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Letter from the Editor

When I was a kid, sitting in algebra, I would watch the clock. I counted down the minutes until I could sneak out for a smoke, counted the seconds that led me to the cafeteria for a slice of plastic pizza and an ice cream sandwich. Those minutes dragged on...each second felt like days, months, years. To pass the time, I doodled. Once, I sketched a picture of the teacher while he lectured. I worked on this drawing for a week. It was a goofy caricature with over-exaggerated facial features and nerdish clothing, including a pocket protector. Behind the teacher, on the blackboard, was a jumble of type—boxy letters mixed with puffy numbers stacked on thin-lined algebraic formulas; there was a beauty in the chaos. Did I know back then the importance of this sketch? No; like I said, I was passing time. Yet, I wonder why today I can still see that picture—the letters, the numbers, even the pocket protector—in my head, though the notebook that was its home is 20 years gone?

As I sit here determined to give a smart answer to this question, I can come up with only one thing. I haven't forgotten this drawing because it was a truth. As a young kid, I couldn't explain with words my frustration with the subject matter—but given a blue pen and a spiral notebook, anything was possible. In this drawing the letters and words, along with the blackboard and the teacher, fused into the single image of a continuous moment of frustration—a moment that could resonate with anyone who suffered through a lecture as if in a foreign country, unable to speak the language.

These days, months and days go by like they are mere ticks of a clock. It feels like yesterday that Katie and Ira asked me to be the Graphic Nonfiction Editor for Sweet and this issue marks our one-year anniversary. That's right, a year. I can hardly believe it. What amazes me more is what we accomplished in such a short amount of time.

Our mission was to build a home for those artists who seek a truth in the fusion of text and image. We wanted to share with our readers those crafted moments that affect us. We looked for those chunks of truth, like the picture of my algebra teacher, that more than resonate with the reader, but linger in the cracks and crevasses like dust bunnies trapped under the bed.

In this issue of Sweet, whether it is Nusha Ashjaee's stark pursuit of identity in "Nusha" or Nathin Holic's ironic tale of lost treasure in "My Life in Gadgets: The George Foreman Grill," there is a universal bond created—a bond that melds the writer's haunts with those of the reader. The same must be said about the poems and essays in this issue. The words, the sentences, the stanzas and paragraphs evoke and provoke images in the reader's head, just as indelible and full of insight as the visual components inside.

Finally, we'd like to introduce our new department: Fan Mail—a place where readers respond with letters to the work they love. So we invite you to spend some time with us. You never know what you'll find lurking under the bed.

—Jim Miller

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Janet MacFadyen

Provincelands II

On the cusp of a dune in the middle of dunes in the middle of the sea.

A hand turns the page, the ocean overturns the land.

The land picks up & moves grain by grain across the highway.

And you & I who have traveled
are here in a swirl of compass grass.

One ridge after another floats into the binocular lens until we reach the edge
beyond which

there is only blue: sky-fused waves, sea serpents
foaming & half crazy.

We surely are lost, but down
is still down: fishing boats end up there, waterlogged & mythic.

The Lucy G. sank tied up at the pier and lay there patrolled by squid, embossed with
barnacles, seaweed tugging at her rigging in the tide.

You could look
straight down on her decks & derricks, not so tidy now.

Look up: a heady diaphanous robe. Dusk settling, sun giving way to languor,
your warm brown thigh. A person

could touch—here—wipe the freckling sand from its curve. From the cleft between

a throaty motor starts up, whines and lifts into the air: ultralight climbing a steep hill
east or south or west, light blurring into indigo.

Two figures

you & I dozing, backs to a biting wind, doused in dusklight

wondering if and when the coyotes will emerge
from their beech forest dens

wondering about safe haven, safe landing, what else
will shake itself from sand

to rise up, circling.

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sweet

4.1

Florida Revisited

Darkness overwhelms me just before sleep like a wave,
the headlong rush of long-distance buses

passing through Belfast, New Russia, and Pauling,
pausing briefly in truck-stops where arc lights

transform into columbine.
See the now-yellow buses slide

down ramps of enormous cactus flowers,
and when I awake I find

I am headed due south

into the gardenias of my childhood.

