

Reed College Creative Review



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PROSE
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CHARLIE WITHOUT VIOLINS :: Diana Oliva

I have a theory about Charlie. I have many theories, but the most prevalent one involves him being a man who is followed by muffled violins and maybe the *Air* soundtrack from the *Virgin Suicides*. It's not so much a hypothesis about existence as much as it is a dream. It begins with him arriving in San Francisco in summer and taking off his shoes as soon as he gets out of the airport. He exhales a very thin breath and plucks his hand in the air, snapping quietly until he considers assertion in hailing a taxi. He carries his navy-blue sports bag across the busy street, the warm cement touching his naked feet. The taxi-driver inevitably has a warm-brown beard with streaks of white, and a curled moustache. Charlie insists on keeping his bag next to him instead of putting it in the trunk, and discusses the minor frustrations of flying with the driver.

"The last time I went on a plane," the driver might say, "I wasn't very comfortable. There wasn't enough room for my legs. The flight was long and the movie they played was awful."

Charlie speaks, "They showed *Moulin Rouge*. I hate that movie." He'll reject, naturally, something that I would. He'll continue to snap and twitch nervously, but he won't explain to the driver his mild case of ADHD. The drive between the airport and my front door will take an hour in the perpetually idiotic traffic. In some versions, he finds the time excessive and becomes frustrated, but the way I like it best is when it seems as if no time has transpired at all for him or for me. He arrives at my home and pushes the door. It opens as if it weren't locked, as if I had no reason to ever lock my door. His bag falls off his arm, making a dry bump

sound muffled on the carpet. The door is left open; I am at the top of the stairs, playing the piano.

His weight on the stairs is pleasurable; it makes a quiet creaking noise. There is a sound of a dog barking somewhere. There is a sound of paper floating outside, gasping past a window as the wind picks up. Somewhere a radio buzzes. A bee pushes at my window, and it makes little beating noises when it can't get in. Waiting for Charlie isn't a problem for me, in this version. I know he'll be at the top of the stairs, because he always arrives there no matter how long it takes. Someone is splashing in a pool somewhere.

The door swoons open and Charlie leans his lanky body on the frame, pressing his hands on the opposite edges to relieve some tension. His skin is peeling as it did our last summer, with a mild sunburn. It reflects in the dimmest of light, and as he walks toward me, my eyes water. His arms are bare, his teeth are exposed. The piano music, in the best version, doesn't stop playing when I leave the keys. The adagio arpeggios live inside the ear like shadows inside the rooms of my house.

If I throw myself up in the air, Charlie exuberantly catches me. He pushes his lips against my skin like the bee pushing itself against the window. It's a light tap, a series of light taps. I feel like the kisses inside my cheeks. Every bright cell contains pieces of his still, nervous osculation. I am made of his moments, there being nothing outside of the imaginary violins accompanying his presence. Who cares how it really happens, if this is the way it could.

•

Charlie was a physicist who I knew by chance in col-

lege. By chance I mean we took one class together our first semester but we happened to eat lunch at the same time and started eating at the same table on a regular basis. After two years at Tristan Music Conservatory School in San Francisco, he dropped out and applied to M.I.T. for three years in a row until he got in. But for three months, he stayed on my couch when he couldn't live in the dorms due to being un-enrolled.

My apartment was just a place where he came home to sleep, and his interactions with me were few and unromantic. I didn't expect to exploit the situation, though I did entertain notions of an isolation-induced affair. Maybe one day, a fantastic disaster would occur, like a freak blizzard or a flooding of all roads below our hill. Unable to escape, we would be forced to stare at each other for hours, with no television and possibly no radio. If we were lucky all the electricity would fail, and we would have to stay up with candlelight. It would last for days, and the cold nights would induce us to sleep next to each other in order to maintain our rather subjective body temperatures. Somehow, the bodies pressed against each other would induce a long-tempered passion in Charlie to well-up and surface.

"Olivia," he might say, "You are the subject of my deepest fantasies."

Then I would respond, "Of course," and in a low susurration, imitating a Bond-film villainess, "Mr. Dollwood, you know so little of what I know so much. I was born a high school lover. I read men like sheet music."

The scenario itself was so absurd and unlikely that I took a special delight in adding more fantasy to it. "I'm also a trillionaire," he'd add. "And I want to spend a portion of

my fortune on your education. It's the least I can do."

"No, no," I'd insist. "All I want is your heart."

He'd spread out his fingers on my hips. Later, he would sleep back to back with me, accidentally kicking my thighs and calves in the middle of the night. He'd cough and snap compulsively, waking me up in the middle of the night with his infallible quirks. I would listen pensively, humming the praises of Charlie's crisp, congenial existence in my sleep. The nerve I could have had, if ever in those months we lived together, to ask him to sleep next to me (not with me!) just to know the precise rhythm of his sleeping lungs, chest rising to a cold, innocent beat.

•

"Hey Ollie, I'm going to the market. You need food?" was a normal question he asked me once.

"Don't go!" I shrieked without thinking. He stared at me baffled for a moment until I realized what I had said. "I mean, how's that song you've been writing?"

"It's great, I mean, as good as I get. There's a reason I'm switching schools. My violin's crap. But I was going to the market..."

"Yes. Bring back bread, any form of it. Croissants, bagels, loaves, English muffins, whatever." I walked up the stairs and leaned carefully over the banister while reciting the different breads he could bring. "Pita."

"Word," he departed. He left some coffee in a teacup on my table. I lifted it to find a moist little pool of condensation, another Dollwood-print. I regarded it and whispered to myself a barely intelligible song I'd written on the piano: "*And if my heart had wings, I'd tie it up with strings, so I could I reel it out and reel you in!*"

He returned three hours later with no bread but with three different boxes of cereal. "I couldn't make up my mind," he told me. "So I got all of them."

"And the bread?"

"Oh yeah," he said, snapping his fingers gracefully. "I forgot."

•

Charlie, though forgetful, distracted, twitchy, and stubborn to most people, was and has always been not just these things for me, but more. He was whimsical, child-like, energetic, and tenacious. I have been very aware of both his states: Charlie-with- and Charlie-without-violins. Charlie-without-violins left hair in the drain, clothes in the drier, and Post-it notes on everything. Charlie-with-violins also left hair in the drain, but it formed a pattern, swirled like a cloud and stuck like warm chocolate to the bottom of my soap. His clothes were the welcome surprise of a pre-warmed drier. I could stick my hands in and feel his corduroy jacket's long sleeves, surmising that his lanky white arms filled them perfectly. The Post-it notes left me wondering if he was a poet.

*"Send transcript,
Before 3/18, or
Face applying next year."*

I traced the letters with my fingers. He startled me with his ghost-like presence, appearing at the bathroom door while my electric-toothbrush hung off my lip, vibrating against my teeth. I turned off the water.

"Hi Charlie," I said, foam still frothing at the corners of my lips.

"I have to go pee."

"Yeah, let me get out of your way. I'm sorry."

"No prob. I can wait."

"Well, where are you transferring to?"

"M.I.T."

"What if they reject you?"

"I'll just apply again. They can't reject me forever. No one who really cares about anything gives up after getting rejected anyway. I'm going to go to this school."

I stood in the steam, stunned by the pale glow of anticipation. What if I took the same tone, what if I refused to take no for an answer? I wanted to follow him for the rest of his life, applying again and again every year, submitting new material. I'd flood him with essays, recommendations, scores from arbitrary and possibly unrelated tests. Or stories, poems, songs, pictures, flowers discovered in jungles and named after him. I'd invest great portions of my life and money to break him down. After all, there was a possibility it was as he said, *They can't reject me forever*. 'They' being in my case the united front of the Charles Victor Dollwood Committee. Maybe I could impress a variety of trustees, his parents and friends, until they had no choice but to let me love him. Maybe I could argue the snapping, trapping Charlie into being the subject of beautiful things. If only he would let me.

•

The theories followed Charlie's presence as long as I knew him in college. His reaction combined two facets of a person beloved by a person he loves not: sympathy and feigned ignorance. He didn't address the obvious things, like a dinner I took three hours preparing, or the song I wrote for him, *Etude of an Empty House*. He simply took them,

gracefully, like a child takes candy offered him without consideration for the giver. There was a simple, unforgivable pleasure I delighted in watching the lack of curiosity as he discovered something I had left him. He didn't think too much, he just moved. The cup of coffee that was warm at ten, just as I was leaving for class, woke him up only as I made it out the door. I would listen carefully, before mounting my bike, for the tinkling of the spoon mixing in his sugar and milk. The metallic stirring noise assuaged me in knowing that behind this ada-esque fantasy was a man who drank coffee to shake off the sleep.

Eventually, after many days of going to class, remaining estranged from even my closest friends, playing music for hours on end to relieve the retrospectively uncomplicated, youthful sentiments of isolation, I came home to a place without a fantasy. Charlie was trapping his scattered things in his navy-blue sports bag, combing his hair nervously with his fingers, and trying to get a tie on. I looked on, my eyes perceiving the situation casually as I stood in the doorway.

"I'm moving to Massachusetts," he said, grabbing a stray sock from underneath the couch cushions.

"There?" I questioned stupidly.

"I'm going to go give these guys a piece of my mind."

"They didn't let you in?"

