smile.

Elliott was astonished. Even though most people were friendly in Savannah, no one ever had approached him. He had always attributed his isolation, which one must note he much preferred, to his usual downcast and blank expression. Such a look discouraged company. He had never encountered such a bold assumption as this man had made by inviting himself to join him. Elliott started to stammer out a sort of poorly contrived excuse, but before he could gain any coherence, the man sat down across the table. For a moment, neither of them said a word.

To Elliott Saunt, who rarely beheld himself in the mirror, nothing about the stranger seemed uncommon. However, a passerby might have commented on the unique likeness that the two men shared. This was especially apparent in the shape of the eyes, and although the stranger's were ornamented more excessively by wrinkles, they shared the same dull color as Elliott's. The stranger's lower lip, though slightly limp on one side, mimicked in its relation to the upper, the same pursing fashion that Elliott portrayed. In fact, one would most likely assume the two men were relations separated by about thirty-five years. Elliott Saunt, however, would have sworn he had never seen the stranger before this serendipitous meeting.

The stranger, now a little more timid after his bold approach, finally broke the silence: "It's an interesting choice...an interesting reading selection indeed," he said, looking at Elliott's copy of *The Idiot*. Elliott was surprised at the subject, for he had forgotten all about the book that he had laid on the table when he had hurried in from the storm.

"Do you read much?" continued the stranger. "Do you have many friends?"

"No," replied Elliott rather meekly.

"Oh, that's a pity, I would have thought you might read more often."

"No, that's not what I meant. I read quite a lot. I meant I have no need for friends, I mean no time for friends...I mean...I'm quite content with myself."

"Oh, interesting. Well, I suppose every man must have a friend in himself. Just look at Mr. Goliadkin," the old man said as he patted the book.

"That's a different book," replied Elliott dryly.

"Oh, so it is," said the stranger as he lifted a tattered pair of spectacles to his eyes, "I can barely see anything without my glasses."

Although Elliott had a similar disposition as the old man, he did not empathize, but instead grew more annoyed with the stranger's boldness. The stranger now opened the book and began reading somewhere in the middle. Elliott glanced out the window again only to find the shower had hardly subsided.

"Excuse me. When we were talking earlier, I meant to say that I find in other people...a well, a sort of irritation. Something like an itch, or rather irritation...hmm, that doesn't quite explain it," he muttered, "something that plagues me until I am left alone again."

The old man, who had not lifted his eyes from the pages, silently continued reading. Elliott felt an extreme urge to rip the book from his withered hands. The mildness of his own manner, however, prohibited his emotion. He was about to turn his attention outside again, when the old man slammed his hand on the book.

"Yes, I have read this one indeed. Sir, you must really be the idiot."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Prince Myshkin. Isolated in your insanity, you have never experienced love, hate, passion, intellectualism." He paused. "But you really should read *The Double*. I think the character of Goliadkin applies to us all."

"What are you talking about? I've read it and it's just irrelevant as Gogol's nose. Nabakov even indirectly disposes of it in *Despair*. Despite the narrator's illusion of apparent familiarity between him and his 'twin,' reality shows otherwise..."

Elliott paused, for the old man had begun laughing uncontrollably as Elliott spoke.

"The nose and Goliadkin. I've never compared the two."

"I wasn't speaking literally," Elliott seethed. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

Still unable to control a crack of a smile, the old man replied, "Oh no, I'm seventy-two, hmm, or seventy-five? I can't remember. Anyway, I have an eternity of free time."

He looked at Elliott for an elongated moment of silence. Then he rose and took the hand of a child who had appeared from somewhere behind the bar. "Pleasant to meet you sir."

The old man left the café as unobtrusively as he had entered. Elliott sat for a moment, surprised by the abrupt conversation. He then paid his bill.

He took his coat and walked out of the café. The clearing of the storm left steam emanating from the wet sidewalks warmed by sunbeams. As Elliott looked about he felt a hand touch his own.

"Pardon me sir," said a child beside him, "Might I join you in your walk home?"