The fragrance could marry me forever
or were I able to endure the intensity of night-blooming jasmine

I would weep at last into its branches,
drunk and allergic at the same time.

~ ~ ~

Each journey unfolds like a come-on, the way palms
strung with white lights

pull the shoppers deeper into the mall.
Possibilities expand

then the realization comes
that we may never find our way home, and we stand

waving goodbye on the deck of a luxury liner
heading out to sea at night.

~ ~ ~

Already I have gone far from where I began.
The child crawls from its dozing mother;

the hand, blindly exploring,
wanders from the body until some precious

object is grasped,
and I stir as if trying to rouse myself,

pulling at the heavy legs and arms like oars.
In the distance, the lights of shore are winking

while next to me in water the old
familiar faces waver like glimpses of the unborn.

~ ~ ~

What can I do with this wildering ache
rising to the surface after years of drowning

or the sea yielding up its fishbone and coral
in a world that is perpetually transforming?

How can I stop you and shake you
and say to you now

Listen, what happened
and when and why?

~ ~ ~

Time oozes from its wrapper
like chocolate on a window sill.

Look, taste it, it is done. The world
has changed into something no one

could predict or recognize even
were I able to put a name to it, or name myself

having changed so much and being
so much a part of it.

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I took

a carrot with two long roots, rounded,
even sumptuous if you looked close up,
tapering into slender legs. It had a tight
pert butt, nice crease where the cheeks
met top of the thighs, then a stomach
topped short by a bush of stiff brown hair.

I was ready with the paring knife
to saw that fetch in half, stared at the
abdomen and stopped, put the idea back
back in the fridge and dreamed
of dying, dreamed of creamed corn and having
another ear, heard the abruptly silenced shriek
of who knows what from the wood, saw
those yellow eyes take a bead on me.

And then I knew

there was no way out, the body
is served up at the dinner table, so the next
night I took a butcher's knife and prayed,
freed an orange foot from its orange
ankle, ankle from calf, calf from knee, knee
from thigh, came up short where the torso
met the leg, closed my eyes and in one
firm stroke parted the lower stomach from
the crotch, which I pitched to the waiting
she-bitch on the floor who swallowed it whole,
unblinking, and wanted more.

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JANET MACFADYEN is author of two books of poetry, *A Newfoundland Journal* (2009) and *In Defense of Stones* (1996); and has a third collection forthcoming from Slate Roof Press this year. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Southern Poetry Review*, *New England Watershed Magazine*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Rosebud*, and *Osiris*. Janet has been a writing fellow at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center and has won an Academy of American Poets Award. She is a formative editor of the creative projects press, *Shape&Nature* (www.shapeandnature.com), and will roll over and die for chocolate mousse.

Laura McCullough

Whole Brain, Whole Body

Across these hard Cs evoking
cock and cunt, cutting through
the sibilance is the thick band --

the corpus callosum -- connecting
the two. Inside this band, millions
of fibers twist toward the job

of carryover between the two
sides, exchanging language,
tasks, and the band broken

equals agenesis. There was a part
missing in me as the breasts
begged to be sucked or kneaded;

where did the mind go,
thinking it was un-needed?
then after those years of hiding

the body in folds of cloth,
the mind returns like the light
has been turned on in a room

I had been undressing in
forever in the shadows,
and stares across the divide

at the breasts, and wants
to be sucked and kneaded,
needing now its other half,

agenesis becoming its own
agenesis; what's flowering
soft, violet-scented, synaptical,

charging every node? Multiple
nipples in the no longer split
brain, split body; this is whole.

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sweet

4.1

Blessed Life

Knives.

Good knives, really.

I'd never heard of garbanzo bean soup,

but he'd left some for his girlfriend back home.

Do you really think of yourself as a surrealist? I asked.

No, he blew out.

On that air, I blew my own: *or did you say no*

because of how I asked it,

and if someone else had asked,

Would you have said, shit, yes,

and he said, *that's too complicated, and what is this knife for?*

It was a small knife,
a paring knife with an inward curve
on the back end as if for a thumb.

I told him I didn't know, but we both admired
its beauty and utility,
though it was clear neither of us
fully understood it.

I opened some cheese and used the tip to tip it
out onto a white triangular plate,
and then to slip a crescent off
and onto a cracker and handed it to him.

