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Volume 6
Spring 2011

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Chapman University



Volume 6
Spring 2011

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We would like to thank the Department of English, as well as the office of Strategic Marketing and Communications for their help.

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Cover drawing by Lara Odell.

Greetings readers, and welcome to the sixth volume of *Elephant Tree*.

Before you devour the pages of this eclectic compilation of work done by Chapman students, we would like to thank you, the reader, for your interest in one of the most important crafts we have as an American nation. This little book in your hands represents a passion for creative writing, an art form that we continue to make immortal by publishing these kinds of literary treats. With ink and paper, anything is possible.

Of course, we could not have created this journal without the help of many individuals. We would like to thank all of the students who submitted work to this year's issue of *Elephant Tree*. Without you, this collection of stories and poems would not exist. Many thanks as well to the Office of Publications & Creative Services. Lastly, we must thank our faculty advisor, Professor Logan Esdale, for the extraordinary wisdom and insight he has brought to Chapman University.

Our goal in this project was to provide a representation of the many talented and creative individuals here at Chapman. This issue of *Elephant Tree* features poems and stories on a wide range of topics, including the adventures of a murderess consumed by envy and zealous piousness, re-castings of familiar fairy tales, a story about feeding a clan of hungry birds, and many more.

We hope you enjoy this year's edition of *Elephant Tree* as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. Happy reading!

- *Elephant Tree* editorial staff

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An excerpt from *Creative Suicide*

Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.

– Georges Bataille

While everyone was waiting for the teacher to arrive to the workshop, which he was already five minutes late for, I settled onto my desk next to the window that gave out to the campus lawn, settling onto it gradually, delicately, in the attempt to regain some of the comfort which until then had been denied to me thanks to fifty milligrams of Adderall which hadn't yet worn off, and a whole night spent hunched over a dozen pages of compulsive writing; I settled onto my desk and tried to relax, but the murmuring noise of the little zealous crowd of aspiring writers, a crowd that surrounded and included me, seemed to ring against my eardrums in a peculiarly excruciating way, I thought as I sat at the desk, a dreadfully salt-less soup of voices with the stifling odor of onions and opinions, gossip and pepper, I thought, to my mind nothing but a hopeless exhaustion of *in the room the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo*, tacitly vibrant with a theme of operetta and the unfathomable ridicule of an Ionesco libretto, I thought to myself as I sat at the desk, stretching my legs under the desk, I should rather say failing to stretch my legs under the desk and by so doing recover comfort, and I felt my soul thinner than fabric under iron while my Aderralled-out mind burned neurons into thinking thought, so to speak, so I was rather stuck in there, *existentially stuck*, in a matter of speech, unable to move, to swim amidst these pungently acrid voices and vocalizations of boredom and antebellum diplomacy, my whole being dancing the statics of time at the tempo of minutes and eons lining up against the tick of One, a rhythmical articulation of my suspended soul past the tick of One, my soul in eons and eons in my soul past the tick of One when the tick of One represents the incipit of this fevered account of the mind, this mental manuscript manipulated multiplied mutilated and mystifying itself and me as I run through its dissonant chords. So I at once turned away from it all and began to look out at the front lawn, trying to catch some air from the open window, though I soon couldn't help but set my gaze on the perfectly shaven, green face of the lawn, I couldn't help but consider and then observe and then study with sharp focus and undivided attention the immaculate surface of the green lawn, so polished a lawn, so exact and smooth a lawn that in the matter of

mere moments I found myself on the verge of going mad over it, thoroughly mad, I thought, sitting at the desk, on the verge of tasting the skin of insanity with the tip of my tongue over a green and probably wet piece of land, a terrifyingly tidy piece of land, something my mind deeply dreaded, I thought, so I at once turned back to my overwhelming peers and their appalling chatter and noticed that everyone in the room seemed to have resumed to a sensibly quieter tone of voice. In the meantime, the teacher still hadn't arrived and the atmosphere was getting heavier with impatience. Agog were the eons that were my minutes, and agog the waiting the room had demanded of us, a susurrant of reflexivity, an invite to insight, what insight, waiting whispering murmuring chattering waiting, it's about time, isn't it, time to start class, no, I could use a few more moments of peace, what peace, peace beyond tedium, what tedium, relax, He must be on his way, He'll be here soon, O will He, yes, soon. These writers' workshops, I should rather say these university classes, tend to feature a cyclical repeating of the same scenes: the students would settle onto their desks, loudly empty their bags and display all sorts of objects, those they need as well as those they do not need at all, all sorts of paraphernalia, indispensable or not indispensable, are thrown over their desks, I thought as I sat at my desk, tons of useless notepads and notebooks, Moleskine journals, colorfully decorated pens and pencils, piles of books for other classes but never for the class at present, and, finally, those most beloved laptops which are the most practical and (poorly) disguised remedies against academic boredom, all these objects exhibited as a testament to the alleged good will of the students, I thought, sitting at the desk. But what always sends me off wondering madly about an acceptable explanation is the question of what use can somebody, anybody, make of a laptop in a writing class, a so-called *creative class*, where no writing is actually done during class time and no notes need to be taken, where not information but ideas are dealt with, concepts and so on, *conceptual and intellectual stuff*, as they say, I thought, no free refills of academic nonsense widely distributed by what I call "the fast school", or "the fast fool", our modern university. And so I wondered, like all the previous times, about the usefulness of these powerful technological remedies against boredom, about the *actual usefulness* of these machines, which had momentarily distracted this writing populace from the fact that our teacher was by then almost ten minutes late. Of course, it has to be admitted that these machines had succeeded, at least momentarily, in placating the storming miscellanea of chats and chuckles that had so violently numbed me and forced me into a corner, with little choice but to contemplate obsessively the barely visible

traces of the lawnmower on the grass, and to almost go mad over it, I thought, sitting at my desk and intently observing my colleagues. Certainly, not all of them exhibited the features just described, but those who didn't, usually exhibited the totally opposite features, that is, no books, no laptops, not even a pen and a paper, their desks stripped down of everything normally belonging to a desk, their vagabond minds zoning out in some otherworldly, exoerotic quadrants, where their desolate boredom could be consoled by the thought that if the teacher didn't show up after twenty minutes they'd be all free to leave. As I then took one more look around the room, trying to distract myself from my own thoughts, I was momentarily struck by a detail of the room which had previously failed to capture my attention: comfortably resting on the blackboard was the image of the hanged man game, drawn in chalk, the remains of a previous class, I thought, sitting at the desk. Yet, it was as though the drawing had suddenly come alive, as though it now resonated with the pride of a new significance, I thought. Underneath the somewhat goofy sketch, insinuating the shapes of a body and a rope tied to it, lay both the present and the missing letters of the cause of death, the semantic enigma, P - - - - S, a fairly short term, I thought, P - - - - S, a plausibly ordinary, sensibly innocuous word, I was brought to assume, yes, no, far from a dangerous, menacing or formidable word, as there are such words in our verbal and meta-verbal universe, P - - - - S, a simple word, I thought, but what word? Of all words, which? Given that all the parts composing the standard representation of the hanged man had been drawn, and confident that this was no random hallucination of mine, I had to assume that the poor bastard whose neck had been cracked had not suddenly hopped out of the wicked pack of Madame Sosostriis, and that whoever had been playing the game before me must have lost quite badly, failing to guess a single letter of it, however that didn't matter to me so much as the fact that I had no adversary to confirm my answers, no word-maker to leave me doubtless as to his creation's secret. It was a long shot, and a futile one, I thought, absolutely pointless, yet our mind oftentimes wanders in the void surrounding the pursuit of meaning, the seductive void of purposelessness, a Kantian purposefulness without purpose, finality without end, I thought as I sat at my desk. Finality without end. Even so, the question puzzled and intrigued me enough to induce me, for the time being, to direct all the neurotic energies of my obsessive compulsive disorder toward answering it, a far better occupation for myself in the current situation, far more interesting than eavesdropping on my peers' affairs, for all I cared, I thought, sitting at the desk. Suddenly, I noticed my right thumb once again