Elliott jumped. It was the same boy that had left with the old man. He had large glasses and sandy blond hair. "No, I don't believe...I mean...no, I'm afraid not."

Not belaboring the point, the boy let go of Elliott's hand, a motion that sent the confused man into a rapid retreat. Elliott briskly walked home without meeting a soul. He spent the rest of the day tinkering in his attic.

The next morning Elliott left his house as usual, but was shocked to find a middle-aged man at the foot of the step.

"Sir, may I bother you for a moment of your time?"

"No...I'm in quite a hurry," Elliott replied.

Elliott briskly walked in the direction of the nearest bank. "It will be an excellent alibi...the bank...and why shouldn't I be in a hurry to the bank?" he muttered to himself.

To his surprise, however, the man came up beside him at a rapid pace, muttering indistinctly. Elliott, although panicked, picked up his pace. But the man passed him still more quickly and disappeared around the next block. While he stopped to catch his breath, Elliott realized there was something inherently familiar in the man. His stride, his build, his voice, his muttering all reminded Elliott of himself.

"What is this absurdity?" Elliott whispered.

He turned down another street, anxiously looking behind him to see if the man followed. The street was empty.

"How could it be? This is impossible but all these strange happenings...impossible..."

Elliott soon passed into Lafayette Square. There was a tattered homeless man making roses out of sweet grass leaves.

"Hello Elliott!" three voices said in unison. Across from the homeless man sat the old man, the child, and the middle-aged man who had followed him. While they looked friendly enough, to Elliott a man with a mask and serrated knife would have been a more welcome sight. He turned from the bench and hurried home. He locked himself in his attic.

An hour passed when Elliott happened to walk by the window. To his amazement, the three dreaded personages were standing at the steps. They waved. Another person joined them. He looked to be a teenaged boy with sandy blond hair.

In his attic, Elliott had a box of old photos. He now extracted it from a dusty pile of unused items. Locating a photo of himself as a young boy, he compared it to the child with the big glasses. There was no mistaking the resemblance. The same was true for the teenager. The middle-aged man could be identified to have almost exactly the same visage as his own when he looked in the mirror. Although Elliott had no proof, he deduced that the older man was another instance of himself. Not wanting to confront them, Elliott stayed locked inside the rest of day.

In the morning, he found the number had grown to six, with the addition of another boy between the ages of the teenager and young boy as well as a man in his sixties. Elliott descended.

“Good morning, Elliott,” said the group.

Elliott paused at his doorstep.

“What right do you have to stand outside my door?”

There was no answer. Elliott pointed at the middle-aged man. “What’s your name?”

“Elliott Saunt,” they all replied.

“How old are you? Just you,” he said pointing again at the same man.

“Forty-two, and you?”

“Forty-s...wait...I don’t have to answer to you. Would you mind leaving me alone?”

“We are leaving you alone.”

Irritated, Elliott walked away. The other Elliotts followed him. They continued to follow him the rest of the day. By the time he reached home again, he had counted ten Elliotts.

This was the beginning of a new epoch in Elliott’s life. Each day he left to ramble around town and found himself surrounded by the ten Elliotts. He asked them to leave several times but to no avail. They usually did not impose on his day. If he went to a café, they quietly waited outside until he finished. Despite their polite unobtrusiveness, their very presence irritated Elliott beyond measure. They muttered all day long to themselves and each other, not only disturbing his private reflections, but his public anonymity. Elliott was utterly frustrated by his inability to disperse the Elliotts.

One day, Elliott Saunt took the ten Elliotts out to lunch. They went to an elegant restaurant on the river and sat around a circular table. Elliott stood up to speak.

“Gentlemen, I have brought you together on this occasion to have a word with you. You must have pity on me. I have no need for ten of you, and I therefore ask you to take leave.”

Elliott was about to continue when he realized all ten of the Elliotts were muttering to one another instead of listening to his plea.

“Gentlemen, please. Listen to me. You must!”