Good cheese, he said.

Neither of us smiled.

In the other room a party was going on
neither of us wanted to join. Instead, we waited
for the doves (beating, beating) that always enter
a room if you wait long enough,
the things waiting to be said:

I don't like where I live.

I miss my sons.

I can't leave because the money's too good.

We're all going to die. Which made us laugh.

Which is when we let our bones fall to the floor with us around them,
and pat the new dog, stroking her long ears,
the fur that seems like something
we lost and can't ever get back,
let our hands touch once in a while
and mumble in our separate languages
sure we're being understood.

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LAURA McCULLOUGH's most recent books of poems are *Panic*, *Alice James Books*, and *Speech Acts*, Black Lawrence Press. She is the editor of *Mead: the Magazine of Literature and Libations* (www.meadmagazine.org), and the convener/organizer for the first national Symposium on Race, Ethnicity, and Class scheduled for spring 2012. Her work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Pank*, *Guernica*, *Diode*, *Mad Hatters Review* and other journals online and in print. www.lauramccullough.weebly.com

Kathleen Kirk

Winter Starlings

I don't exist, whispered, heard,
not quite believed
as I don't quite believe anything.

Then, at the window,
a small black bird stippled gold.
Then another and another,
wings dipped in gold, winter starlings.

A sudden clamor in the snow,
in the branches of the evergreen, and then far off
all of them congregate
on the boughs of the naked oak.

We won't exist, together,
the veil of milk fallen from our eyes,
gold from their wings,

when it all goes green again, green again.

KATHLEEN KIRK is the author of four poetry chapbooks. Her work appears in a variety of print and online magazines, including *blossombones*, *Greensboro Review*, *Leveler*, and *Poems & Plays*. She blogs "eight days a week" at *Wait! I Have a Blog?!* and is the poetry editor for *Escape Into Life*.

Ashley Inguanta

There's a Hound Inside Her Lungs

There's a hound inside her lungs, breathing the scent the man left. Sweat gathered in clumps, a salt-water river through his forehead lines. His eyes, cowboy-hat shaded. He said flowers belong under rugs. Clusters of veined petals, soiled roots—he said they all belong under rugs. Her back rushed to the wall, corkboard pin held between his calloused hands, almost, almost on her skin. Almost, almost on her brown skin, her branching veins rising, plumping like mountains, then settling—hard. She thinks this is what thunder feels like when the sky grows sharp with light. A decade later, light will pierce her in the form of a woman's tongue, sharp enough to slice the begonias she hid within bells. Muted lullaby, bloodhound chorus.

ASHLEY INGUANTA earned her MFA from the University of Central Florida and has taught several Introduction to Creative Writing courses at the university level. She has also worked as a Creative Writing Instructor at Lakeside Alternative, a mental health facility. Most recently, her photography has appeared in *make/shift magazine*. Ashley is also a contributing photographer for *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Elephant Journal*, *Breadcrumb Scabs*, and *All Things Girl*. She recently earned an Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train* for their Very Short Fiction Award. Also this year, Ashley has been nominated as UCF's choice for the AWP Intro Journals Award in fiction. Her short-short "Trash" is forthcoming in *Gone Lawn*. Keep up to date with Ashley's publications and travels here: www.ashleyinguanta.wordpress.com

Oliver de la Paz

Labyrinth 1

The boy in the labyrinth holds a torch before him. He cannot see his shadow, which, behind him swims in a somnambulant glaze. Winds tighten around the boy's body and his torch so that the universe lowers its eye to this den beneath the earth. Blossoms of fire flit from crevasses. The boy thinks, to be guided through the labyrinth is to be guided by bodies filling with light. The universe thinks, there are the stars. There and there and there.

Labyrinth 2

The boy in the labyrinth feels the ball of twine unspool from his hand. The soft speed of its spillage as he walks. He measures it; his intimacy with its heft. The knowledge it erodes as spring water through quartz. Down the passageways, a game of cat's cradle tugs itself into a bright red web. In the darkest dark, the red twine twists about the corridors. It breathes the way a heavy sleeper breathes. Soon the boy in the dark has no string in his hand. To return to his demarcations is to enter a thicket, to bind oneself to the ligatures of one's own making. The darkest dark takes a deep breath as the boy's hand feels for that which sleeps beside.