twisting hieratically in and out of my palm, and soon my lips, too, were twitching, a pair of nervous tics recurring under the effect of at least ten milligrams of Adderall, all the worse under fifty as I had been for quite a while now. After all, I thought to myself, sitting at the desk, I had been pulling an all-nighter in order to complete the piece which I was about to deliver, a fairly slender but, in my hopes, satisfying piece of writing, no more than a dozen pages, as already noted, a piece which I had revised to the point of nausea, subjecting it to a ruthless process of correction/destruction, twenty copies of it now lay in my hands ready to be passed around to my soon-to-be annihilators, twenty copies of this composition of mine which I now suddenly dreaded, suddenly and for no apparent reason, in fact I became from a moment to the next actually utterly repelled by it, absolutely repelled, just like a father might feel repelled by his deformed newborn, or a Rabbi by an uncircumcised penis, I thought, sitting at the desk and flipping through the pages typed in Times New Roman 12 pt. font, double-spaced and justified, a dozen pages of dense sentencing covering the paper like concrete laid on a road in winter, the writing of a madman, I suddenly thought as I sat at my desk. I was intent on holding on to these pages until the teacher had arrived, but there was still no sign of him, and once again the widespread chatter seemed to have caught up with its original pace. It was now well over fifteen minutes into the class, and the “writers” had become restless and with a mind to the moment when they could finally put away writing and call it a day. It’s over, I thought, I’m safe, in five minutes I’ll be able to get up from this seat and run to the closest bin and finally put an end to these disgusting papers by trashing them all into the bin, not simply throwing them in but also full-hand pressing them down to the very intestines of the bin, *creative suicide*, I thought, sitting at my desk. Still sitting at my desk. Still holding on to the papers and watching the clock hanging up on the wall right above the girl whom I’ve nicknamed *Simone Du Boudoir*, for no reason other than perverse, complacent amusement, and for the fact that she spat her Wiki-feminism as though spitting black magic from a ducking stool through a mask of shame. I should add that I truly revere Simone de Beauvoir, but the girl’s spittle-talk, punctually and profusely dribbled at every class, tended to sound like the indigestible rants of a confused epigone, I thought as I sat at the desk. Not being able to stand the sight of her, not even for a brief moment, I chose to ignore the clock and thus Time itself, and turned back to the mysterious puzzle on the blackboard, whose sinister presence seemed to haunt no one other than me. Who could have drawn such a word, a teacher or a student? I asked myself as I sat at the

desk, what kind of sick, inane fellow could have been so miserably perverse not to reveal what the word was, not to write it up at the end of the game, for if nobody had solved it he should have written up those missing letters, so not to torture other hopeless lads like myself who were striving to get some peace of mind. Once again I looked down at my twenty copies, and once again my thumb hurt from twisting, as though acting on its own authority, putting up a silently polemic fight against my overly awake mental faculties. Around me, everyone had already started to delete the traces of their hoardings, packing their keepsakes back into their scruffy bags and shaking their legs with their eyes fixed upon the clock and its lancets moving away from the tick of One, now almost twenty eons away from it, I thought, and once past those twenty eons the tick of One might as well have never existed today. Ready to pack up my things along with the gang, I grabbed my dreaded papers, my hands crumbling the top few pages, a motion I could not help, and soon the touch of the paper slowly wrinkling under my fingertips gave me an unexpected pleasure. All of a sudden, just as the most impatient souls among us stood up eagerly, the door opened up to the surprise of everyone in the room, and the tiny round figure of a lady in her sixties appeared by the threshold. She cleared her voice with a grunt, followed by a gastric gulp, then announced that the teacher was on his way, that He had asked that we wait for his coming, and that we should begin the workshop by ourselves. *By ourselves?* Whether this was a joke or some sort of a test, I looked at my peers' puzzled faces and I was confident no one had a clue as to what to do next. Before she left, the round woman stopped to observe the blackboard and the hanged man drawn on it, she suddenly picked up the eraser and began to delete the image. Before I could even think of an insult to vomit to her face, I jumped from my seat in Antigonean fervor for my brother the hanged man, to save the depleted silhouette of his mystery buried in lines of chalk and missing letters and voids of generous vocabulary now trembling under the brash of uncaring senescence, I thought in an instant as I threw myself bodily and boldly in front of the lady and forced the eraser out of her hand, and as I did I dropped my papers inadvertently, all those twenty copies freely floated in the space for an instant which I barely saw but felt as though I had just tripped over the steps of an unending spiral stairway oddly connecting two identical levels through infinitude. The papers precipitated to the floor, but to the back of my eyes intent upon my action they rather seemed to graze it and be gently absorbed at the moment of impact, and as I turned my gaze they had spread in multiple awry patterns which broke the prosaic monotone of the gray tiles, a sonorous

ejaculation of celluloid and ink over a plain made of dust and cheap flooring. A moment of stillness and silence followed. Abruptly and apace, as if in a sudden and nonsensical choreography, everyone got up from their seats and each picked up a stapled copy of my piece, something I had wished not to happen, something I had been waiting twenty eons so that I could avoid, I thought as I observed the silent crowd lining up and bending forward to destroy the patterns so created. I turned back to the blackboard and to the lady who was staring at me, question marks in place of her pupils. She silently dismissed me and exited the room, at which moment my gaze fell again over the hanged man, whose torso had faded under the eraser, and over the unwritten word, P - - - - S, still teasing the neurons of my curiosity and demanding the attention that I was willing but unable to give to it. As I stood there, the eraser still in my hand, my peers had sat back and had begun to read, to balefully scan with pernicious eyes the raucous outpouring of my soul through which I had raped those very papers, ready to annihilate that outpouring and its source, annihilate its very fabric, for they were already destroying it with their sole act of reading it, I thought, standing by the blackboard. If only I could gather enough strength to get them all back and destroy them myself, I thought, as it should be, as it would be *natural*. Powerless, I put the eraser down and sat back at my desk. I thought about Borges, and how he would rather boast about what he had read than what he had written, and about the fact that no matter what we write today, we're fated to belong to the suburbia of writing, the Siberia of Art, covered in the vicious snow of those to be admired, the true greats, whose work has done nothing but destroy us, by the very act of wowing and enriching us they demolished us, wrecked us, ultimately annihilated us, I thought, with every word, every sentence, every verse they wrote or thought, they did nothing but come all over us, jizz over jaded faces, snow over pale shadows, whenever we open their books we are overwhelmed by the poisonous semen of their inheritance, spraying thick over eyes in awe, I thought as I sat at my desk. And so I contemplated leaving from one moment to the next, pointless to bother waiting around, I thought, and for whom? For them to finish up their criminal deed? For the teacher to finally arrive and placate this madidiotic atmosphere, dispensing academic wisdom like crumbs to pigeons? No, I could not take that, but then I could also not take cowardice disguised as defiance, I thought. I looked around me at the reading populace, and I noticed visages distorted in disgust, or shock. Instead of pens, they held sharpies of various colors. Simone Du Boudoir had her right hand covering her mouth, as a gesture of either