"Not yet. They'll come around. They *think* they didn't let me in, they *think* they sent me a rejection letter."

"What are you going to do about me?" I blurted, conflating fantasy and reality inadvertently. He ignored my question and continued to search underneath tables and seat cushions for long-lost possessions. He found a Cana-

dian quarter and a watch that needed new batteries. He found his iPod headphones and old music theory notes. Slowly, the silence expected from one forgetting a question passed.

"Ollie I'll miss you. You're a real kick in the pants."

"Charlie "

" I found my 16-sided dice! Do you have any idea how long it's been?"

"No, I "

He buckled his bag across his shoulders with a loud snap. "Listen O-face, I have to catch the first bus out of here. Can you drive me to the station?"

"Let me get my keys." I spoke as if I had no reason not to, but I instinctively wanted to delay the departure as long as possible. I fumbled around in my purse quietly in the doorway, until the time I could buy was used up.

I waited with him at the station, where he bought a magazine and two packets of gum. It was a desperately short hour and a half, where I sat across from him on the benches. He had his legs crossed, the right leg above the left, and that right leg twitched nervously in constant beat to his snapping. The twitches were written in sixteenth notes, the snaps in half notes. His magazine was in one hand, a copy of Rolling Stone. He studied it intensely, as did I. The cover amused me, as it had a famous guitarist taking a bite out of his own instrument. *Daniel Glover*, it read, *Creature of The Year*. This month's issue included a poster and a chance to fly to Tokyo to see Daniel Glover in person. He bore a striking likeness to Charlie.

"You know, I never expected my first time saying 'I

love you' would happen in the middle of an empty bus-station."

He did not look up.

"I love you. I love you in an awful way. For no reason at all."

The benches squeaked under his constant oscillating. The magazine vibrated slowly in his hand.

"If you love me I never want to die. I have no reason to die if you love me. I've got no reason to stop living. I could live a thousand lives to love you as thoroughly as possible."

The snapping stopped, and then continued. There was no response as he turned the page.

"I simply love you, the way most people don't. I am not trite, I am not flagrant, I am honest. There's nothing I can do to individualize something so simple and so true: I love you in the most human, sincere way. I dare you to speak, if there are any words you have against or for love."

Charlie turned the page.

"It must be great for you to get on your bus and remain unchanged. I do not resent any of your privilege. We were put on this earth to feel this feeling, described over and over again in countless, unintelligible ways. Our miserable time on this miserable world is punctuated with periods of longing, and it's all that a person can do to risk their pride, self-esteem, and sanity to love someone just a little bit more. Nothing's worth anything unless you care enough to look like an idiot."

"Sorry," he said, looking up with his stark green eyes. He didn't speak, he just locked eyes with me.

"I was saying, we have a purpose here, a social re-

sponsibility "

He observed a respective silence. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you say that? Why do you love? Me?"

"Why do you tell people your name is Charlie?"

He read his magazine and dropped out of the conversation for an uncomfortably long amount of time. It was vaguely humiliating, knowing that he could take so long in forming words when I needed them *now*. He began, unrelated. "It's just not there."

"No."

"What else did you want to tell me?"

"Your bus is pulling up."

"Oh, come on."

"I can't believe you like Glover. He's such a terrible musician."

"Ha, yeah," he said amiably, watching his bus pull up. He lifted his bag and ascended some steps onto the platform, and after another short period of time, he left. He waved and smashed his face against the window, distorting his cheeks humorously. I looked on with melting features, reminding myself that something real had just escaped me. My hand extended as if there was something to catch, but all I could do was reach.

•

Later on he would write me postcards, from as far away as Peru and Russia. He made his way across the world searching for excellent new foods and music. He learned various strange instruments, including the euphonium and the sitar. He sent back teas and occasionally pictures. His face, as the years progressed, became bearded and more

complexly-surfaced. There was a depth that came to his appearance, completely separate from the naked-faced youth I idolised in my early twenties. The jawline slacked, the eyes got smaller, and seven years later he graduated from M.I.T.

Carefully, I stepped around his letters, his postcards, his souvenirs of dried herbs and pictures. I watched them slip in through the mail slot in my door every couple of months, and then I hid them in a drawer, away from my sight. They came less and less often, until I stopped receiving anything altogether. I wondered, occasionally, if I could watch him forget me, if there was a moment when he realised there was a gap in his mind, spanning anywhere between three months and two years. Something would be missing, but when he tried to reassemble the images of who or what, the outline and definition would be swallowed like chalk in a watercolor painting.

I have a theory about Charlie. He is a normal man, he is asleep on a flat mattress right now in a white house in Massachusetts, and the most he will be for me is an interesting story. There is no great return, and his years have bested him of his ephemeral virtues. But it suits me, not because I am a lonely or foolish person, but because I am an honest person, to imagine another Charlie, a Charlie-with-violins, with a soft baritone voice, with smooth brown hair and glowing egg-shell skin. I am honest, because I can make a most simple existence of drinking coffee alone and hearing my apartment's foundation settle and creak as it ages with the addition of a little fantasy. I can pour a cup of coffee out and leave it on the table, where he might have left it. I can sleep at ease, imagining that the rustling of evening gowns and purses outside could be the shuffling

of Charlie on the couch. And it's amazing sometimes, that I can come home in the afternoons to find the still, unstirred cup on the counter, and not drink it because I think it's still too hot. It never disappears, I just pour it out each afternoon and refill it each morning, revelling in his absence, where he was, filling in the outline of his Charlie-shaped place.



Edwards had just arrived home from work when he noticed something unusual outside of the window of his apartment. There appeared to be an object caught in the stonework that jutted out from beneath the sill. He opened the window and saw a scattering of leaves and strips of shredded trash. Strange, that it had blown up from the street, but the corridors of buildings had a tendency to make unusual currents in the air. He opened the window and brushed the trash away with the end of a broom from his kitchen. Edwards found something satisfying about watching the debris flutter back to earth. He thought that would be the end of it.

But the next day there was even more. He got out the broom again, but brushed the foreign material away with a growing sense of uneasiness. Edwards wondered if the tenants above him had taken to throwing the contents of their wastebasket out of their window like savages.

The next day he stayed out late completing his weekly grocery shopping. When he got home it was already dark. He forgot to even glance out of the window.

Over his coffee the following morning he realized that the collected trash was a nest. Something was building a nest. The sky was just beginning to lighten, and as it did a winged figure stirred and took off from the stonework with a great clattering of wings.

It nearly made him spill his coffee. He hadn't gotten a good look at the thing; all he had was an impression of vast wings moving quickly up and away.

The following morning Edwards paused half-way through his bagel and crossed the room to peer out

of the window. He examined the large, haphazard nest anchored firmly to the ornate stonework below the sill. The nest seemed like a hurried affair, built out of pieces of plastic bags as well as leaves and twigs and long, grey feathers. Whatever lived in the nest had already left for the day. There was nothing in it except for a severed pigeon head, gazing skyward from the bottom of the nest and collecting flies.

Edwards picked up the phone and cancelled his afternoon appointments. Edwards was semi-retired from his position as a corporate lawyer and now worked mainly as a part-time consultant. His current state of employment allowed him considerable leeway with how he chose to spend his time. Edwards thought that this particular day would be a good opportunity to take advantage of this flexibility. He pulled an armchair up to the window and settled in to read the paper. He waited.

It didn't return until the sun had begun to sink behind the buildings. Edwards had been dozing in his armchair when he was awoken by the sound of wings and settling weight. He stood up and strode towards the window.

It was a bird, of course, but it wasn't like any bird Edwards had ever seen.

The bird was a monstrously large eagle. Its feathers were a sleek, steely blue-grey, the color of asphalt and sky. For a moment, as it stood still and hunched on the edge of its nest, Edwards believed that it was just a scowling gargoyle, part of the stonework. Then it flicked its sharp head back and forth and the ruff of feathers along its neck

rose like a stiff collar. It turned and in the dim light its face looked almost like that of a woman.

Edwards backed slowly from the window. In his mind, the grasping talons reached for his eyes. In his mind, the scimitar of a beak raked at his liver.

Something would have to be done.

•

Edwards brought up the subject of the bird at the next residents' meeting.

Carl, the superintendent, seemed eager to discuss it. His words tumbled up of his mouth in a breathless rush. "It's nowhere near native to this area. Haven't you noticed all the attention it's been getting? Nobody's ever heard of one those things nesting in an urban area. A man with a pair of binoculars told me that it must have escaped from a private collection. He looked like he knew what he was talking about. I think he was one of those birders," said Carl.

"Have you seen it? Have you seen how *big* it is?" said Edwards.

A thin redheaded woman's eyes shone wetly. "Oh my, yes. *Harpia harpyja*. It's such a magnificent animal, isn't it? We're so blessed that it's decided to share our home with us."

Edwards stared at her. "Well, that magnificent animal has made its magnificent nest right outside of my window. It's an eyesore and it stinks to high heaven. It'll have to be gotten rid of," he said.

Carl wrung his small hands. "But, you see, the building is getting an awfully lot of positive press for letting it stay on. Removing the poor thing's nest seems cruel,

doesn't it? It's already lost, it would be tragic to render it homeless as well." The superintendent cleared his throat and began to draw his authority around himself. "Besides, it's doing wonders for our pigeon problem."