“Sit down, sir,” said the teenage Elliott. “The food is about to come.”

Taking into account that any reason he applied was useless, Elliott ate his meal in silence. The Elliotts finished and took their leave. They muttered their thanks and other polite trivialities, hoping to do it again soon.

Each day that followed, Elliott counted another Elliott. One day he lost count. The ten Elliotts had increased to hundreds of Elliotts, and the hundreds to thousands. They represented each milla-instance of his life.

“Perhaps if I could find the old man who I first met in Café Mira, he could resolve things.”

However, while he had seen the old Elliott several times at the start of the absurdity, now it was like searching for a needle in a haystack. There were so many Elliotts that he could hardly hope to find the right one. He wandered through town, anxiously looking for the seventy-something Elliott.

During his search, he nearly collided with an army of Elliotts marching down River Street. The younger Elliotts were stopping for praline samples and the older ones falling behind in the group. Even as these left the group, other Elliotts ran up to replace the open spaces. They were approaching Elliott at a rapid pace, all muttering and smiling. Elliott ran up the hill to a park shaded by oak trees, but the marching Elliotts followed. He ran without knowing his direction. Soon Elliott found himself in Lafayette Square. As if on cue, a shattering crack of thunder sounded and rain gushed from mocking clouds. Elliott huddled onto a bench and watched the approaching march of the Elliott Saunts. The sound of the rain could not drown out the sound of the Elliotts’ muttering voices. They surrounded the bench on which he had retreated. Together with the rain, they drowned his senses with their ceaseless muttering. His head fell limp onto his chest.

Elliott woke up. He was in a hospital bed. As he glanced down at his hand he was surprised to find it withered and covered with bulging veins.

"Dr. Saunt! Paging Dr. Saunt! The patient is awake," said a voice from outside the door. A middle-aged version of Elliott came through the door.

"I was never a doctor," he protested.

"It was a necessity for me fill the role."

"This is preposterous. What happened to me?"

"You've been sleeping, Elliott."

"Dr. Saunt," said the outside voice, "come quickly. A forty-six year old man has been rushed here after passing out in a park downtown. It may have been a stroke, we aren't sure."

The doctor, as Elliott realized he must be acknowledged, left the room. Elliott rolled on his side.

"Why couldn't this just be a dream," he muttered. He noticed the patient in the room with him was an older Elliott on his deathbed. "Perhaps I can watch myself die now or somehow trade places in this hell."

As Elliott finished his thought, his attention turned to the open bathroom door in the room. He focused his eyes on the mirror, which gave back a small reflection of himself. His hair was completely gone and his face looked forlorn and sagging. He got up and approached the mirror. The face that stared back at him was the very same that had talked to him that day in the café.

"What have they done to me? They've taken my life away."

"You've taken your life away from yourself," said a voice behind him. The so-called doctor had entered the room again. "You weren't a positive unit to yourself. You had to be removed so that unity could subsist. You've brought yourself to the edge of your own existence."

"But I'm the real Elliott Saunt!" screamed Elliott.

"How are you any more real than any of us?" replied the doctor.

A younger Elliott in scrubs appeared behind in the doorway.

"What will you do to me?" Elliott stammered.

"What would you do to yourself?"

"Let me finish my days in the solitude and isolation of my own home. I won't bother any of you. You can carry on with your existence. I even accept you as an extension of myself."

"So be it," confirmed the doctor. He muttered something to the nurse.

Elliott woke up. He was in his reading chair with a copy of *The Idiot* on his lap. There was silence around him. It was the first silence he had heard without muttering. Even he himself had ceased muttering. The light

peeked through the window as the sun rose. Elliott's day planner was sitting on his desk as usual. He took it with his withered hand and opened it to the date. Written in the slot, he read:

Don't forget: Meet yourself in the morning at Café Mira

Excerpt from the novel
Sitting on the Knees of Gods

There were no clouds in the sky. The sun hung over Clarence, watching him move in between the rows of vegetables. He stood up and felt the bones in his back pop. He walked down the row to the edge of the field where he had a bucket of water perched on a stool underneath the sycamore tree. He picked up the ladle and sipped lukewarm water out of the dipper. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked over his shoulder. Abe was still working, pulling sweet potatoes and putting them in a burlap sack that hung over his shoulder. Clarence knew better than to ask Abe if he wanted some water. His brother worked from sun up to sun down. Clarence untied the torn piece of shirt he had had wrapped around his forehead. He poured water from the ladle over it. He retied it and felt the coolness of the wet fabric caress his face. He began to walk back towards his bag when he heard the bell coming from the house. Abe straightened and began to make his way towards the house. Clarence met him at the edge of the field.

“Ain’t this weather’s something?”

Abe didn’t respond.

Clarence looked up at him. “I can’t wait till fall.” They walked up the porch stairs. As they entered the house, the smell of frying bacon hit them. Mama pointed at the table.

“Ya’ll sit down. I’ll bring it over.”

Clarence pulled out a chair and sat down. He rested his head on the table. Abe sat down next to him. Mama walked over with two tin plates. She stopped at the table. “Get your head up boy!”

Clarence sat up. Mama placed the food down in front of them. Bacon and leftover cornbread. Clarence sighed. “Why we always gotta have cornbread?”

Mama didn’t turn as she fixed herself a plate. “You lucky we got bread in the first place. Eat your food.”

Clarence frowned as he took a bite of his cornbread. Abe put a piece of bacon in between two thick slabs of cornbread. Mama came and sat down

in the third seat at the table. "You boys almost finished with the fifth row?"

Clarence nodded. "We should be done by sun down."

She glanced over at Abe. "How's your brother doing?"

Clarence took a sip of water. "Fine. Works fast. Don't stop for water."

Mama raised her eyebrows. "You make sure he's ok. You know he won't say anything if he ain't."

Clarence grinned. "Abe'll be fine. Take more than a hot sun and some sweet potatoes to bring him down."

Mama shook her head. "You just keep an eye on him, you hear?"

Clarence nodded. "Yes, Mama."

Abe pushed his chair back and walked out of the house. Clarence sighed as he stood up. "Guess lunch is over."

Mama stood and began stacking the plates. "Remember what I said. Keep an eye on your brother."

Clarence walked towards the door. "Alright, Mama." He walked onto the porch and looked toward the field. Abe had already started up again. Clarence picked up his rucksack from where he had left it half full of sweet potatoes and walked down the row to where he had left off.

The sun had moved west in the sky when Clarence saw some movement along the edge of the forest. A boy from a neighboring sharecropping family had come out of the trees. Clarence covered his eyes with his hands. Abe continued to pull potatoes. The boy motioned Clarence to walk over to him. Clarence looked at Abe, before dropping his rucksack and walking towards the edge of the woods that ran along the backside of their rows. The boy was a few years younger than Clarence and had a stick in his hand. Clarence walked up and placed his hands on his waist. "What you want, Curtis?"

Curtis grinned. "I found something."

Clarence shook his head. "Can't you see I'm working?"

Curtis continued to grin. "I found something." He pointed back towards the line of silver maple trees. "In the woods."

Clarence looked back at his brother, who was still bending and rising, bending and rising. He sighed. "All right. Where is it?"

Curtis started walking into the woods. "This way." Clarence followed him into the cool shade of the forest. The sun forced its way through the canopy of leaves in slanted beams of white that penetrated the afternoon shadows. They came to a clearing with some dogwood trees in the middle

of it. Curtis pointed at one of the trees with his stick. "I found it this morning!" As they approached the trees, Clarence saw what Curtis was talking about. Something black was hanging from a branch of one of the trees. It spun idly afternoon breeze. Clarence raised the back of his hand to his nose. It smelled of charred meat.

"What is it?"

Curtis poked the charred mass with his stick. "I don't know."