stupor or outrage (not that I cared, but I couldn't help noticing). Behind her sat another one of those hi-tech girls, holding her iPad like a baby, protecting it from my sentences as though she feared that they'd run out of the page and violate them both. All of a sudden, she stood up from her seat, grabbed my piece and walked straight to the corner of the classroom where a bin lay empty, and did what I had wished would be my privilege to do. Not a word spoken, she walked back to her desk, and I realized that everyone else was scribbling vehemently all over my pages, the combined sound of the various sharpies resonating across the room in a vulgar cacophony. By the time they were finished, the eons had added up to forty, and I began to fear the worst for the teacher had still not arrived and I was left defenseless. One after one, every student in the class walked up to my desk and dropped their copy of my story with their comments marked all over in different colors, each one coming from a different commentator. Wordlessly, they all returned to their seats, but their shaking legs, twisting thumbs and exhalations betrayed their anxiousness to leave once and for all, but nobody at this point knew whether or not they should still wait for the damn teacher to show himself, after nearly forty five minutes of such tedium. Then, as if that wasn't enough, the door opened and the round lady stepped in once again. She said she had forgotten to mention that the teacher had also requested that even in his absence the author of the day must read aloud to the class. He had stressed that this was an important part of the process. As she walked back outside, in quite a rush I should add, as if to escape from us, the whole class turned to look at me, their disconcerted faces fueling the engine of my frustration. Of my anger. I had no choice but to read.

To read the full story, please email the author. His contact information can be found in the back of the issue.

The Tale of the Morning Glory

Before I penetrated the dawn with the scent of my bloom, I lived as a woman like many of you. I was born and raised in a small Mayan village, not too far from the now-famous pyramids people prefer to visit, after man having discovered the ruins, cleared away many of the plants and trees and animals which embraced them. The time—well, it was long ago, long before the Spanish tongue made its way onto the coast where I called home.

Upon my birth, I was blessed with the name X'kebán by the village shaman, which means “*Lover*” in my native tongue. The shaman, in choosing my name, meant to grant me a life of sincere forgiveness, unconditional compassion, and infinite empathy. But what the shaman didn't realize was that there was a thing as blessing someone with too much love, much more love than a single person could hold in the heart, and this love could eventually become a burden.

As I grew older, my childhood was filled mostly with early morning strolls into the jungle and late evening saunters down the road through other men and women's homes. Even at a young age, I enjoyed listening to the songs composed by birds, marveled at the way the plants and trees grew from beneath the land, and how they spiraled upward toward the heavens. My afternoons were spent playing with other children of the village, often engaging in harmless mischief and pretending to go on courageous adventures. As the years passed, I became more and more affectionate to all who crossed my path. But I could not alleviate the tremendous feelings of devotion and fondness I felt from within my spirit. My mother began to reprimand me for being overly friendly and loving everyone in the village—however simple and pure it was—and scolded me for offering too many eager kisses on cheeks, too many tender caresses on shoulders, too many heartfelt hugs. But I could not resist the overwhelming amount of love I had for the spirit of people and creatures and things. The people in the village did not seem to mind my fervor very much, until I began the transition from girl to woman.

The time came when my body began to curve itself into a feminine shape at the age of fifteen. When I would walk down the road to spend mornings alone in the jungle, I would subsequently pass huts made of mud, stone and wooden poles. It was through these that I could hear the whispers of the

village women permeate my ears. I had no option but to listen to them exclaim how my ingenuous love would soon turn into premeditated passion. They would warn each other to be overly vigilant of their men when I was near, since they said the insides of my soul were soon to burn and explode into an appalling zeal. But notions are not necessarily true. Although I did have too much love in my heart, my only intentions with men were to provide them with a sympathetic smile or empathetic ear, a virtue I suppose most women in the village could not seem to grasp or understand. Instead, their apprehensive opinions of my overpowering love seemed to burn and scorch into their minds. And thus began their accumulated disdain for me. From then on, they began to disregard my existence, refused to look into the windows of my soul, and pretended to never hear my voice if I were to ask them for anything. Soon thereafter, both my parents passed away, although they left me a hut to call my own. And so I was left alone in the village to care for myself. In the mornings and evenings, I would submerge myself to the unconditional acceptance of the land that surrounded me and appreciated my nature.

As I would walk to and from my hut, however, the women would come outside their homes amidst the dirt and stone-covered roads to glare at me as I passed them by. As I walked into the village with my head bent down, I would begin to dread the walk toward them, as they would turn their noses up and mutter a thousand insults my way. And though I would pass through, I could hear their echoes resonate about which one of their fathers I had met that morning in the jungle to love, which one of their sons I would meet for that afternoon, and which one of their husbands I would take all for myself in the evening. I tried not to let their murmurs bother me much, because I knew what I did in the jungle, and I knew who I was, and I knew I was not any of the things they deemed me to be.

There was one afternoon when I was slowly walking down the pathway, lost in another one of my lingering thoughts, looking up in awe at the heavens swirling above. And suddenly—although not unexpectedly—I felt a stone strike against my chest. When I looked down, I could see the red welt bulge and feel the burn of the falling stone against my skin. My eyes turned to my left-hand side and I noticed a frail young boy standing across from me with stones gathered in his tiny arm held firmly across his chest. His eyes widened and darkened upon catching my gaze, but he refused to move until I took a step toward him. As I did so, his hand rapidly reached into his stack of stones and grasped a small rock, his arm bending from behind his head to aim it at me once more. But before he could throw the second stone, I quietly asked

him what compelled him to do such a thing. His eyes softened and told me it was because he heard his mother telling the other women in the village I should be stoned to death. Although distressed to hear this, I took out the very last bit of honey I was carrying with me—a golden prize layered inside a kapok leaf I had carefully gathered that morning—and began to hand it to the little boy. He instantly dropped the stones in his arm to clutch the leaf, but before he could fully hold it in his hand, his mother came running toward us, screaming at him not to exchange words with me and not to dare touch my tainted hands. She snatched the leaf I had given him and threw it onto the floor, stomping on it until it was nothing more than a dirt-mangled pulp. The people in the nearby huts heard the commotion and walked outside, only to see her dragging her son by his arm toward their hut. The women shook their heads at me, pointed at me, and warned their children to stay clear of my path. From that moment on, none of the children would come near me anymore. Instead, they would run the opposite way from me, as though I were a bee ready to insert my sting. They continued to throw stones toward my arms and legs, but the bruises I endured were not nearly as painful as the sorrow in my heart from not having any children to love or to love me back. I never blamed the children for their actions, as I suppose they were simply being obedient for following the orders of their parents. I consoled my lament and distress by choosing instead to assist the sick and the poor, the lonely outcasts of the village, because they were the only ones who did not judge me or think poorly of me.