The red-headed woman added, "Not to mention the feral cats. They wreck havoc on the native songbird population, those feral cats."

Edwards was beginning to suspect that she was a birder, or at the very least a bird sympathizer. "And I'm sure it will be just as wonderful when it snatches some poor toddler off the street," he said.

The conversation paused. "I don't... I don't think birds *do* that, Mr. Edwards," said the superintendent.

Edwards rose from his chair and began to stride towards the door. "But it could," he said, "It could if it wanted to."

•

Edwards started to wake up later, making sure the sun was shining through cracks in his curtains before he ventured out of his bedroom. If he arrived home too early then he would walk brisk loops around the block until the sun set. By avoiding the half-lit times of the bird's comings and goings, he could almost pretend it wasn't there.

But sometimes, even in his bedroom with the pillow pressed tightly over his head, he could hear her sharp beak crunching bones.

He couldn't stand being in his living room when the bird was there. He hated to see the sharp grey head circle smoothly around and around like a gun on a turret.

Darkness was Edwards' only respite. When the sun went down the bird settled in its nest and sat quiet and still

until the sun rose again. It was as if the lack of light flipped a switch off in her avian brain. Edwards supposed that was when she slept, though it was difficult for him to imagine her sleeping.

He started dreaming of a shotgun. He could feel the slick metal of the barrel against his fingers. He could see the sudden explosion of feathers. He could see the bird and the nest and the half-eaten corpses of pigeons and squirrels and cats sliding from the stonework and plummeting towards the street.

He imagined it would probably upset the birders immensely.

•

One weekend afternoon Edwards decided that he had to do his dishes. He had been spending so much time avoiding the bird that his chores had begun to pile up. Edwards stood in front of the sink in his eat-in kitchen, scrubbing the plates and then wiping them dry with a soft cloth. When they were clean enough he could see his own reflection gleaming in the porcelain. He gave himself a weak smile and smoothed his thinning hair back from his forehead.

He heard something beat through the air outside of his window. Edwards screwed his eyes shut for a moment.

When he was a boy he had kept a parakeet. He remembered that he had given it a flat metal mirror that dangled from the ceiling of its wire cage on a chain. The reflection in the mirror was supposed to trick the parakeet out of being lonely.

Perhaps that was all there was. The bird was there because when the sun hit the glass of William's window at

a certain angle she could see herself and pretend that she was not alone.

It was with this thought in mind that Edwards finally approached the window. He put his hand against the pane and let his forehead fall against the glass.

The eagle turned and fixed him with one enormous yellow eye. She was looking straight at him. She wasn't blinking, not at all.

"So, you do see me," said Edwards. The bird looked frozen. All of her feathers were pressed close to her body. Nothing moved except for the iris of her yellow eye. It flickered in and out, as if someone was shining a flashlight in her face and switching it on and off and on again.

Edwards lowered his voice. "I know why you're here," he said, "But you're mistaken. Listen, I'm not the kind of person that you think I am. You don't understand these things. I've done nothing wrong, really. I haven't done anything wrong. You don't understand."

"Please," he said. His voice began to crack and waver. "Please, just leave me alone."

The bird stared at him through the window. Then the ruff of feathers rose around her face and she began to scream. The window muffled the sound, and he experienced it mostly as a buzzing of the glass beneath his fingers. The bird's dry tongue lashed as her polished beak snapped open and closed. The feathered chest pulled up and down. Circles of pigeon-laced breath appeared on the glass and then contracted into nothing.

Muted, she looked like she was laughing.



There is a tree made of stringy hairs on the shower wall at the YMCA. It is on the far side, branching out at waist height and reaching toward a faucet above it.

Mirna Sinclair ate bats when she saw it. She had set her shampoo down by her toes and was peeling her swimsuit over the soft hills of her body when her eyes passed across it. She stopped with a roll of Lycra circling her middle. The sight made her back squirm, and her feet not want to touch the ground. She cursed public showers with every sinew of her body. She felt the thousands of black hairs dancing like sand fleas on her skin.

She glanced around the locker room for someone to sympathize with her, but feeling only the echo of her own disgust, she turned off her faucet. The stream of the shower rolled into beads upon the sagging landscape of her body.

She took a couple of steps toward the opposite wall.

From the middle of the room, she saw the shape form. A sort of awe slowly brushed over her. She had felt this feeling only once before, as a young woman running across a windy city to stand alone in an art museum. She had, in one second of realization, been completely disarmed by a single map of whirling color on a canvas before her. The stark disconnect of viewing the work of some distant mind while all alone in a monochrome space had consumed her. She hadn't known quite what to do with her hands or the muscles around her eyes.

Mirna stood still for a couple of seconds. The hairs branched out quite beautifully across the faded yellow squares. The thin strands swept gracefully. They dipped with the pulpy white valleys of the molding, but clung tight,

coated in soft skins of moisture.

In a whisk of proactive motion, she moved toward the wall, and turned on the shower whose head stuck out a few feet above the tips of the tree. She stood in the steamy flow of water, letting it beat down on her head. She worked her swimsuit over her folds, stepped out of it, and wrung it out. She would open her eyes for a couple of seconds at a time, until the water avalanched over her eyebrows, around her lids, and in the edges of her eyes. Then she would squeeze them tightly shut.

Eventually she became comfortable with her proximity to the unhygienic mass of beauty, moved her head out of the stream of water and examined the tiles. No-where did the tree grow too thick, given the threads of media, but the edges of a trunk were defined with artistically placed layers of hairs, each following the contour of the one beside it. Within the trunk, three knots were designated by swirls of hair, surrounded by many segments of a circle, and blended into the whole by long strands sweeping the side of the circle and continuing upward.

The water fell on the old woman's shoulders, and the chamber filled with a soft steam. The picture swept her in. She didn't wonder about the girl who had made it; Mirna didn't care. She wanted to touch it though. She stood still for a long time worrying about the water aerobics class ending and the room flooding with chatty women.

Slowly, her ears watching the silence, she brought her finger to the middle of a single branch. She traced her finger down the smooth tile and the branch moved with it, reforming where she stopped. The straight branch now had

a lovely curve. The ease at which the hairs could be swept like silk through the layer of accumulated moisture excited her.

She began to find the tree too straight, seemingly stricken by the winter freeze outside. She envisioned the whorls of Van Gough, the motion of a warm, lively breeze. So she began to work on the tree, one branch at a time. She found that she could pull a single hair out of the mass dragging it by its tip, and she began to disassemble a branch to add life and lumps to the sweeping edges of the vertical trunk.

She felt strange, but banished the notion from her head. Her mother had been a strict schoolteacher, and her father worked on the railroad. She left home when she was seventeen and became a typist at a newspaper. She had enjoyed making words appear on the page, but they were never her own. They had boundaries; the letters were determined decades ago, and the periods followed rules. The text would always appear in perfect squares, laid out by the man she married when she was twenty-one. He considered the arrangement of the boxes an art, but Mirna always saw them as boxes. She never told him this, and they were happy together until his death three years ago. He was gone, the boxes were gone, and here she was, making shapes out of hair on the shower wall at the YMCA. She felt silly, but strangely liberated.

Her squat body, shaped like an endearing loaf of bread, remained under the shower as she reached her fingers across the wall. For ten minutes, a time unnoticed by her, Mirna's fingers danced with the strings of hair.

Standing on her tiptoes, she was reaching to the very

top of the tree, when she heard a pack of voices outside. The sounds paralyzed her. A hand from the other side of the wall gripped the handle of heavy door to the showers, and in the second that was spent fully opening it, Mirna moved two showers down, away from her creation. And in streamed a group of ladies, colorful and loud. Her heart raced, and she feared that they would notice her shampoo bottles and balled up swimsuit sitting below the artwork that these ladies would at first see, like she had, as a gross slab of black hairs.



I have a daughter who travels across the country, who ran away when she was seventeen and never came back home to stay. I am her surrogate father, and I loved her not because someone had to feed her but despite it. I simply loved her, the way most people don't. And she couldn't return that, though I suspect myself for what those reasons were, and it's a disgusting thing to have to wonder if my one mistake was why she left, and where she went, and to assure myself, after many years, that even though she was missing she must have been happier somewhere else. Sonia.

•

She came back here a few weeks ago, in mid-January. It was the first time I had spoken to her in five months. It was the early hours of another late night for me, a night I was spending on the roof crafting bags for the flea market, needle and thread, my sewing machine and fabric scraps at hand. Her headlights hit me from behind, casting my shadow across the trashscapes, my backyard bicycle pieces bent around with a strange light. She emerged from the driver's side window without opening the door and vomited on the neighbor's lawn. The engine was still running.

Her body on the grass made it easier for me to understand. I could do something about this problem. She was on the ground, attached to it and settled. She was asleep or suffering, both and maybe ready to keep going if she hadn't stopped here. I climbed down my ladder from the roof toward the driveway. I got to slide my fingers below her arm fat and carry her into my house, while every pound wanted gravity more than it wanted to come with me. I took

her to the bed she used to sleep in, brought in the comforter and lumped it over.

"Dad?" she said, briefly opening her eyes. She hiccupped once and fell into a deep sleep. I turned off the car, went back on the roof, and sewed.