They watched it as it spun. It hung from a blackened chain that looked like it had been hastily thrown over the arm of the tree. Flies were buzzing in and out of its crevasses. Clarence brushed them away from his face with his hand as he inspected the mass. He looked up at the blackened form and was suddenly confronted by bulging eyes, and a jaw that hung slack in the wind.

Strong arms grabbed him by the waist and pulled him back from the swinging body. He struggled and flailed his limbs in an effort to free himself from the vice-like grip. He saw Curtis running towards the other side of the field. The arms carried him by his waist back into the forest. Clarence continued to struggle, but the grip maintained its hold. They exited the forest at the edge of the Laurent property and the arms dropped him in the grass. Clarence lay motionless, watching the gnats as they fluttered from one blade of grass to another. Abe emerged from the corner of his vision and walked back into the field. He picked up his sack and continued where he left off.

Awe Strikes: An Interview with Linh Dinh

On 3 November 2009, Linh Dinh visited Chapman University as a part of the Tabula Poetica Poetry Reading Series. He is the author of five books of poems, *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy* (2009), *Jam Alerts* (2007), *Borderless Bodies* (2006), *American Tatts* (2005) and *All Around What Empties Out* (2003); two collections of stories, *Blood and Soap* (2004) and *Fake House* (2000); and the novel *Love Like Hate* (2009). His work is widely anthologized and translated, and he has edited two collections of work by Vietnamese writers.

Linh Dinh also maintains a blog, *State of the Union*, where he is developing a photography project. The photographs—mostly street scenes and portraits—are posted without captions. During his visit, he showed a selection of portraits of the residents of one of Camden’s tent cities and discussed the current economic crisis.

In the wake of his visit, graduate students Scott Bloemker and Judd Hess conducted the following interview via e-mail.

Bloemker and Hess: You seem to have multiple roles as an artist—short story writer, poet, photographer, cultural critic. Can you describe what draws you to both photography and poetry? What are the differences, as you write, between poetry and prose?

Linh Dinh: There are many overlaps between the two arts: photography and poetry. In each, I try to create an emblematic moment, to make each photo or poem represent life as a whole. (The fact that I fail nearly always is inconsequential.) In a successful, triumphant work of art, there should be beauty and tension, just as in real life, a bit of raw, erotic tickling coupled with an endless perspective of post-coital bewilderment, memory loss and nostalgia, maybe a plastic skull in a corner. As I practice it, photography forces me to become more civic and social. Walking miles to take photos, I get to experience actual environments with my body. I sweat, freeze, bump into people. Photography is also bad for my liver, since I sometimes drink with my subjects.

Poets enjamb, prose writers don’t, but syntax is absolutely crucial whether I’m writing stories or poems. One cannot become even a half-

assed writer without knowing how to construct a sentence many different ways. Clauses are my best friends.

B and H: How do you define or think of yourself as a poet? Do you see yourself as an urban poet, or perhaps a Vietnamese-American poet? Are there labels others have given you as a poet that you see as particularly fitting or inapt?

LD: I was born into a city of a million, Saigon, and have spent most of my adult life in Philadelphia, which has 1-1/2 million people. I have also lived in smaller cities, the suburbs, and even Certaldo, an Italian town of 16,000. But, yes, I am primarily an urban specimen.

Saigon and Philly are both very dense and walkable. As soon as I hit the sidewalk, I become aware of many other bodies, most of them unknown. I also have a heightened awareness of my own body as I dodge, sidestep, and yield. I look surreptitiously, then slot myself deftly into a fleeting gap. At 46, I have owned only two cars, for two years altogether.

As has been pointed out many times, the city is a mess of juxtapositions. One is also swarmed by language, visual and audio. Though much of it is nonsense, of course, pay attention and you will be rewarded. Having spent more than 20 years in Philly, however, I don't pretend to be constantly enthralled. There are too many visual cues here that can trigger a mortifying memory.

B and H: You mentioned in passing the poetry camps. How exactly do you think of those camps? What do you find are drawbacks of such labels or categories? Are there some ways in which they are useful to poets or to readers?