In the outer areas of the village, the elderly were left alone for death to meet them and take them to the Upperworld. Their children had abandoned them for fear their ailment would strike their little ones, and so they had no one to provide them with water offered by the rain god Chac Mool, and they had no food prepared to feed their ailing souls. They had no other mind to escape to for a moment's time, no one to provide them with the invaluable sentiment of companionship. They were kept remote from the village, secluded away so their sons and daughters would not have to awaken the superfluous guilt asleep in their souls if they were to see them, as they preferred not to be reminded of their forgotten duties. But the ancient ones held a special place in my heart, they helped keep my days busy, and assisted me in passing time. They accepted my love, and I eagerly accepted their devout love in return. By that time, I had learned to search the jungle for berries and fruits to feed the old and poor, offered them teas I had seen the shaman grind into the mortar, and would pass hours telling them all about the sights and sounds I had seen

deep inside the jungle. One evening, as I was set to leave them in their huts, a very old woman grabbed my hand. I caressed her hair with my other hand, distraught at feeling her relentless fever scalding my wrist, and wanting desperately to alleviate her pain. She made an effort to smile and she pulled me down to kneel beside her. As I held her hand, she told me I was blessed far beyond this world, and that I would learn my true destiny in the next one. She told me it was precisely a divine nature I was blessed with as a child resonating from deep within that would bring me true and eternal goodness. I thought she was telling me of my passage into the Upperworld, the celestial place where I hoped to one day be greeted by the four bacabs, or jaguars, who held up the corners of the skies. I told her I would meet her there when the time was right. But the old woman simply shook her head, and with slow gasps muttered “Xtabentún.” She sighed her very last breath with that word. I kissed her on the forehead before I wrapped her inside the deer hide lying beside the wooden cot, and left the hut for the evening to make my way back into the village.

When I returned to my hut that night, I became extremely ill, so much so that I was unable to rise from where I lay the next morning. I had developed a fever which consumed every inch of my body. But I was more preoccupied with the elderly who would be left alone for the day, as they depended entirely upon me and I could not bear to disappoint them. As I tried to pull my body up to stand, I felt my skin and bones collapse onto the floor. When I came to, I realized I could not speak or move, but could feel my body being lifted into a box of what smelled like ceiba wood. I could hear the cries of the poor and the elderly—those who had truly loved me in my life—and listened to them whimper that my death was untimely and unjust. It was then that I realized I was experiencing my spirit lingering inside my deceased body, and horrified at the prospect of existing inside that body forever. I began to wonder if I was being punished from the gods for possessing too much love from when I had lived. I could hear my loved ones remark on how curious it was that such a sweet aroma was emanating from my casket. As I felt myself being placed gently into the earth, the voices continued on in bewilderment and the scent permeated from inside my makeshift tomb. Instantly, and before I could comprehend exactly what was happening, I saw a pure gleam of white light emanate from within my mind, pushing me from underneath the soil, past the roots and stones and rubble of the earth, and felt myself rotating around the stones laid delicately on the land. I realized then I had turned into a vine which offers buds that are born every morning to seek the glory of the dawn

and enjoy the radiance of a new day. Those from my village and everyone thereafter have since referred to me as Xtabentún, the vine blessed with white flowers that offer a sweet perfume and attract bees to drink from my nectar so they can produce a pleasant and sweet-tasting honey.

As I grew longer and stronger every day, I learned how to twist my vines past the village and twine them around the other plants and trees of the jungle. It was there that I took a much needed rest on the sacred ceiba tree. I loved nothing more than to lay myself against him and embrace his trunk and wrap myself around his branches. One morning, I asked him who he was before he grew from the soil of the land. When he began to tell me about the time of the jaguar, I draped myself down from his branches and uncurled my petals to listen.

Sugar and Gasoline

"So, I think they're gonna kill me," she said as she dragged her nails down the thick bars.

"Well, doll, now why would you think such a thing?" The voice returned.

"It's just what they keep sayin'. They say I'm crazy."

"Oh do they now? Well, I can't say I am surprised. Are you?"

"Eh, it's fair. Sometimes I sing my hymn."

"Should I be surprised?"

"Should you?"

A little girl with one unruly curl sighs at the crucifix and mutters her prayers as she stares at the sufferer above her. She lisps, "Dear Jesus H. Christ, protect me from my sins," as she gazes at the hole in Jesus' side. The girl spies at the young beauty next to her and grimaces at her sister's heavenly, yet dull expression. Her sister, Alice, had nothing to mutter, for Mama's Alice was an angel with cherub curls that couldn't possibly be stretched and counted. The little girl breathes in the burn of caramel permeating from her sister's strawberry curls and pinches her baby fat before she can taste the caramel singeing her tongue. She watches a drip of sinner's sweat from her father's chin dribble onto her mother's white delicate gloves. The smear leaves a brown smudge on the fingertip, where her mother's red nails peek brazenly through the thin fabric. She listens to the off chorus chants and sways her one-curved head to the preacher's call to worshippers. Little lips of smudged lipstick color the collar in front of her and she wonders who was locked in by Mr. Keating this time, who wanted to pass English or score a higher grade in biology?

"How was the food today?" he asked as she collapsed onto an unmade bed.

"Well, lets just say . . . and this is just sayin' . . . complete crap."

"Bad day?"

"Shoot, I donno, but some very buttery woman got in my way today."

"Oh, did you crisp her up and send her packing?"

"No, no, no. I was singing today, one of my favorites. 'Yea though I walk' . . . well you remember, and this obese-y lady finished the lyrics."

"Not too bad in my opinion."

"She was fatter today."

"And . . . ?"

"And . . . Mama always told me you're not a woman if you're not pretty, and I didn't like looking at her and it hurt my heart to see her fat lips sing my song. Dontyoulookatmelikethat, I'm not sorry. Why must you always make me feel so bad? You should feel bad for all the blood. It took me two full hours to mop up all that smell. My back still hurts."

"Maybe you should just read your bible."

"Oh! Good idea."

A young miss with sweaty palms and a purifying peach mask on her pores kept her bible under the mattress until they told her not to anymore. When the young miss heard them at first, she jumped off her bunk bed onto the splintered wood and sprinted into her mama and daddy's room to make sure they heard the voices too. Daddy snored and heaved his pregnant belly to the rhythm of the drum echoing from his mouth and her mama shook in her dreams as she dreamed of a former, present, and future life. The young miss crept back into the room, crawled over Alice and laid back into her tiny bed. She sat on her yellow sheets and kissed her bible, smudging the cover with grainy peaches, and whispered to no one and everyone that she always knew she was a saint. Her one curl stretched into a bun so she tore at her itchy neck instead of the poor curl as she usually did when she was nervous. She looked at her thin red nails, painted by her mama as they waited for the pies to cool, and bit her cuticles. She breathed in a wisp from the window, smelling the taint of gasoline on the sleepy town. The air was never clean and the scent of pies and cheap oil snuck into the noses of the sweaty inhabitants of the sleeping town. The young miss would remember this smell and smile as she waited on the chair for another man in power.

"Some woman made me raise my voice again today and then tripped herself on my foot," she giggled.

"Oh did she now?"

"Mhm, I fought with that large woman who is always trying to sing. It was funny, though. My nail polish chipped on her tooth. I killed her tooth."

"Why, again?"

"Why not?"

"Good point. So you fought with fatty again, then what?"

"Well, I sang again . . . 'through the valley of the shadow of death' . . . of course

... 'I will fear no evil.'"

"I hate that song."

"So my friends told me. They hated you."

"They should have told me to my face."

"So you told me."

"Sorry yet?"

"No, not yet. Don't hold your breath, I know you're just trying to make me feel bad."

"Funny."

"It's pretty lucky you can't too . . . your breath always smelled like gasoline, and your blood coulda caught fire."

"I liked the taste."

"I'm gonna read."