•

I wouldn't walk in to go see but I knew what she looked like asleep. I knew what she looked like drunk. I knew what she looked like heartbroken. I wanted to stay above and watch the house. In her room, inside her head, whatever she had done was disappearing. She was forgetting, I hoped. When she was eight, and she came to me with her mother, she had pink gummy cheeks and she said it was her dream to run a music-box factory. When her mother left me, I kept the girl and I made her a bed out of a refrigerator box. I filled it with pillows and down comforters and stuffed animals. The experience was love, the only way an eight year old knew it. I took her to McDonald's, honeyed her milk, combed her hair, helped her collect Beanie Babies, taught her to play the harmonica, and trained her as a competitive chess player. I let her eat brownies for breakfast. I'm convinced it would have never been enough to replace her mother, Isabella, but I wasn't a bad stepfather. I never abandoned her.

After I put Sonia to bed, I started making a new bag just for her. I wanted to make her something before she left again, and I didn't know how long she'd stay this time, or where'd she be within a few weeks without me. I hoped she'd go back to work in Skagway, in a few years go back to college, keep playing music. Her life took turns without

warnings, and everything I knew could be different from one visit to the next. Now her hair was dreaded and tinted with red henna. When she was eight her hair was black ringlets all the way down her back. When she was eight her skin seemed more yellow, her eyes were swimming darker. She may have changed races — now she was fair, her eyes were crazed and rimmed with black, like wet ink. Her body had terrain it never had before, weight and womanhood I wanted her to embrace. She could never place her lips together, firmly — her mouth was always parted.

I spent that entire night awake, sewing on the roof with my garden lamps on. With coffee, patience, and the news going, there was no reason to nod off. The primaries were on, New Hampshire was next, the candidates were promising, Obama could win. I could hear Sonia crying down below. Knowing the world had wronged her sickened me. Maybe because I knew she took an active hand in hurting herself. Whatever thing was done, whatever sorrow her heart was condemned to, I couldn't comfort.

•

The bag I made her was messenger style, canvas and leather. It was brown and green, with buckles from three used belts, and it smelled like an old book. I cut a cat decal out of a t-shirt and patched it on. I finished her bag around five in the morning, but the night wasn't done for me until the sun rose, when I turned off the lights and the radio, put away my thread and fabrics and whatever else into little plastic Ziplocs. I climbed down the east side of the house, took in my last bit of sun for the day. The desert sun, even in December, is not worth being in. Then I went to bed.

•

When I woke up I went into the bathroom. I saw something in the mirror that most definitely was not my reflection. I turned around and Sonia was holding her hand out. In her palm was what appeared to be a white pebble. Her eyes disappeared inside her face, hiding inside the shadow of her brow.

"What's happening to you?" I said.

"My mouth is bleeding," she said, "and my tooth is chipped." Her eyeliner was crawling down her face.

I plucked the tooth chip from her hand. "This is what you do now. You look miserable. And your teeth are falling out. What's happening to you?"

"I just need a dentist. I was in love."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Fine. Go to the kitchen Sonia. I'll make you some waffles."

•

She had a way, since she was a kid, of revealing just enough information to me to let me know she was keeping me out of larger portions of her life. In this case, she *had been* in love, which meant that she probably *still* was, which meant she was trying to *not* be in love. Ultimately, I wanted to know who broke her heart and why. I took out the waffle iron from the cupboard. I began mixing the batter in a bowl. Sonia sat up straight in her chair and nothing seemed out of place.

"How about some orange juice?" I said.

She said, "Yes please Paco."

"Pulp or no pulp?"

She said, "Pulp thank you." I had raised her right. I

started mixing the batter again. Sonia took a sip. She closed one eye and swirled the juice in her cup. She said, "I don't want it to separate."

"What's his name?" I said.

She raised her glass to the light, still swirling. "Whose name?"

"The asshole who broke your heart."

"Vincent is not an asshole."

I said, "What'd he do?"

"He just said 'no.'"

"So why are you here?"

She put down her glass and looked at me. "I've got no where else to go."

"Because no one will ever love you like I do."

"That's not fair." She drank her first sip, wincing.

I stopped mixing and stared at her. "Oh I'm Sorry Do I look like a pair of scales to you? Didn't you leave me here in less-than-fair situations? You think your mother was fair to me?"

I poured the batter in the waffle iron and she fell face-forward on the table and knocked the orange juice all over the floor. "Sorry," she said, "my tooth hurts." I started cleaning up the floor and let the first waffle burn.

•

When she was seventeen, she wasn't particularly incapable of taking care of herself, at least compared to many adults I've met. That's why when she finally took off I let her. It wasn't a volatile situation, but it was profoundly unclear in its cause.

I came home from the flea market and Sonia was in her room stuffing a couple of sports bags with clothing and

books, mostly books. She was wearing a trench coat, an aqua crinoline skirt, and a pair of leather boots. It was January, because had it been any other month it would have been too hot to wear any of that. The sun was setting full and red over the Panamit Mountains. It was seven o'clock.

"I've got to go," she told me, "I'm an adult now and I need to face adult responsibilities. I'm going to go find my mother in Alaska."

I stood in the doorway of her room. "Sonia, I'm your father now," I said. "You can stay here, and I can take care of you. Put your stuff back in the closet. We can eat some avocados and pasta for dinner."

"Paco you're not my dad. You mean a lot to me but you're too irresponsible to be my dad."

"How are you going to find her? How do you even know she is where she says she is? Have you talked to her in the past year?"

She crammed a Barbie doll into her bag. "We talk Paco. She writes to me. She's been waiting for me."

"Isabella hasn't written this address in over a year. Your car won't make it through the desert. I've been a good father to you so don't just leave me."

"You're not a bad person, Paco, I just need to find my mother."

I felt like a black hole was hiding in my stomach, swallowing all my words before I could say them. I squatted down, to hold my stomach and talk to her face to face. "You're my baby. Your mom might not realize how important you are but I'd do anything to make you happy. We can go on a vacation, and I'll take you there to your mother. Let me come. We can get any candy you want from

the gas stations we stop at. You can talk to me about anything you want. I'll listen to you, Sonia."

"That's just it," she said standing up. "You can't come with me. No candy. I need to do this alone."

I shaded my head with my hand on the porch and tried to not dig for a cigarette in my pocket. I said, "I don't want you to leave. I don't want you to turn out badly. I'm not a bad father. I never left you."

"I think it's best for the both of us, Paco. I'll keep in touch, you know. We can still be friends." She was trapping things in the trunk. A scrunchy fell out of her bag.

I picked the scrunchy up and offered it to her. "When did you stop loving me?" I said. "How long will I wait for you if you go?"

She took the scrunchy from my hand and pulled her black hair into a bun. "You'll be waiting for a long time. I'm just looking for the person I used to be. My mom's girl." She got in the drivers seat. She rolled down the window and said, "Remember the good times. I'll write you I promise." She started the car. "I'll bring back anything I can, whenever I come back. Thank you for your tenderness, Paco."

She started to back out of the driveway slowly. I stretched my hands out into the air like I was about to catch a ball. "Eat your goddamn vegetables," I said. "Don't date white guys with dreadlocks. If a guy can grow a full-on beard, he's too old for you." The car was in the road. "Wear sunscreen." She was disappearing. "Watch out!" That was important. "Sonia!" She was gone. I ran down the road. "Don't you care about me?"

•

We went to the dentist later that day, after our failed

waffles, where her tooth was fixed within a few hours. There was no one else scheduled for the morning, so she was taken in immediately. They did a good job and Sonia came out with a lollipop.

"God my mouth feels like an animal," she said.

I looked at her bloated lips. "Careful."

"I'm going to ignore that." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "They made me take off my lipstick."

"You hungry?"

"No, I just want some coffee," she said.

We went to Roma's Café on 5th and J. We sat in a corner booth. The waiter brought us water. Sonia pulled out a notebook. She put her hands out on the table, splayed out some drawings, and began a story. "Paco," she said, "I've lost one of the most important people in my life. He was beautiful."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"In Skagway," she said. "I listened to him Paco. I was good to him. You don't know. I'm a nice girl." She opened the notebook full of drawings for me, like a teacher presenting a picture book to a class of first graders. She flipped the pages and looked at them. "Four months, Paco," she said. Every page was a black inky drawing of a young boy with a Prince Valiant haircut. He ate an apple in one drawing, displaying a mouth full of crooked teeth. In another he was asleep or crying on a desk. "He looks like something Leonardo Da Vinci drew with his left hand," she said.

I nodded with my chin propped up by my hands. "Vincent abandoned me in the middle of nowhere, and I had to go down to Virginia to make sure he was alright."

She was on a new drawing, one of Vincent casting a fishing line out of a boat. “He never told me he didn’t like me; he just got sick and went away. I followed him because I’m stupid.”

I felt the need to interrupt her. “Sonia, why did you follow him?”

“I thought he would miss me. I was wrong.”

“And you never found your stupid mother?” I said, “She lied to you and you abandoned me?” I dug my hands under the seat cushions and felt humiliated. The waiters kept avoiding stopping at our table even though I wished they’d interrupt. I felt my face get wet and I didn’t want Sonia to look at me.

“So I learned my lesson and I came back here. I’m sorry I made the wrong decisions. I just wanted him to love me.”