LD: One should always approach an unfamiliar poet or poem with an open mind, irrespective of attached labels. That said, these can be useful as rough demarcations of the poetic terrain. How do you want your work to be perceived? Who are you trying to impress and which poetic lineage do you want to belong to? When I started out, it was important that those with an experimental bent took notice of what I was trying to do. I gravitated towards certain journals such as *Sulfur* and *New American Writing*, while ignoring others. Still do. A common aesthetics defines each camp, but this solidarity often hinders real criticism. One rarely sees one

“postavant” poet criticizes another, for example. By penning a positive review or outright flattery, one gains a new ally or strengthens a friendship. This political capital may yield a reciprocal review, blurb, job, or a grant down the line. Negative comments, however, will ensure that one has made a lifelong enemy. So the unsuspecting reader reads one fluff piece after another, not knowing that they are mostly about politics, and have little to do with literature. Sniping between camps are more common, though still rare.

B and H: You spoke of being a “whore” in the piece you did for *The New York Times*.

LD: I felt whorish because I could only express half of what I wanted to say. For this, I only have myself to blame. For the last five years, I’ve been obsessed about the economy. I knew it would collapse. In 2005, I taught, for the first time, a poetry writing workshop called “State of the Union.” Students were asked to examine the alarming state of our country, at variance with the Muzak tinkling from Washington and mainstream media. I discussed peak oil, mortgage frauds, and the criminal complicity of our government. None of these topics made it into my *New York Times* article, however, because all they wanted was a personal account of someone making do with less, not my railing against Wall Street, Washington, or, god forbid, the mainstream media. The series itself is called “Happy Days.” Its main thrust is complacency.

B and H: What is your perspective on being a poet outside of academia? You mentioned your “State of the Union” course, you talked about your teacher Stephen Berg, and, of course, you visit campuses for some of your readings. So how are you connected with academia?

LD: I never finished college and have worked as a filing clerk, house cleaner, window washer, art installer, and house painter. At 40, I got my first teaching job when Bard hired me for a few weeks. Ann Lauterbach has had me back several times and I’ve also taught briefly at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Montana, and Naropa University. My academic career has been sporadic, to say the least.

The academy is fine and necessary, but it’s not good when nearly all of our poets are walled inside it. The academy is a utopia because that’s where our most untainted, optimistic, and beautiful gather—and I’m not

only talking about the students, of course. Poets shouldn't loiter in paradise. Paying through his nose, a young person drops into utopia, does a few hits of acid, then leaves. But you can't get rid of a tenured rhymester with a crowbar, even if he hasn't written anything in decades, if ever.

B and H: Are there any canonical or contemporary artists – poets, perhaps also visual artists – you feel employ a style or purpose similar to yours? How has your reading and your background in visual arts shaped your writing?

LD: In a 2004 interview, I talked about Louis Ferdinand Céline, how I admired his energy, his dark sense of humor and the grittiness of his observations. Céline was someone who came into contact with a lot of people. That physical willingness to engage people is very attractive to me.

I admire that Ginsberg managed to become a public figure, someone who could command an international stage to address the biggest issues. Among contemporary American poets, we don't have anyone like that. The allure of bohemia, common to the Beats and Abstract Expressionists of that era, is also gone. While in college in the 80s, I could still be inspired by Franz Kline saying, "A Bohemian could survive in a place where an animal would die" (I'm quoting from memory, so it's probably slightly off). Today, most poets are careerists who dream of never having to leave the academy. Their motto, *Tweed jacket from cradle to grave!*

Compared to poetry, the art world puts a higher premium on originality. To be considered relevant at all, one must be distinctive. One must have a vision. While in college, I was very inspired by wild and playful contemporary artists such as Martin Kippenberger, David Salle, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco Clemente. (At this point, I also discovered writers such as Rimbaud, Artaud, Rabelais, Kafka and Céline.) The boldness of the art scene in the 80s taught me much.

In 1994, I curated a show at Moore College called "Toys and Incense," which focused on creativity as play. Many of my ideas about the creative process, I arrived at while trying to paint.