A young lady with muddy brown eyes and dry hands coaxes her bitten cuticles on the silk wonders in Alice's drawers. She finds what she was searching for and pulls out Alice's favorite polka-dotty dress. The dress she told Alice looked like chicken pox and the dress the young lady warned innocent Alice that if she wore it too much she'd get what Mrs. Lesley had on her lips and then she wouldn't be pretty no more and then the men would point at her and tease each other. Alice cried and ran to Mama. The young lady stared into the mirror that she hung by her closet and looked at her poor girl's face. She'd never look expensive like her mama did in those pictures from her wedding. Her face was round, yet not plump, and her freckles were dusty, yet not dirty enough to be sexy, and her chest was flat, yet not concave enough to keep Mr. Keating's scratchy hands away. The day he locked the door and offered to teach her the proper use of nouns and then the proper use of parts is the same day the young lady would remember when she baked him a very sweet pie, a lingering sweetness that tickled his taste buds as the maggots crawled in and out of his throat, eating the remainders and falling asleep in the cold, wet, pillow-y tunnel of flesh.

"Hey guard . . . I'd like to pray," she shouts to the ship of a woman as she disappears past the sea of outreached hands.

"Honey, they won't listen to you."

"Shut up, Charles. Hey guard, wanna take me to church?"

"Fine, Inmate 222. Open door now," the heavy voice returned.

"Thank you ma'am, my, you are pretty . . . if you gave me an oven I'd make

you a pie. Or some night I could braid your hair like I did my daughters."

"Another pie?"

"Thank you, Inmate 222. Enjoy yourself at church," the guard said as she looked around the empty cell.

"You can't follow me out Charles, no men allowed."

"You should have told your legs that."

"I did, believe you me, but they got a mind of their own, opening and closing, kicking and tripping. Hey, do you hear them now?"

"Yeah, they want you to apologize."

"No siree, they want me to kill the guard. But good guess, close, and I hate when you're close."

"Wanna play a game?"

"Wait till we get to chapel. I love church games. Lets play 'guess who killed her husband.'"

"Or guess who smothered two of her husband's children then stabbed him in the neck."

"Oooh! I love a challenge!"

A woman with a lavender dress and a pale yellow hat stood by the altar as she watched Alice in front of the oily preacher in her mother's wedding dress before she was able to zip up the lace and watched Alice say I do with an earnest smile before she did too. When Sam and Alice came back from a week of pleasure and prayers, she approached Sam and grabbed the sinless wonderer between his thighs. Sam shook his head as any bedded newlywed would, but the offer was on the perfectly set table, dressed up in its most tasty crust right by a melting stack of vanilla bean ice cream and dusted with cinnamon. He tasted like apples, not the sour kind but the ripest of apples which rolls as far as possible from its tree, hoping it'll be named something different from those who came before and after him. He finally took a bite a few months later and was so full he confessed to Alice his gluttony. Alice cried and screamed, pulling out her perfect strawberry curls and throwing them at the table where one fly covered bite remained spoiling in the gasoline air. While Sam slept with his sins, Alice poured the liquid air around the bed and wept as every woman should, quiet and powerful, like all the other slaves wincing with wonders and wandering wishes of other lives, past and present. She lit a match and didn't even scream once as her flesh boiled from sugar to caramel while Sam baked evenly next to her. For months after, the woman brought her bible to the rubble and breathed in the flavors, smiling in

remembrance. It smelled like a carnival and tasted like the air they breathed day in and day out, the same air that guiltlessly killed them.

"So, did you ever love me?" he asked.

"I preferred you, but I did mind you, too. Why did you always have to bug me like that?"

"I did nothing of the sort."

"Always so gentlemanly, and you couldn't accept my friends, well then. Jiminy Cricket! You just smell so badly!"

"Says the woman who hasn't showered for days."

"I'm sacrificing my beauty for your sins."

"You were never a beauty, but you were so darn sweet. What happened?"

"What happened?"

A woman of questionable age stood by the stained glass window fingering the fabric of Mama's recycled dress. The rain tripped from the sky onto the skidded knees of the hills surrounding the town and muddied the roads on the day of her wedding to a Mr. Charles Albany Strowes III. Rain came harder than the cholera cries that swept from the bowels of worlds over, worlds that would never know of a woman child who sits in a chair waiting and listening to voices. Charles had a name from the town over and had a personality to match. He didn't know her but knew he had to marry the woman with the brown eyes that were wrinkled, he assumed, from smiling; he knew he should and didn't know why he knew this but hey, people in the South speak slow and think even slower, his mama always said. His mama was from Michigan and hated everything southern, the fried green tomatoes, the silent widows, and most importantly, the heavy, sweaty air that smothered her shy northern manners and her brave northern ways until she cried silently like all the other women who hid behind their wedding dress curtains. The wedding was the grunt of the town and people remembered the young lady who wept at her sister's funeral as well as the woman who was now marrying a Mr. Charles Albany Strowes III. This Mr. Charles Albany Strowes III was a widower who never shied at the prospect of showing his three beautiful daughters around town and always searched for the perfect replacement for the former Mrs. Charles Albany Strowes III. This perfect replacement happened to be the woman and she didn't mind because she was now a married woman and for now she had her friends telling her she was beautiful and for now they were happy and for now she never would get caught.

"Why just the two? Why my Tallulah and Sandra?" he begged.

"They were the pretty ones . . . you were too nice to them."

"They were my babies."

"Your babies were slut heathens who ripped my bible for coloring paper," she retorted as she bit her nails obsessively.

"But they helped you bake, they tried so hard."

"Alice helped my mother bake too."

"Who is Alice?"

"Who was Alice."

Two heads covered in tiny curls bobbed through the pantry, their little doll arms covered in flour and sugar. Not caring whether it was sweet or starch, they licked the white powders from their baby paws. A wife watched them from across the linoleum plain and scowled at the voices in her head. Her friends told the wife that she was never going to be as pretty as the little girls and when they were old enough to go to school everyone will wonder at how beautiful the original Mrs. Charles Albany Strowes III must have been to have borne such sweets. She should fix things now so no one would ask or could even picture the blonde, curly woman who loved and created instead of ached and prayed. The wife wooed them to the bedroom with promises of a tangy crusty pie with whipped cream for each. The two girls skipped to the bedroom and shied against the pillowcases as the sweetness of their breath sank into the feathery emptiness with a dry hand against their curls. Charles came home, shutting the door with a whiff of his nose. A cherry pie, Tallulah's favorite. He wondered how sweet his wife must be to make his favorite daughter's favorite pie on her favorite day of the week, Sunday, the day for the angels. He tiptoed into the bedroom, ready for his babies to spring at him, laughing as they each attached themselves to his legs. He opened the door slowly, a grin as wide as the door on his empty face, and stopped. His heart paused, then skipped a beat, beat. He ran to the bed and picked each limp child up one after the other, and looked at his new bride in a mixture of confusion and love. Who hurt her? Who did this to his baby dolls? She walked to the kitchen, cut a thick slice of pie, and sat with her red toes touching the cold air, breathing in tears, gasoline, and cherries.

"Please sit here ma'am, Now what would you like to eat?" the solemn guard asked as she stared at the single woman.

"A cup of gasoline, please." She smiled.

"Always gasoline?" He laughed.

"And ma'am, I would like a piece of caramel apple pie, cherry pie, and just plain old apple pie. Please ma'am, would you bring a very sharp knife to cut it all with?"