Sonia began to sob, so I felt around for the messenger bag. This was the place, now she would appreciate it, and it could be a token of peace. “Sonia,” I reached one hand across the table. “Don’t cry”

The waiter interrupted, and I immediately shot my hand back. Sonia composed her face and ordered a side of plain tofu and some Mountain Dew. She translated for me and ordered a black coffee. When the waiter left she fumbled into her sweatshirt pockets and plucked out three quarters.

“Going to make a call, I need to talk to a friend” and the tears she was holding back quivered inside her voice.

It was like a movie then. Sonia, putting on her reflective round sunglasses on, reaching down the dips of her

cheeks and sobbing. Sonia, getting up by pushing the cushy purple seats with her little hands. Her hands, leaving prints on the foam that slowly disappeared and flattened. Then she is outside, through the yellow windows, being Sonia on the payphone. She is calling someone, someone else is picking up her signal, speaking in English, and I can tell I’m being punished, being left out of something important.



OUR CHANGING BODIES :: Lauren Seegmiller

Kathleen took up smoking again the day Ruthann Pryor got her first period at recess. She wouldn't start teaching her fifth graders the Our Changing Bodies unit until April, two full months after Ruthann's hand shot into the air during morning math.

"Yes, Ruthann?" Kathleen asked, continuing to write notes about integers on the whiteboard.

"May I sign out, Ms. Gordon?"

"We just had recess, Ruthann. And you're going to need positives and negatives for the whole chapter and they can be kind of tricky."

"It's an *emergency*," said Ruthann.

Kathleen turned to look. Ruthann's penchant for drama preceded her talent by a huge margin, but the horror on her face was more genuine than it had ever been.

"Then yes, Ruthann, go!" Kathleen said.

Ruthann rose from her desk, pulled her T-shirt down as far as it would stretch, and clasped her hands awkwardly behind her back. Kathleen saw the amorphous red blot to the left of Ruthann's hands and thought, *Oh, God*.

"Gross!" said Jolene Sawyer from the middle row. "She's on the rag!"

Ruthann froze. The other children stared.

Kathleen dropped the open dry-erase marker, grabbed Ruthann by the shoulders and steered her into the hallway. Once the door was shut, she crouched in front of the girl, one hand on each arm, in her best comforting-teacher posture.

"I had an accident," Ruthann said weakly. Her chin wobbled.

"It's alright, Ruthann," Kathleen said, "it's all part of growing up for all girls. Do you need anything? A pad? A tampon?"

"I don't know."

Kathleen softened her voice. "Ruthann, is this your first period?"

"Sometimes when I was little at night I had them."

Kathleen held Ruthann at arm's length. The girl's nose was beginning to run.

"That's not what I'm talking about, Ruthann," Kathleen said. "Wetting the bed is very different from your period. Has your mom ever talked to you about menstruation or your time of the month?"

Ruthann shook her head quickly.

Kathleen suppressed a groan. "Okay," she said. "Ruthann. You didn't wet your pants or, that's not urine. Once every girl gets to a certain age and it's different for everyone but it happens to everyone she starts to get her period. Which means, uh, every month, women and girls, uh, *bleed* from their their private parts."

Ruthann's mouth parted and her eyebrows scrunched together.

"Don't worry. It's completely normal. It's just part of growing up for girls. I get my period every month. Every girl in the class will start hers sometime within the next few years if she hasn't already. Your mother gets hers. All women do unless they're going to have a baby. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Ruthann did not look soothed by this information.

"Your period comes once a month, and it lasts for a

few days—maybe four or five—but it’s different for every woman,” Kathleen said. “And, uh, there are special products like pads, which you put in your underwear, and they absorb the—the mess. And there are also things called tampons, which—you know what? Never mind. A pad will be just fine for right now. You can sometimes feel a little pain called ‘cramps’...like a stomachache? Do you feel like that?”

“No.”

“Okay. We’re going to go to the nurse’s office and get you a pad. And we’ll call your mom and let her know. The important thing is, are you alright?”

“Um. I think so.”

“I know it’s overwhelming, but you’re doing great. I am *so* proud of you, Ruthann. Are you ready to walk to the nurse’s?”

Ruthann nodded. Kathleen walked directly behind her to the school clinic, where the nurse gave Ruthann a generic, wingless pad and a book about puberty.

“If you like, I’ll call her mother,” said the nurse.

“That would be extremely helpful,” said Kathleen. She gave Ruthann’s shoulder a squeeze and left, piling up the new obstacles: giving a supplementary call to Mrs. Pryor, explaining to the class what had happened, hastily drafting a letter to parents, making up for lost time with integers.

As soon as she stepped back into the classroom, the noise stopped. She held the students’ gaze as she walked to the center of the room and recapped the open marker. One or two kids blushed, others held their lips in as though to stifle laughter. More than a few boys had the same lost, uneasy expression as Ruthann.

“Who’s hall monitor this week—Daryl? Daryl, will you please escort Jolene to the Vice Principal’s office?” she asked.

Jolene opened her mouth.

“Say one word, Jolene, and I will call your parents.”

Jolene scowled but went silently. Daryl followed, toting the wooden hall pass.

“Everyone else—push the desks back and make a circle,” she said. “We’re going to have a special class meeting about what just happened.” She crossed to her desk, picked up the phone and dialed the extension to the main office. She watched her class slide their desks to the back of the room and sit in a circle with their legs obediently crossed and faces fearfully expectant, as though she might threaten to also call their parents.

“No one’s in trouble,” Kathleen said, with a hand over the receiver.

They started to whisper among themselves as she spoke to the Vice Principal, but every pair of eyes returned to her, and the fear she saw disheartened her.

•

Kathleen was supposed to bring dessert to the teachers’ lounge lunch, but she decided to hide the tub of cookies under her desk and drive to the 7-Eleven instead. She had to stay for that evening’s PTA meeting to present her budget with Isaac Komorowski, another fifth grade teacher. The meeting would be at seven, and in order to last that long she needed a cigarette immediately.

It was only February of Kathleen’s first year as a full-time teacher, but she was already exhausted. Her class was a good group of kids, and they got along well with one

another despite a lot of strong personalities. Jolene Sawyer loved to throw the class into chaos by flouting authority. Ruthann Pryor constantly groped for the spotlight. Daryl Franklin's lack of empathy made Kathleen wonder if he might grow up to be a serial killer. Still, Kathleen was always impressed with the creativity of her class's projects, the strength of their eleven-sentence paragraphs, and their quick comprehension of most subjects. She tried to meet their energy with challenges. But even the better behaved children complained about the difficulty of the work she assigned, that they had to write in cursive, that they had regular book reports, reading logs, times tables tests. They had practically revolted when she had imposed restrictions on snacks after first term.

After that, the fifth grade team decided it might be best if Kathleen team-taught with Isaac Komorowski next year if the board renewed her contract. Isaac was the darling of the faculty—envied not only for his creative curriculum, but for his class average of 'advanced' scores on the state standardized test. His infectious enthusiasm and nice smile made him popular with everyone. Kathleen—along with all the unmarried female teachers—had developed a bit of a crush on him. But during the last teachers' meeting, Kathleen had begun to detect an air of condescension from him. That was the meeting when rest of the fifth grade team revealed their team-teaching plot to her.

"And why am *I* the candidate?" she had asked them.

"Well," said Ms. Smith, "we think some of your curriculum is a little...dated."

"Dated?"

"Well, the cursive requirement, for instance. I mean,

most people who hand-write anymore print. And the reading logs—does it matter how much a child reads as long as they're learning and enjoying themselves? And dictating snack time foods—"

"I think what the fifth grade team is trying to say," Isaac Komorowski had said, "is that it's only your first year, and...*maybe* you could try working with someone who teaches...differently than you do...until you come into your own style of teaching."

"Yes, thank you Isaac. That was *exactly* what I was trying to say," Ms. Smith had said, and blushed.

"Yes, *thank* you Isaac," Kathleen had said.

In the parking lot, on her way to get cigarettes, Kathleen saw Isaac at his car, retrieving a bag of red plastic cups from the trunk. He was parked next to her.

"You ready for budgets tonight, Kathleen?" he asked her. "I was thinking about getting some paint for a mural if you want to maybe combine classes. You know, have the kids do something creative."

"Actually, April is national poetry month, so I thought about having them write poems and illustrate them for a class anthology."

"Oh yeah? Well, that *is* creative. And pretty cool."

"I like to think so." She unlocked her door. "And all we need is paper."

"Hey, I heard about Ruthann Pryor. How's she doing?"

"The nurse told me she's spending the rest of the day at home."

"Good. She deserves a day off. God, I don't know if I would do if it were one of the girls in my room. It's amazing

you can hold yourself together like that.”

“Thanks,” she said. She sat in the car, shut the door and started the engine.

“Hey!” Isaac said as she backed out. “Weren’t you signed up to bring dessert?”

As Kathleen drove to the 7-Eleven she thought of Isaac in the teacher’s lounge. Sometimes he was sweaty from a spontaneous game of class kickball. Sometimes he had tempera paint or homemade clay under his fingernails from some project that managed to be both educational and fun. He was always at the center of everyone, talking to the other young female teachers, who wore long, shapeless jumper dresses and bright colors. The teachers who glowed with the delight of making a difference.

•

In the dead time between the final bell and the PTA meeting, Kathleen tucked herself into one of the brick corners outside her classroom to have her third cigarette of the day. She was about to light it when Mrs. Pryor came marching up. Kathleen yanked the cigarette out of her mouth and hid it with the lighter in her left hand.