Labyrinth 3

The boy in the labyrinth hears the beast. The pad of the beast's hooves, quiet vowels sung to a sleeper. The boy listens to keep himself awake. He thinks of spiders on the edges of their webs, the ballet they dance on their self-made filigree. He thinks of an azalea sewed into the hem of a dress. The boy thinks, this kind of thinking lead me to the labyrinth. Its black geodes. Its promises of wild crystal blooms held within.

Morning digresses into night and the beast's song laces its orbit through limestone causeways. It grows smaller and smaller until imperceptible. The boy soon misses the song. The beast's idle stroll. The faint breeze to remind that there is anything there in the widening dark.

Labyrinth 4

The boy in the labyrinth has been following his shadow. He conceives it to be god. And god said genius is in the eye of its wearer. God said the land before us awaits its innocents. The boy thinks he will sleep soon and that his shadow's tongue is lined with velvet. Above the two, stars and the blue heart of the moon threaded with its meteoric scars. God said this is a maze and your questions are hard. God said there are miracles and there are miracles. The boy thinks he will sleep soon and that his shadow is scrubbing the white from the moon. The boy thinks if he were to lie down, he and god would see doubles. And in the underlight of bright stars they both know the world they live in chooses them.

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OLIVER DE LA PAZ is the author of three collections of poetry: *Names Above Houses*, *Furious Lullaby*, and *Requiem for the Orchard*. He is the chair for the advisory board of Kundiman.org and a board member of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. A recipient of grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts and The Artists' Trust, he teaches creative writing at Western Washington University. His recent work has appeared in journals such as the *New England Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Tin House*, and in many anthologies. As well, his work can be found online at [Linebreak](#), [Diode](#), [Verse Daily](#) and at his website www.oliverdelapaz.com.

Raina Lauren Fields

Saturday in Blacksburg, VA

I wake under the sky of afternoon,
day waning into quiet. I hear nothing but birds,
their song tense, a familiar sadness.

Say that my feet are black with the soot
of the bar floor, the town sidewalks.
Say that my makeup is smeared across my pillow.
Say that I sleep until 4pm.
Say that I wake up next to a man whose bony elbows
and knees would have kept me up all night
if it weren't for the vodka.
Say that he pulls my nipples with his teeth.
Say that I like it.

I try to make music out of this day,
but I cannot listen to the jazz
of sirens without feeling like the end is near.
In this town, sound is an omen.
Every muffler backfiring, every nail gun
in a construction site, automatic weapons.
There is a history here.
Anger grows like flowers,
its unconditional blossoms,
branches flawed.

RAINA LAUREN FIELDS is currently enrolled in the MFA program in Creative Writing at Virginia Tech. She is a Cave Canem and *Callaloo* fellow. She has poetry published or forthcoming in *Callaloo*, *Gargoyle*, *PANK*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *580split*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *5x5*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Breadcrumb Scabs*, *tawdry bawdry* and other literary journals. She has also published poetry reviews in *Rattle* and *Tarpaulin Sky*. She is a current editor of *Toad* and previous General Editor of Creative Writing for *The Minnesota Review*. You can reach her at raina.fields@gmail.com.

Jesse Millner

Eating Chocolate Virgins

Jesus spent some time in the desert.
It must have been hot and I'm sure
he longed for cool water,
needed to purge himself of the temptation
his flesh sang out for.

Maybe he wanted companionship,
the touch of a woman
late at night when the world was silent
in that dark way of the still and very holy.

He told himself, drink of the Spirit to turn away
those temptations of the flesh.

I'm sure he thought often of water,
of a woman's slender hands in moonlight,
of the way a body's deeper thirst might be quenched.

*

In the early '80s when I was drinking
my way through France with my ex-wife,
we stopped for a couple days at Lourdes
and laughed at the desperate believers
filling their plastic water jugs with the holy fluid;
and unlike Jesus who longed for a simple drink,
these pilgrims prayed for metaphor, wished for healing in the cool grotto
where a young girl, years ago, had seen the Virgin Mother's

face look down benevolently,
before touching her with
a quick, electric grace.