"By gasoline do you mean coca cola?"

"Sure Ma'am, that'll do just fine."

"You'll never bake pie again."

"You'll never eat it again."

"Here are your pies and your soda, 222. Enjoy. Would you like me to turn the music down?" the ship-woman asked as she patted the woman on the back.

"No, my friends are singing along."

"They sing now?"

"Oh, of course dear . . . enjoy your pie," she said as she looked around the grey cell then exited quickly.

A woman child walks into the steel room and sits in the padded chair. She smiles coquettishly as a man of power straps her arms to the chair and asks him if her hair is curly today or if it is just that damned one curl again. He says he doesn't know. She looks into emptiness and smiles sweetly at the warden, she asks if he would please tell Charles that he smells like gasoline. The warden nods. She lays her head back against the chair and hums a familiar tune, a tune the prison guard was used to.

"Ma'am, you are convicted of the murders of a Ms. Tallulah Rose Strowes, a Ms. Sandra Ellen Strowes, and a Mr. Charles Albany Strowes III. Do you have any last words?" a foreign man asked the sitting woman child.

"Do you, Charles?" the woman asked the empty oxygen behind her.

"No, you're the one they came to see."

"Do you all want me to weep quietly or scream a sorry?" she shrieked as she stared at her bitten cuticles.

"They don't care."

"Well, my dears. I am a good southern girl like all the rest of 'em, I just have many friends and many songs and many recipes . . . I am very happy to see all of y'all and would be very happy to host ya later this week."

The third daughter cries behind two-sided glass as the murderer of her family invites her to lunch and wails as the warden straps the helmet to the one-curved head and weeps for her step-mother's soul as she grips her crucifix and watches her step-mother's brain bake with a warm crumble of voices and cinnamon.

Empty Plates

Clara's hunger was insatiable. She dreamed of creamy white pasta that had the involvement of complex greens: broccoli, spinach, artichoke hearts. Clara wanted to feel slippery cooked carrots on her tongue, sweet lemongrass chicken that was characterized with a tenderness no man she had come to fall in love with had. Clara wanted an extra side of zesty lemon sauce that she could use to drench the unsuspecting plate with, and she wanted garlic mashed potatoes to reassure her that she was the conqueror, not the conquered.

And so she got in the hand-me-down Chrysler she inherited from a father she never actually knew and she drove, listening to songs like Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" on the radio stations that didn't emit too much static and didn't play too much relevant pop music. And in the car Clara lit up a cigarette and put the windows down and exhaled as Carly told her that *she had some dreams*, and that they were *clouds in her coffee, clouds in her coffee*. The hour that Clara drove wasn't equivalent to the hour she would spend in the bathtub, the hour that would lazily pass sitting by the fountain, or the hour she would take to fold her clean clothing into warm, neat little piles on her bed. It was a unique hour; Clara felt like she had never spent time this sweet in her life. She put her signal on and clicked away to the left-most lane, the one that led to Pasadena, where she decided that she would find refuge and a good meal.

Stopping by a clean-looking gas station, Clara fed her father's old Chrysler some pungent energy and while the pump rested, she asked a plump but affable-looking man where he would eat right now if he had the choice. He had a beard and was wearing a shirt that said "Minnesota is for Lovers" and socks with his sandals, like some kind of unfashionable Jesus Christ.

"A place called Plates," he said and gave her directions.

The restaurant was only three blocks from the gas station; all she had to do was go down this main street until she reached Carte Blanche avenue and there she had to make a hearty right turn (she would see a deep purple house on the corner, quaint and with raspberry bushes out in the front, usually a sleepy dog rests upon the porch, the man with the socks and sandals said, it never barks) and would continue on Carte Blanche for about three minutes. She would pass three stop signs until she reached Kennedy; the restaurant would be on the left next to a family-owned fortune-telling business (a mother

and two daughters. The eldest daughter Maria displayed a true mastery in clairvoyance and the other, not as intuitive with other people's pasts and futures, sold fruit she grew from her own little garden [bananas, persimmons, guavas, mangos, avocados]).

Clara arrived, slowly turning into the little lot, the Chrysler's tires crunching away on happy gravel. The restaurant was especially petite and lonesome; the only indication that it was indeed Plates was a painted cardboard sign that read "Plates" in a kelly-green paint. Clara skeptically opened the door, but a hostess reassured her that they were just re-modeling.

"The owner just bought more land; we get so overcrowded for lunch and dinner that he decided it was finally time to expand. *Expansion.*" The hostess's tone of voice revealed that she paid high respects to the owner of Plates. Perhaps he gave her the job when she was on welfare or perhaps a year ago she was left alone with the rosy-cheeked hungry baby while her husband began making love to some younger, pretty thing.

Plates was fairly empty except for two blonde Scandinavian men and their dark-haired daughter. They happily waited with empty bowls in front of them; the dark-haired daughter who looked about four pretended to lap some soup off of her spoon, creating delightful slurping noises with her lips and the air. The hostess asked *how many* either out of habit, or perhaps she hoped Clara wasn't here alone, handed her a single menu, and led her to the best seat by the window out of empathy and good heart.

Clara glanced at the menu, her eyes adoring the vivid descriptions of tantric cheesy Thai pizza served with a side of peanut dipping sauce, salads drizzled with dried apricots and caramel-glazed walnuts, lobster served with a bowl of borsht. However, nothing seemed as satisfying as a piece of grilled chicken so Clara decided on number seventeen, the lemongrass chicken served with vegetables and mashed potatoes (although the menu offered jasmine rice or French fries as a substitution for the mashed potatoes, Clara decided against playing God with her carefully orchestrated meal), so she ordered it along with a glass of pinot noir to feel romantic with herself. As she sat and waited for her touch of romance, she noticed an older man sitting by himself. He looked so desolate and so grief-stricken, that Clara decided something horrible must have happened to him. His wife of thirty years ran off with a lean and tough young bull-fighter. His mother had just collapsed from a pulmonary embolism. Right in front of him. The morning after her ninetieth birthday party. He was her only son. He bought her groceries every week and never forgot the condensed milk and rainbow sherbet. She was the

only woman he loved, especially after his no-good, rotten wife betrayed him like that.

Yes, Clara decided, she must sit with him. A man this lonely must be a given a break. So she took her purse and walked over to the lonely man and asked him if she may sit with him. He nodded yes, and was not surprised that she asked, which in turn, surprised Clara. She asked him for his name and he replied something generic, like "Mr. Johnson."

He must be so embarrassed that he's by himself that he's giving me a false name, Clara thought. This poor man.

Clara had never sat down to have dinner with a stranger before, but she was in a strange town and she embraced her newness to the situation. She asked "Mr. Johnson" what he did and he said he used to be a radiologist. Clara told him that it must have been a lonely job but he replied that he loved x-rays and that he hated sick people. "Mr. Johnson" didn't look like an ex-doctor with his brown suit and blue tie, but someone who led an active life in politics or business. Although "Mr. Johnson" wasn't very talkative at first, he had big, kind gray eyes and asked Clara how old she was.

"My twenty-second birthday is in two weeks," she said.

"I have a daughter and she'll be twenty-three this year. Can't say when, exactly, I haven't spoken with her in years."

This made Clara sad and so she changed the subject. She started gossiping about her neighbors because the best way to become close to people is to light-heartedly talk shit. "Mr. Johnson" found pleasure in this, and decided to share a story about Mrs. Patrono and her lady friends.