“Miss Gordon! I need to have a word with you!” Mrs. Pryor said.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Pryor?”

Mrs. Pryor put her hands on her hips. A gold cross necklace dangled menacingly atop her knotted scarf. Kathleen wondered how deliberate its placement was. “I just thought I would have you know that I’m having Ruthann transferred out of your class. I’ve never liked the way you’ve done things, but today was the last straw. I’ll be making a formal complaint to the school about this morning.”

“A complaint?” Kathleen asked. She tried to remember her exact words earlier.

“The last thing I want is for my Ruthann to learn about the facts of life before she’s ready. She’s only ten! That is her *family’s* job. Not yours.”

“Did you get the voicemail that I left you? I think you’re a little confused about what exactly I told Ruthann.”

“Look, the school may let you teach puberty from a binder and advocate pre-marital sex to fifth graders, but I was going to pull Ruthann out of that Our Changing Bodies garbage. I don’t trust you people at all with my daughter—and this morning proves me right.”

Kathleen’s face grew hot. “I assure you,” she said, “that Our Changing Bodies is not at all like that. And I was just trying to make Ruthann *understand* the immediate situation, nothing more.”

“No, what you did was decide you presumed the best way to explain something *that* personal to *my* daughter?”

“Well, I *am* her teacher,” Kathleen said, now so angry she couldn’t settle on any words to defend herself further. She met Mrs. Pryor’s ferocious gaze before opening her left fist and placing the cigarette between her lips and clicked the lighter.

“Oh, and now you’re smoking on *school property*?”

Kathleen drew in the smoke, inhaled, and blew it out the side of her mouth.

“*This* is a tobacco-free zone by *law*—wait until the PTA hears about this. I’m not the only one who thinks you can’t do your job.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Kathleen.

“You’ll *really* be sorry when the board discusses contract renewals.”

Kathleen tapped away the ash. Mrs. Pryor stood staring, as though anticipating Kathleen to make a more dramatic action, like start a fight or tearfully promise to resign.

“If you’d like to schedule another appointment,” Kathleen said, “voicemail is the best way to reach me.”

Mrs. Pryor breathed in loudly through her nose, turned sharply and stalked away, yanking a cell phone from her purse. Kathleen finished her cigarette. She knew good sense was on her side, but didn’t know enough parental politics to gauge how much sway Mrs. Pryor had. She dragged the smoking filter across the mortar of the wall behind her and put it in a garbage can before going back inside.

She sank into her desk chair and began to blink out tears. The nicotine hadn’t made her any calmer. She grabbed the tub of cookies and pried it open, taking a cookie from the top. It crumbled in her mouth and down her front. It tasted like tar and she couldn’t swallow it. She put it down on the desk, looked around the room and imagined another teacher in her place. It was a woman with bright eyes, who would wear floral patterned dresses and effortlessly dazzle teacher, parent, and child alike. Who would let the kids eat Twinkies at nine-thirty in the morning and tear down Kathleen’s meticulously stapled train of cursive examples. She cried a little harder.

A knock startled her, and she looked up to see Isaac standing outside the locked door. She brushed the crumbs off her blouse before stepping outside.

“Are you here to go over the budget numbers?” she asked.

“I saw Mrs. Pryor talking on the phone and thought I would come check on you. She looked pretty pissed off. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“Do you want to go home? We can present your budget by proxy at the meeting.”

“No thanks. I can do it.”

“You sure?”

“Unless one of the agenda items is nailing me to a cross, I think I’ll manage.”

“Look, I know some parents are pretty harsh. I used to want to quit, too.”

“I never wanted to quit,” she said. “It seems like *you* all want me to quit.”

“That’s not true,” Isaac said after a silence. “We’re just trying to help.”

“Well, it can be pretty patronizing.” She felt her throat constrict again.

He sighed. “You’re not interested in dinner with the fifth grade team at all, are you?”

“Well, gee, you make it sound so inviting.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “Look”

“I’ll see you at the meeting.”

Kathleen shut the door and walked slowly across the room to her desk. She looked at the wall clock. There was an hour and a half until the meeting. She wondered how many mothers Mrs. Pryor could rally before then. She smiled as she imagined them sitting sternly with crossed legs and arms, staring her down, whispering to each other.

They would grill her about every cent, make sure every book was morally sound. They would have her personal files, her library records. They would slash her budget to ribbons, march to her room and take away some of the books she already had. They would swarm her, break her nose with *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*, hold her down to burn her with her own cigarettes. Her last sight on earth would be a wistful yet condescending look from Isaac before they tore her to pieces.

I dare you, she thought, and finished her cookie.



STREETLIGHT :: *Keri Smith*

Sean, Ben, and I trace the cold streets following the moon. The air seeps through my jeans and button-holes and I feel wet and slippery and alive. The streets are black and tan, shining slightly; curbs mask their own dark tunnels, deep currents which twist downwards and out to sea. Trees stitch a black geometry against the horizon while beneath glows the private yellow rectangles of empty containers. It is raining.

Sean and I rush noiselessly forward across the pavement, cold air burning in our mouths, smoking up our view. We run in a cloud. Ben wanders slowly, kicking his legs out and up, face down toward his soaked sneakers.

As Sean and I run, I snatch at her arm and grabbing her wrist pull her around me in a fast arc. Her eyes widen in surprise and her dark hair whips about her face, long wet strands lashing her shoulders, in her mouth. She glares at me as our spinning comes to a sudden halt, trails of wet residue drip from her nose, shine across her cheek. She smiles and shoves me and we press on, running faster. My head clicks clack, clack with each footfall. My brain has come loose. It smacks against the bone, clack, clack. I wonder if Sean can hear it too.

Our golden shapes click off and the jack-o-lantern homes fade us into the random spills of orange light. The world is denser, sharper, closer, but still the moon hangs white.

Sean stops to catch her breath, foot hopping from botstot to botstot down the center of the road.

"I'm so tired," Sean says and I can see the dark bags under her eyes, her cheeks black rents in her pale skin: she

looks half-night anyway.

"I know," I say.

"Lena!" Ben says and Sean and I turn back towards his voice.

Ben is moonstruck, rooted to the side of the road. His dark sweatshirt and jeans make him appear one bodiless mass, a shrub, a can, a black lump swallowed into obscurity. His round thick face is leveled upwards, a smooth white disk offered to the street lamp under which he stands. In his halo of light Ben looks less cherubic, more terrestrial, the white cap of a toadstool bathed in sudden unexpected light.

"You have to see this," Ben says.

Sean and I sprint down toward him, her short legs working hard to keep up with my long strides.

We settled in around him, me fitting my cold sides into the crook of his arm, leaning into his chest, Sean reclines against my chest, her arms brought in tight under her breasts and up to her sloping shoulders a trembling 'w' of flesh.

"Look." Ben reaches up with his free arm and points towards the glowing iris of the street lamp. We crane back our necks.

The night swirls around us in a million tiny golden particles, twisting through and around one another falling sideways, falling up so the dark can barely breathe in this swarm of light crawling over its black swollen hide. We huddle there together amazed, and the drops of light continue their hypnotic dance, an explosion of crystalline filaments which fall down wet on our faces. I feel the closed

doors and dead houses as we stand alone in the rain. Ben brings his free arm in and sneaks his big palm up the line of my back sliding his fingers under the clasp of my bra and pulling the scratchy fabric away from my skin. He lets his fingers fill the small pattern of indentations. I shudder a bit, still cold, but no one moves to go.

“God,” Sean whispers, “why do I never look up?”

I squeeze her so she knows I agree, but I cringe hating the sound of a voice cutting across my eyes.

It is Friday, and the night stretches on free of expectations so we three can breathe again.



THE TOWNIES :: A. Werner

Greg lay on his back and wriggled against the floor. He felt the texture of the threadbare Oriental rug acutely through his t-shirt.

His friend Jenny walked back into the room and it seemed to him that she had been gone for a very long time. She smelled like smoke. A small, dark animal circled around her feet like a satellite. "What's that?" he asked, not moving from his prone position.

"This is Yuri, Greg. You know Yuri."

Greg shook his head and snapped his teeth together.

"He's a schnauzer, Greg. A sort of German terrier."

"Terrier," said Greg. "Carrier, harrier." The words came up without thought, burbling between his teeth.

"Warier," said Jenny.

Greg nodded at her. Yes, that was indeed an appropriate word to follow in that series of sounds.

"I guess your mushrooms have come on, then," said Jenny. She smiled at him and sat down on the couch, folding up her long legs. One foot dangled off of the edge of the cushions, encased in the shiny patent leather of her Oxford shoe. She was as toothy and slippery as an eel.

Greg rolled over and began to move towards her, dragging his belly across the carpet. The shoe was so irresistibly shiny.

Jenny was tall and raw-boned, with features too harsh for most people to consider pretty. She had brick-red hair that would have grown out thin and blowsy if it hadn't been cropped so brutally close to her skull. Her eyes were beady, far-set, and flat grey. Her eyes, along with her teeth, gave Greg the impression of something predatory and aquatic.

She looked like she should live deep under the sea and breathe black water.

Greg reached the couch. He reared up and ran his tongue along the tip of her shoe.