B and H: You have a blog, and you've published poetry online. But during your visit, you spoke of "reevaluating your relationship with the internet." Could you explain how the internet has affected your work –

perhaps your writing process as well as the dissemination of your work—and what you mean by reevaluation?

LD: The internet is certainly very useful, but it also encourages bad reading, writing, and living habits. Photography has helped to lure me away from this worldwide dumpster. But, paradoxically, it's also where I post all of my fine photos. Though media are comfortable blinders for us postmodern zombies, we must nevertheless strive to live life more in the flesh.

Do you know where you are? Turn off the television and radio, crush that iPod. Do you need to hear that ditty for the millionth time? Our minds are so cluttered with repetitive trivia.

B and H: How have you become a cultural critic? Do you see your poetry as cultural criticism?

LD: I've always been interested in social issues. How can a writer not be? As an immigrant, I've also had many delightful or humiliating opportunities to reexamine all societal norms, from how to lean on a wall, masticate, to the elaborate shticks of a poetry reading, not that I employ any of them. I'm perfectly natural.

Besides the U.S., I've also lived in Italy, England and Vietnam as an adult, so I've had a few chances to compare differences between cultures. What interests me most is the issue of power. Who has it? How is it gained? How is it deployed? Power is not just a bomb or a left hook, but the inflection of a single word. Who dares to unleash such a weapon?

B and H: While you were at Chapman University, you spoke of the poet as the "aristocrat of the servant class"? Do you see that as your most essential role, both in your poetry and your photography? How do you define the "servant class" you mentioned? How do you balance the line you mentioned between witness and exploitation?

LD: I've written poems about this issue of the aristocrat of the servant class. One was published in a recent issue of *Harper's* and included in my new book, *Some Kind Of Cheese Orgy*:

Clean, Clean, Clean

Belonging to the lower class, you're expected
To cater to the upper class' lower bodily functions,
Not to engage their minds but to wipe their asses,
Kiss their cunts on demand, suck cocks for tips,
Unless, of course, you're an artist, in which case,
You're an aristocrat of the servant class, to quote
That grand maestro among slaves, Jasper Johns.

I used to clean apartments and houses.
Showing up for a new job, I was greeted
By the mistress, "I have the most respect
For new immigrants. You work so hard!"
Down low, you'll get a disproportionate
Low down on all things funky and nasty,
Nothing unusual, really, just shit and stuff.

I cleaned toilets and fridges, folded panties,
Got on all fours, dipped into the suspicious.
A young woman confided, "I moved to Philly
Because California women were so beautiful."
She was usually home when I came. The spine
Of her soft porn book turned to the wall. They all
Had some smut in the house. This was before
The internet made these sad and surreptitious
Purchases unnecessary. I found a teen-aged
Madonna in a closet, so I knelt and sighed.

A fat one lived alone, but once she said, "Sorry,
The house is so messy today. I had company
Last night," and her face brightened angelically.

In a talk I gave at Texas State, I showed a few photos by Peter van Agtmael. Embedded with American troops in Iraq, he accompanied them as they barged into people's homes. He photographed terrified civilians, including a boy with a bloodied face. Granted, van Agtmael did document some abuses by "our boys," and his very presence likely prevented them from doing worse, but to an Iraqi family, I'm sure he was

just another foreign invader. Imagine Vietnamese troops kicking down your door, turning your house inside out, with me snapping your whimpering mom as she cowers beneath the flat screen TV. I also showed Kevin Carter's photo of a vulture lurking near a starving Sudanese toddler. That's certainly emblematic, since every photographer, and, by extension, every viewer, is a vulture. Having said all that, I try my best not to offend anyone when I take candid pictures on the streets. One must be sneaky, and I've gotten better at it.

B and H: What are the ranges of responses you have received from your project—viewers, or perhaps those photographed? Have you ever feared for your personal safety?

LD: A few praises, but mostly indifference. But I don't fret since I will make sure my enemies pay for this gravest of insults against my dignity. My wife gets nervous because I often stray into the shittiest neighborhoods.