"Let me tell you about Mrs. Patrono and her lady friends," the man whispered to Clara.

"Mrs. Patrono? Who is she?"

"Mrs. Patrono comes here almost every single night."

Mrs. Patrono and her lady friends arrived dressed in loud hats and she requested the booth away from all of the windows so that her lady friends would not become distracted by what was going on outside and would therefore find it overwhelmingly easy to concentrate on her woes, which she frequently had an abundance of. For her fifty-fifth birthday, she ordered a large German chocolate cake and treated everyone to spaghetti cooked by the chef at Plates, only she gave them instructions that paralleled the ancient recipes her great grandmother used in Italy. The spaghetti was a success, and Mrs. Patrono spent the afternoon and early evening discussing the diet she was putting her cocker spaniel named Alfred on (chicken and broccoli

dinners, the creature needs the extra fiber!) and the side effects that Levodopa, a medication that Mr. Patrono was instructed to take three times daily, was causing.

"Sometimes, he wakes up in the middle of the night, and wonders, very loudly, why there is no dinner made," Mrs. Patrono said, "and other times, he's as lucid as a fox and reminds me to pay the cable bill three days before its due date. He is two different men. Girls, I am suffering."

She only arrived without her lady friends once and she was so alarmed by her loneliness that she would step outside every few minutes to smoke a cigarette and make a phone call. This disastrous predicament never happened again and that following week she told her lady friends all about the kind of loneliness they couldn't possibly imagine when one faces an empty booth.

Just then, a skinny waitress carrying a tray on her shoulder confidently placed two plates upon the table. The hostess who was marching behind her, apologetically placed a wine glass next to the plate and told Clara it was on the house since it took so long to get. Clara smiled unconfidently; the plates were empty and she didn't see anything in the wine glasses.

"Ma'am? There's nothing here," Clara said.

"You ordered the lemongrass chicken that comes with vegetables? You stuck with the mashed potatoes and I see that they're there. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Clara looked over to the man's plate, but all that she saw was gleaming white radiating from the circular space. She also noticed a smile upon his face and that he carefully took the folded napkin and placed it upon his knees.

"I don't understand," Clara said.

"Our entrees, our drinks," the man started, "are invisible."

"I'm paying for food and drink that's invisible? Is everyone else served anything? Are we still paying for this?"

"Yes we are."

"Absolutely we are not." Clara began to rise up from her seat, smoothing the patient wrinkles from her skirt.

"Wait, sit back down."

"Why? I don't understand this place, is it a joke? Is this some sort of tourist attraction? Is this for crazy people?"

"No, it's not for crazy people, it's not a joke, there might be some tourists here but that's coincidental. Listen, try your chicken." The man had suddenly gained a keen interest on making sure Clara tried some of her food.

"There's no chicken."

"There is, though. It's glazed over with a sweet lemon sauce, it's kind of a caramel color. Like orange, but prettier."

Clara wanted to believe him, she desperately did. She gazed at her white plate, hoping to see the piece of chicken, but all she saw was a void and it made her hungrier. She cursed herself for not stopping by the grocery store and picking up a chicken breast. She ventured off and her curiosity had led her to a table with an expensive, imaginative meal resting upon it and in front of her a gray-eyed old man who allowed himself to be deceived out of desperation.

"I don't see it."

"Clara, try some of mine. I got the mushroom cheeseburger, medium-rare. You eat red meat, right?"

"Mr. Johnson" took the steak knife that was brought with his dish and started to cut the invisible burger with concentration; he didn't even scrape the plate with his knife, the meat was supposedly so thick, until the juicy piece was segregated from the rest. He grabbed her plate and with his fork and placed the piece of burger onto it.

"I made sure you got a piece with plenty of mushrooms."

Clara sighed and thought she could perhaps play along. The man's eyes were wide, waiting to see her try his beloved burger.

Clara took the fork properly set to the side of her supposedly loaded plate, and stabbed the burger, opting out of getting grease on her hands. She then wondered why she chose this method of consumption if the soaked bun was indeed non-existent.

"I'm putting some fries on your plate," the man said, "they're seasoned." Clara thanked him and began chewing on the burger, first in small bites, then larger ones. She could almost taste the buttery mushrooms, the sharp essence of Vermont cheddar. Then she tried the seasoned fries, dipping them in invisible ketchup that the man had given her from an invisible glass bottle. Clara realized she was forgetting to tend to her wine, so she took petite sips from the glass in between slicing pieces of invisible chicken and popping pieces of diced carrots and finely chopped broccoli that did not exist, into her mouth.

"Do you want to try some of mine?" Clara felt badly that she had not offered "Mr. Johnson" some of her dinner before she got started on it. He grinned and said, Sure, and handed his plate to her, noticing she shifted the weight of her hand once the plate reached it, as though it did actually hold half of a hamburger and the remaining five thick wedges of fried potato.

“Mr. Johnson” grinned and clasped his two big hands together, like a delighted child. In this very moment, Clara detected a genuine and organic sense of happiness that was rare among most people. Whatever was piled on this man’s plate seemed to fulfill a stale void that was left behind; the stuff here was fresh and it consumed him. His cheating wife, his dead mother, his missing daughter, they were components left in his refrigerator, at home and to be forgotten for the night. Tonight he was eating out.

After awhile, the waitress came back and asked if the two of them would like sundaes or a piece of cheesecake to share. The two shook their heads no and Clara asked for a to-go box.

March 19, 1991

The day felt slippery
in the old man's hands.
On his lap his fingers teetered
over poorly written headlines
and poorly reported news.
He let his fingers pause at the date,
clasped his hands,
closed his grey eyes,
and fell asleep on the bench.

For the next few days
the pigeons rested on his legs,
pecked at his worn jeans,
and nuzzled beneath his withered hands.

Outside Where We Paint the Streets

Outside where we paint the streets.
I walk to tell someone what I've seen,
but there's no one in the dark,
and no one stops when the sun comes out.

I walk until I reach the library,
and settle in a spot by the stairs,
where the shade cools my burnt skin.

I'm told to move,
and so I settle against the boards
that cover the library's broken windows.

There, I watch the people.
I count their ties,
and the times their heels grate the street.

Some offer change, some offer food, most offer glares.

A little boy walks by:
his face is red and freckled and his glasses are broken.
He asks if I'd like to finger paint with him.

We spend the afternoon in front of the library's broken windows
with our hands and legs covered in color.

But I don't tell him what I've seen.

When he asks about the calluses on my hands,
I tell him that I like to climb trees.
He smiles and says,
"Me too."

When he asks about the lines and shadows around my eyes,
I tell him I stayed up late to wish on stars.
He smiles and says,
"Me too."

When he asks why I only paint with blue,
I tell him I like the way it looks.

He shakes his head and dips his hand
in red
 and blue

 and yellow
and green,
until at last they come and scoop him away.

I don't tell him what I've seen.

WENDY BELANGER

Astronomy

Moon Child,
what will you do?

Nightly shape shifting from full-bodied bullet
to half-moon honey,

fractured fingernail, trickling teardrop.
You are a victim of my perspective.

How do you cope?
You may feel grand and bold one night, but Lady—

I'm the astronomer. I'm the man with the telescope.
I am the scientist of celestial bodies, Saturn's rings,

surrounding satellites, wish-upon-a-stars, so
fear me—for it was I who cast Pluto out!

You're no planet! I guffawed,
and my fellow highbrows marveled, *So true, so true!*

So, Moon Child,
what is in it for you?