"Don't be a creep," said Jenny and she tucked her feet underneath her.

Greg fell back to the floor as if she had struck him. He felt for a moment that he might cry. He could feel the saline start welling up from under his eyes. Instead he took a breath and lay back down on the rug by her feet. Greg curled into himself and closed his eyes. He threaded his fingers through his beard and went elsewhere.

When Greg returned to himself it was 4 p.m. and he was hungry. He stood up and brushed carpet lint from his t-shirt and jeans. Jenny looked up from the book she was reading. The little black dog, Yuri, looked up at him too.

"Do you think you could perhaps drive me into town for some food?" he asked her.

"Sure thing," said Jenny, "I need to drop off the new issue of *Townie*, anyway." She squeezed his shoulder. He felt for a moment that he might swoon. It was the drugs, he knew, there were still the remnants of the drugs working their way through his blood. It was probably the drugs, but there was a small part of him that knew he might be in love with her.

Jenny was technically his landlady. She collected his rent and organized repairs on the house. He was under the impression, however, that she did not own the house, that it did not actually belong to her. This impression may have

evolved from the fact that she was a few years younger than him, twenty-four to his twenty-six. Greg could not imagine owning a home until he was at least thirty. He suspected Jenny was an agent of some greater power, the kind of person with pockets deep enough to own property.

Greg was an artist and did not own property. He painted and worked part-time at the local QuikStop in order to make ends meet. He rented.

Jenny collected a stack of photocopied black and white pamphlets tied together with string and walked with him out to the car. The radio came on as soon as she turned the key in the ignition and Greg jumped in his seat, startled. Jenny fiddled with the dial and then classical music poured over him like cool water. Greg sighed and then twisted in his seat to examine the stack of *Townies* in the back seat. The cover of this particular issue was graced with a sketch of the dog, Yuri. The drawing looked a little like the dog from *TinTin*, but with all the colors in reverse. And on the cover Yuri was wearing glasses and smoking a pipe. Greg had the impression that the dog from *TinTin* was a drinker, not a smoker.

"I think the cover came out well," said Greg. He had drawn the cover.

Jenny looked over at him from a moment. "It's a lovely cover, Greg. Thank you," she said. Greg smiled at her.

Jenny stopped the car in front of Ibis Used & Rare Books and hopped out of the car with the issues of *Townie*. When she opened the door of the store a bell rang. Greg stayed in the car. He pressed his forehead against the glass of the passenger window and closed his eyes. Jenny put an awful lot of effort into *Townie*, but no one ever seemed to

want to buy it, even though it only cost fifty cents a copy. Sometimes Greg would go into the bookstore on his own and buy six copies at a time, just to up the circulation numbers.

When Jenny returned she had more paper copies with her than she had walked in with. Her mouth was drawn in a thin line. She looked very haggard and cold for a moment before starting the engine.

Jenny was an exile from warmer climes. Texas, she had said. Greg had never been outside of New England. Texas seemed as unreal to him as Shangri-La.

"Circulation drops in the summer. When all the students are gone," said Jenny. She might have been addressing him, but she just looked straight out over her steering wheel. Greg made a small noise of assent and Jenny rolled the car back onto the street and towards the diner.

Jenny loved the diner. She used nearly nonsense words like "googie" and "populuxe" when she talked about it. To Greg, however, it was just an average diner with peeling vinyl booths and plastic countertops. The food was not particularly good, but the price was low and the servings were large.

When the waitress came to take their order Jenny bantered with her at pace so frenetic that Greg could barely follow it. Jenny rattled her pack of cigarettes at the waitress, asking for permission to smoke, but the waitress just kept shaking her head and smiling.

"It's illegal to smoke in dining establishments in the state of Massachusetts," said the waitress. Jenny put her cigarettes away and Greg managed to order the tuna melt

special. Jenny ordered a side of fries and a cola.

Jenny sighed loudly, almost theatrically, her shoulders rising and falling. "I think that I may have to give up," she said. Jenny always spoke in a very flat voice, almost a monotone, and it was very difficult for Greg to tell when she was joking or not.

"Give up what?" said Greg. He felt very nervous all at once.

She made a wide, sweeping gesture that seemed to Greg to encompass everything that ever was. "This," she said, "All of this."

"I don't understand," said Greg. The waitress returned with their orders. Jenny took a long sip of cola and nibbled on a few limp fries before continuing.

"Do you know what I was intending to do with my free time when I first arrived here, Greg? I was intending to write a novel. Or a memoir. Something weighty and important. Do you see what I have produced, over these last few years? Only this." She pulled a crumpled back issue of *Townie* out of the pocket of her jeans and tossed it onto the table between them.

"But *Townie's* great!" protested Greg. "All those stories about when you were back in Texas, the music reviews, the "

"It costs me money to print this rag every week. I pay for it to exist. Do you know what that makes *Townie*, Greg?"

Greg shook his head solemnly.

"That makes *Townie* a vanity publication, Greg. Vanity publications belong to the ninth circle of literary hell. They burn down there along with the slash fiction and chick tracts."

"It's not so bad," said Greg.

"Besides, I'm not even a real townie. I am a false local. I am scum," she said.

"No," said Greg soothingly, in the same voice he would sometimes use to talk to Yuri. "Not, of course not."

She paused for a moment and then said, "I think I should go back to Texas."

"No," said Greg, "That is the exact opposite of something you should do." He was nearly trembling with panic.

"I'll go back and then I'll use the last of my savings to buy myself a large exotic animal. Then I'll release it onto my property, and then I'll hunt it down with a semi-automatic machine gun. You can do that sort of thing in Texas, Greg. That state would give me a swift kick in the ass."

"Stop it," said Greg. "You're not going back to Texas."

"Massachusetts is far too respectable for me, Greg. They won't even let me smoke indoors."

"If you go back to Texas, I'm going with you," said Greg. He slammed his palms down onto the table for emphasis.

His display of loyalty seemed to touch her. Her jaw unclenched and her smile became less frantic. "You'd hate Texas, Greg," she said gently. "The climate's not good for the sorts of drugs you like."

"I'd switch to peyote," said Greg.

"You'd be kicked to death by jack rabbits," she said. "You'd be gored by long-horned cattle. It would be a terrible disaster. You can't go to Texas, Greg."

Greg felt his eyes become very large and wet. "I love you, Jenny," he said.

Jenny stared at him for a long couple of moments. Greg felt like his heart might burst out his chest and beat it-

self onto the middle of table next to *Townie*. “No, you don’t,” she said finally. Her face had become extremely serious.

“I do,” said Greg. “I love you. I’d follow you to Siberia if I had to.”

“Siberia’s gentler than Texas,” she said. “You don’t love me. It’s just the last of the drugs talking.”

But Greg, being Greg, was very aware of the fact that the drugs he had eaten were almost completely gone from his system. He felt his love for her burning in all of his veins and vessels and capillaries. “I’m not going to let you do that,” he said.

“Do what?” said Jenny. Her flat grey eyes flicked back and forth across the table.

“Give me a way out,” said Greg. “You can’t. It’s too late.” He blinked back tears. “I’ve ruined it. I’ve ruined everything.”

“Hey,” said Jenny, “Hey.” She reached across the table and clasped his hand. “Stop that. It’s all right.”

Greg sniffed and ran the back of his hand across his eyes.

“There. See? Everything’s a-okay. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Let’s go out and get drunk. Really drunk, the best kind of drunk.” Jenny stood up and pointed to the crumpled zine still sitting in the middle of the table. “Then we’ll make a big bonfire with lots of lighter fluid and we’ll burn the extra issues of *Townie*. Bam. Fwoosh. It’ll be great.” She smiled beneficently at him.

Greg looked up her face. He saw for a moment, the pages of *Townie* superimposed on her features. The pages curled up in flames and dropped into ash, but Jenny kept on smiling.



PHOTOGRAPHY/ART



THIS PAGE:
ALGEBRA IN LIJANG
(JEREMY NELSON)

OPPOSITE:
WINTER TREES
(DORA POLLAK)





嫦娥為了國民偷永生
吃藥以後就飛越來越高
永遠地住在月亮裡



THIS PAGE:
CHANG'E
(DORA POLLAK)

OPPOSITE:
BEACH
CAPE MAY, NJ
2008
(JOEL BATTERMAN)





UMBRELLAS (JOEL BATTERMAN)



THIS PAGE: WHALE (TATIANA OUDINE)

OPPOSITE: CIGARETTE MAN (JEREMY NELSON)





THIS PAGE:
SVETA LUK
(ADAMS CARROLL)

OPPOSITE:
SEAGULL
(POLIA PETKOVA)





THIS PAGE: IMPRESSIONS (NICK KAPPEYNE VAN DE COPPELLO)

OPPOSITE: UNTITLED (BECCA ROBERTS)







EAST PARKING LOT (ADAMS CARROLL)

THIS PAGE:
GROWING UP
(TATIANA OUDINE)



OPPOSITE:
COUGH IN SNOW
(RACHEL MARCUS)





THIS PAGE:
HELSINKI MAN
(EMILY BROWN)

OPPOSITE:
UNTITLED
(DANIELA MORAR)





NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF NAT TURNER
(TY BLAKENEY)
LEFT TO RIGHT: SIGN, BLACKNESS,
PURSUIT





NICK (TATIANA OUDINE)

•
POETRY
•

CITY BABIES ::: *Rebecca Mellstrom*

Every baby bruised upon
the ash-black hips of the city.
Smoke-cracked lips exhale the chalky,
ash-sweet odor of aspartame
in its pink paper
packet. Skyscraper
babies make colicky racket.
Across a walky-talky,
sidewalk mamas croon their names,
kisses that leave a nicotine stain.