As for photographing people without permission, I have written, "Most people don't mind being photographed, many do love it, but they don't want to relinquish control over their self-presentation. That's all we're about, really. Posing and vogueing. I must be seen in the proper light, from the right angle, with every hair and comma in place. Denied this right, I might just break your bleep bleep camera."

B and H: What advice or idea would you offer writers like ourselves, perhaps yet to publish much or working toward academic degrees?

LD: Try to remember that you're in this because you really love literature. You are trying to write because you are in awe of what language and the mind, even yours, are capable of.

Linh Dinh's blog: < linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com >

CONTRIBUTORS & EDITORS

Scott Bloemker is an MA in English student.

< bloem102@mail.chapman.edu >.

Daniel Bulone is a BFA in Creative Writing student.

< bulon100@mail.chapman.edu >

Justin Campbell is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student.

< campb154@mail.chapman.edu >.

Alex Carpenter is an MFA in Creative Writing student.

< alexanderlcarpenter@gmail.com >.

Deborah Aguilar Escalante is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student. < escal106@mail.chapman.edu >.

James Florance III is a BA in English student.

< flora100@mail.chapman.edu >.

Victoria Fragoso is a BFA in Creative Writing student, with a minor in Sociology. < 09vifragoso@gmail.com >.

Natasha Ganes is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student.

< ganes100@chapman.edu >.

Pace Gardner is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student.

< pacegardner12345@hotmail.com >

Daniel Hartigan is a BA in English student.

< harti101@mail.chapman.edu >.

Judd Hess is an MFA in Creative Writing student.

< hess112@mail.chapman.edu >.

Kristen Lim is a BFA in Creative Writing student.

< kristen6985@yahoo.com >.

Andrew Mauzey is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student. < mauze100@mail.chapman.edu >.

Caitlin Mohney is a BFA in Creative Writing student.
< mohney.1988@gmail.com >.

Tiffany Monroe is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student.
< monro101@mail.chapman.edu >.

Niloo E Sarabi is an MFA in Creative Writing student.

Kevin Sullivan is a BFA in Creative Writing student.
< kgsullivan@gmail.com >.

Regina Vaynshteyn is a BFA in Creative Writing student.
< vayns100@mail.chapman.edu >.

Danielle M. Walters is an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English student.
< medin102@mail.chapman.edu >.

Erin Whittinghill is an MFA in Creative Writing student.
< whitt108@mail.chapman.edu >.

History

Elephant Tree is the annual student magazine of the English department. *Elephant Tree* began its run in 2006, replacing *Calliope*, which had been the department's magazine for more than twenty years. The change in name reflected other changes. Whereas *Calliope* had been the final project in a magazine-production course—English students submitted their poetry and fiction, and English faculty chose the top three for each genre—for *Elephant Tree* all Chapman students are invited to submit their work, not just those in English, and the editors are students (graduate and undergraduate) who volunteer their time and talent. Students have creative control, and now, on average, each issue publishes 12-15 poems and 8-10 stories. The new name was chosen by the editors of the 2006 issue. After playing with various words and word combinations, they arrived at *Elephant Tree*—and then, serendipitously, discovered that not only does such a tree exist, it is native to this Southwestern, Baja Californian area. The tree is resilient yet uncommon. The image on the magazine's cover depicts some of its branches.

Method

Currently, the deadline for submission is in early December, as are applications to be an editor. In consultation with other English faculty, the magazine's faculty advisor then constitutes the editorial board for the year's issue. Please note that since the editors are writers themselves, and because they were chosen for this position, they are still entitled to submit work for the board to review. You may therefore notice that an editor is sometimes also a contributor. Submissions are read in blind form, no author names attached, in January and February. Once the contents for the issue have been finalized, the editors then work with Veston Rowe in Chapman's Publications Office to prepare the issue for publication. Around 200 copies are printed and, in April, freely distributed. After print publication, the contents are also made available online through the English department website.