You are a slave of my senses,
your form so predictable, you will never

surprise me. I have stripped
you of your mystery

with my centuries of study.
Oh Moon Child,

you are not good enough, haven't you heard?
We've moved on from you,

we want something bigger, thus far unknown.
We'll find it in tomorrow's headlines:

Black Hole Spits Out Life!
Jupiter a Portal to Another Dimension!

Moon Child, you are yesterday's news.
Yet, can it be?

As I spit this speech
into the vault of midnight,

you glow ever brighter, grow ever larger,
emerging like a standing ovation from the smog-ridden skyline –

Oh Moon Child,
how do you do?

Glancing Up

at the precise moment
that the lamp-lights slip
from over our heads
in a whirl of suspense
I doubt we will notice
how much more we can see
of the stars

Eyes Closed

Enticed into an equivalent being,
I've recently begun conquering inner
strands of chaos.

Please just five more.

And one more exhalation, amidst the
entanglement of a branch nearby.

Ten feet out and the same high.

Frozen. Thawing. Dropping
a first few layers down.

Only three more to stone.

Surveying the pebble and filth blast,
I can hear the dull splash between as they
dash, sprinting across the glossy oak exterior.

Expecting cracking, breaking – disappearing beneath,
watching the very ground rise to meet me
where I just lay.

Does it feel a bit stuffy in here?
It's much too thick to take in.

A grasp for hovering air.
I'm up.
In puddles of similar light.

Ghost Town

No sign on the dirt road leading in:
Population: 300 and growing smaller.

No dirt road,
just an unmarked field of sand drifting until it hits
the first home,
the last home,
in a town of buildings scattered 'cross the ground like a child's jacks.

No thoroughfare or main street
where people walk and shop and discuss
the smallness of a shrinking life.

No life, for life has shrunk.
Long-eared jackrabbits run a ramshackle town hall meeting,
thumping long-footed gavels
on the ground in warning when the shadow of something
higher than themselves
sends them racing for safety underground.

There is no dirt road now but the quiet that is never quite silence.

Un Sospiro

Night falls twice, one to vault
the chair, two to toe, tango.
Lovers fault feet of others,
shameless. Love lacks fault,
right? So it was the fault of
San Andreas, then, leading
earthquakes to footfalls stepping
on other footfalls. Imagine, then,
how the feet must feel! (Poor saps,
they'll get the rhythm, or else
find themselves lacking partners.)
Keep eyes on your own feet, your
partner is Jupiter, who has
sixty-three moons and
a nasty streak. Dance
with him, greet him kindly,
avoid his wife. It's a cycle, falling
in love and into space; if one moon
catches you, then count yourself lucky.
If an earthquake splits your sky, please
question how. Even more important than
asking how, please wonder why.
Gravity's defined based on where
you fall, not how, and the sky
a path bursting from a sigh.

We inhale ashes, the sky

sinking around us as the earth drinks
deep from clouds. Eve is afraid
the sun has been eaten, and that
we will be eaten by the falling sky
so we retreat to caves as cumulus
teeth clench slowly, saliva dripping
into our view one drop at a time.
She and I watch the clear spit
fall faster, more beads breaking
on ground and leaves. Between each
drop is a small gap in time, pauses
followed by moments and pauses
and moments and pauses and
moments we think of escape
before another drop, another
moment. We are too afraid
to leave. "He is crying."
The words come from her, weighted
by cold and mist. It is a statement,
a truth. Water lacking salt, his tears
remind us of the differences.

ANGELINE MIRENDA

~~Hansel and Gretel~~

when my girl arrives
she ghosts
past the hors d'oeuvres and feeds
in beside me, the
sun-gorged
chair boiling her milky flesh.
i throw my arm up
and over her shoulder, kissing the red beet
of her cheek.

“what’s cookin’, cupcake?”

salsa music wafts
across the lawn and her hips stir
in time as she glides away, cracking
a smile at me before she melts
into the concrete pot,
step-by-step – water cast up
her chicken leg and across the flat plate of her stomach.

chlorine licks the foundation clean off her forehead
and she throws her hair up
to salvage it from the pool’s appetite
then tosses up a bony hand
when someone spews water at her.

she hurls
one leg onto the sizzling concrete, then the other
and with a heave of delicate, meatless
arms, the water retches her back
onto the boiling gravel.

i trickle down beside her
and scoop her close to me, even as she gargles
protests,
throwing her up,
up and into the pool again

The Frog Prince

mama lived deep, deep in the south
so deep that you couldn't see the bottom of it
and there was no top.
you can get lost in that.
she did.
she tells it like

there was sleep and sweat and sex
born under an old (cr)oak
but when Spring sat up in the green Georgia grass and tossed back her hair
he must have
caught a whiff because one day mama woke up and he was gone
uprooted
and she could only lie in the aftermath
and think
but i was fashioned from your rib(bit)

down south
there is a swamp where crickets chirp and warts _{croak} and she once
saw a man's calloused hand clawing at the water
grasping at
air at

—nothing as hydrogen and oxygen mated and swallowed him whole.

that hand sometimes drummed the mahogany desk in the den during winter
when

everything was white like mama's smile used to be like that hand was later
when

they drug the body up,

his tongue hangin' out the side of his mouth, catching flies like a frog.

the princess never kissed the frog;

she threw him against a wall.

HUSTLIN'

a small bird hopped right up
to the edge of my book and
looked back and forth from me
to my sandwich with those doe
eyes i'd never seen on a sparrow
so i rewarded it for being ballsy
and before i knew it i had fed all
the birds because it was cold and
they were small and i wasn't sure
what about the anatomy of a bird
could possibly keep them warm.

Standing at the Window

Standing at the window,
she wonders.

The way raindrops
cling to glass.
Clasp, grasp.

Not wanting to fall.
Plop, trickle.

She draws her face
in the condensation.
Recreating herself in haze.

There Will Come Soft Rains

I am unkempt
like the shadows of Maine
like cold winter horizons
and clockwork spreads that
wash and wait
wash and waste
over fruited waves of
barley and wheat

There is a time
not spent on time
with lines and weeks in time
all across the cascading horizon
with nothing to say

I will forget the waste
of death and the waste
of life with little strokes
of genius and love and fortune
with small regrets
and wild mothers. I am

knowing
that all hands point
at all the minutes
all the time. I am

the suns climbing
in their most high over
the mountain trees that beg
for the kiss of rain,
the kiss of life. I am

the rain clouds that come
and watch mountains crumble
as they smile for
the kiss that had been

Defeated

Choking Down Dregs

Johnny and the tweakers got real fucked up
last Saturday, spent all weekend in a
Motel 6. Feels like they're trapped here with a
bad vibe. Gotta bust out of this lock up,
swerve up the street, go downtown with the boys.
Slouching and crawling among the real wrongs
all full of bleary eyes and phlegmy lungs,
the sidewalk popping with staticky noise.

Life hasn't ever been so real as this –
every light brighter, every sound louder.
Rocking and rolling, wheeling and dealing
forget the track marks and the smell of piss.
Just glorious, holy pills and powder
as the city center sits, unreeling.

There Comes a Time

there comes a time
when a man may walk down a road
which is not a road at all
it's like a big long flat thing
there are rocks
you know what i don't have time for this

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elephant tree

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 pieces 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 each issue publishes 12-15 poems and 4-10 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 Chapman's Strategic Marketing & Communications, Creative Services 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.

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