The city tosses her babies high,
they giggle and gurgle against the sky,
her pavement rises to meet them.
Summit, plummet, coo and whine,
cityscape and chalk outline.
Hard love, high love, love with a leer,
the city's a sweet mother smothered in beer.

MANHOOD ::: *Alok Amatya*

edge of the blade slides across my smooth skin
blades of ice, that leave welts of tender purple
on the back of my hand, still a soft brown that,
in boyhood i imagined, one day would be gone,
be replaced by coarse scaly grits, of a manhood
that blew smoke aimlessly into a wild blue sky
carefree, fearless, but not lacking the coals
that burn in the gut, and spit fire from the eyes
into that of the passing child, who is scarred
by the violence, the manhood that inflicts
itself without mercy, upon anything that yields...
and leaves charred remains a soul that weeps
sooty tears, and a belly full of ashes that still
pumps ember into the back of my hands, the ice
still melts and screams to touch the surface
of my blood, and bursts fattily into a splay,
a swollen mess of colors, pink and gray.

AWAY FROM YOU :: *Kelly Bolding*

Outside of the car window,
the young trees thrive in the lonesome pasture,
singular,
 grounded,
 remaining,
despite the bitter winter wind, whipping,
their youth winning out over the weathering forces of
 nature.

I fly past them, as if on the wings of sparrows,
a mere flash in their infinite vision.
I am thriving too, or so I am told,
although plural,
 transient,
 changing.

Driving cross-country at night,
away from you and all you represent,
boarding a new ship towards a new sea,
I see the dirty snow piled up in mounds along the high
 way
like a blockade to keep away the night wanderers,
and I have the urge to stop the car and lie in it
and make snow-angels like I did when I was five,
when I lived in Kansas and the snow was still large and
 exciting.

Those days, I didn't know what it meant to need someone
like a body needs the rhythm of a breath.

I didn't yet know what gone meant.

Down by the riverbank, behind the old church,
I would make hieroglyphs in the wet sand
with a small branch of birch, smearing the pictures in my
 head
onto the grainy soil like paint, pretending
I was slicing truth into the earth with a silver sword,
the sacred images forever remaining.

Now, though, I write words,
black scribbles skiing down a bed of white,
always in jeopardy of falling off the edge,
always coming so close,
 teetering,
 precarious.

At night, I would sit on the couch next to my mother,
watching game shows on television
to avoid going to sleep before eleven.
I would shout the answers out to everyone in the room
as if I were speaking the word of God,
and everyone should take heed.

Now I know that they won't listen,
and I've stopped trying to force them.

Today, I wonder when the man from the bank is going to
 call again
with his incessant demanding.
I wish he would forget about money and say,

“You’ve forgotten what it’s like to eat honeysuckle,
what it feels like to sing loud from the depths of your
belly,
and how to be naked without being embarrassed. Come. I
will remind you.”

But he will not say that, and I will not pick up the phone.

You will not say those things either,
so I drive towards the place I used to call home,
although it has long ago forgotten my name.

WHAT THE BLOOD KNOWS ::: *Marena Lear*

The body knows itself.
The cells do not ask for oxygen.
The limbs do not doubt that they will
wake to a pulse, do not question
the heart's intention.
What, then, is I
when it has always been we?

Because your mouth was full of music,
the world was not silent.
In your dreams you traced
a constellated map into my wings
with your fingers, a map of the hip's first jut
to a new-familiar rhythm.

At night when I press my face into your belly,
I am singing to the blood.
It remembers me, like the river
remembers salt; like feet remember sky.
I learned you when I first learned to dance,
and in the lonely whispers
of our childhood trees
there was one shared word.
And so the song of blood
has no beginning.

Love is nothing but a string plucked once,
letting fly an infinite resonance
the only thing heard by the stars.

OCEANS AND CONSTELLATIONS :: *Kelly Bolding*

Often when you sleep so softly, like a child,
I draw glowing constellations on your back
with a stem of lavender from the yellow pot near the bed,
grazing the small brown spots
like angel fingerprints on your pale skin,
naming them after the faithful wives of Trojan war heroes
and the boys I used to love.

Your breath owns the rhythm of a lullaby
that your mother used to sing to you
in Spanish when you were still
small enough to fit into her arms without protesting.

I read poems sometimes into your chest swaying like an
ocean,
their echoes returning to me like ships,
containing the salty dampness of your skin
like plundered treasure,
which wets my lips as they part again
to sing to you more of the words that you will never remember
in the tangerine light of morning.

AT NIGHT IN THE CITY ::: *Dominic Finocchiaro*

At night in the city where the lights hang like wanted
men,
the homeless call passersby to prayer
like muezzin chanting
“Spare a dime” and bearing
witness from back-alley minarets,
echoing the words of a prophet
slumming in an East Village bodega,
using Street Sheets as
blankets to ease the stress on
knees worshipping Allah and
an unzipped pair of too-tight jeans.

At night in the city where doormen hold their hats like
someone else’s child,
while in the confines of
cloistered confessionals,
bathrooms with red walls
under bars with black floors,
lonely men genuflect and
grip their God in their
sweat-soaked fists, leaving
their holy water on walls covered with
the excrement of
downtown deities.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest Reedie (or, To Whom It May Concern),

You hold in your hands this year's Creative Review. But I'm sure you already noticed that (if not, flip to the cover. It's in giant font). For two months, eleven of us sat for hours in Eliot deliberating over the unholy amount of submissions we received. We treated each submission anonymously and whittled everything down to the lean, sleek volume you're currently thumbing through (lean and sleekness courtesy of Sacha, our wonderful layout editor). Our goal this year was to make the RCCR a part of the community, something as integral a part of Reed as RKSK (though without the cultish chanting and bowls of borscht) or the Motorized Kouch Kollektive (though without the... motorized couches).

It's spring break as I write this. I am at home, far from campus, from the grey rain of Portland and the old red bricks of Eliot. It is warm and sunny outside and I think with nervous excitement about how the review is going to turn out. And I ask myself: what do I want to say? What do I want this magazine to say? I want this year's Review to be more personable. I want it to be a voice, a representation of what Reed has to offer and chooses to share. I figured the best way to convey that was to close the review with my directly addressing you, dear Reedie or reader.

When Professor Pete Rock sent out an email asking if any of his students were interested in being the Editor for this year's review, I jumped at the opportunity because I really feel like the RCCR should be an important part of Reed, somewhere for talented Reedies to show their work; to read and be read; a source of inspiration cultivated from

our peers, and not some tucked-away commodity of artsy elitism.

The Creative Review is compiled from submissions discussed as anonymous work, and voted on democratically by everyone present at our meetings, which are open to all. This year, we've got poems about love and the ocean, stories about prodigal daughters and giant birds, photographs from around the world and around the corner, and art of all kinds. So I urge you: see what Reed has to offer.

Lastly, a giant thanks to the RCCR editors, particularly Sacha and Allie for devoting far too much time to our publication, and to the entire editorial board for showing up as often as possible and weighing in with honest and insightful opinions. Also, much thanks to Kristin Holmberg, the SAO, and the senate for providing us with the monies to make all this fancy printing possible. And a thank you, of course, to Mara Thrush at Bridgetown Printing, for her indispensable help.

Michael Avishay
Editor-in-Chief

P.S. To let you all in on a little inside joke: there's a sort of latent theme to the design, though we didn't have enough time to elaborate on it much. The relics of our idea are the robot on the cover and the tarsier etching on the title page. Our genius and esoterically brilliant idea: Monkeys vs. Robots. Or, Pre-humans vs. Post-humans. Social commentary? Perhaps. Artistic criticism? Maybe. I leave it up for you to decide.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

DOMINIC FINOCCHIARO is too weird to live and too rare to die.

DIANA OLIVA is unfaithful in the worst kind of way: not to her lovers, but to her God.

POLIA PETKOVA is a senior majoring in Economics. She is from Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Her hometown, a contemporary of Troy and Mycenae, is one of the oldest cities in Europe.

KELLY THOMAS is a sophomore English major who stores her masses of excess hair on shower walls. She has never made a tree.

SARAH JACOBY has been drawing as long as she can remember but has only recently gotten any good at it.

KELLY BOLDING is a new-blooming poet born from the red dirt of Oklahoma who loves yoga and sunflowers, the smell of the ocean and cute animals.

A. WERNER likes Kafka and comic books.

DORA POLLAK likes to think she is a mountain hermit, serving tea and buttered scones to the friends who come to find her, but actually she is a fearless explorer, discovering new planes of existence in her cosmological wanderings...

REBECCA MELLSTROM is an apprentice awkwardsmith and is impressed by weird facts about animals.

KERI SMITH is a senior english major at Reed College, born and raised in Hayward, California.

LAUREN SEEGMILLER is a wonderer, a wayfaker, and a tattered wastrel stuck in a drainpipe.

JOEL BATTERMAN wants to help remake Michigan's transportation infrastructure.