My ex and I snickered our way through
the show, wandered out into the barren
town where shops sold miraculous souvenirs,
including my favorite—chocolate Marys,
which made a great after-lunch dessert.

Later, I ate the Virgin and entered a sugar haze,
thinking about how Jesus once walked the desert in a heat-induced daze,

and I suppose all of these pilgrimages
are just ways of entering the barren, beautiful
world of faith. Ways of figuring out if Logos
was Jesus before his conception, before the Annunciation,
before Gabriel briefed Mary on the coming world
of tears, and long before I ate the Virgin after
a ham sandwich in a French café.

I have long struggled to understand
virgin births, resurrections, salvation,
how that mighty stone was pushed away,
how the cave shown empty like a burial,
how the night stars rose over the mountains
and blinked those special messages from outer space.
I have long struggled to understand the Trinity,
how saltines and grape juice are Jesus' body,
how communion makes us one with spirit,
but which spirit, which holy ghost?

I'm all for Logos, all for the quenching of our long
thirst with a fountain of sacred words. I'm all
for ghosts, for the Holy Spirit that enflames the world,
sets forests on fire and screams like a banshee
on a rollercoaster sitting next to a bat
out of Hell. I'm all for Holy Relics,

for fingers and toes and bits of skull,
for arm bones and neck bones and thigh bones
which are all connected to the notion
that the remnants of our bodies
are somehow imbued with meaning.

I should say that it's only certain bodies: Peter,
Paul, John the Baptist, Pope Clement and the like,
or even Descartes' skull, which was missing when they dug
up his grave in Paris just after the Revolution.

But the world is on fire man, just as John the Divine promised,
just as Revelation predicted, and I've heard that next week,
exactly at 1 p.m. on an otherwise normal Wednesday,
Jesus will descend from heaven and bring us 1000 years
of the Kingdom of God. *Extra, Extra, read all about it,*

poet predicts the return of the Savior!
Is there any limit, then, to what poetry can do?

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JESSE MILLNER lives in Fort Myers, Florida and spends a lot of time confusing creative writing students at Florida Gulf Coast University. His next book, *Dispatches from the Department of Supernatural Explanation*, scheduled to be released by Kitsune Books in early 2012, will answer every question about God, gods, and the afterlife.

Leah Browning

Halfway Through the Biography of Anne Sexton

Things begin to fall apart. The kids are sick,
the car's engine won't turn over, all the light bulbs are breaking.
My fingers swell in the night. It's the salt, the sugar, the heat—
but it seems symptomatic of some larger failing.

Autumn. It's been raining for days and days, and she's back
in the hospital again—is it the third time, the fourth?
I can't help thinking of the skirts she used to wear, the position
of her hand on the banister, all the secret codes and signs.

The old life—the two of them holding hands on the porch,
children running on the summer grass—
did it all melt like ice under the smoldering weight
of the words in her head? Or did it ever exist at all?

Outside, the rain falls heavily, like sparrows
striking the roof. Her body is so slight, so fragile—
and yet we are all silent, standing here in the dark, waiting
once more for even a hint of breath, or a soft rush of wings.

LEAH BROWNING is the author of three nonfiction books for teens and pre-teens (Capstone Press) and two chapbooks, *Picking Cherries in the Española Valley* (Dancing Girl Press, 2010) and *Making Love to the Same Man for Fifteen Years* (Big Table Publishing, 2009). Browning's fiction, poetry, essays, and articles have previously appeared in a variety of publications including *Queen's Quarterly*, *42opus*, and *Tipton Poetry Journal*, as well as on a broadside from Broadsided Press, on postcards from the program Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, and in several anthologies. In addition to writing, Browning serves as editor of the *Apple Valley Review* and daydreams about big boxes of chocolate truffles. You can find her personal website at www.leahbrowning.com.

Nearing Solstice

Lisa Ohlen Harris

Daylight lasts till nearly 10:00 p.m. as we near summer solstice. While my children are still asleep, I rise in the early morning. Already there is light to the east. I pull half and half from the fridge and watch the sky while my coffee brews. I am waiting for that moment, just before sunrise, when light and dark merge and dawn could be dusk.

When I was a girl, my family drove north each summer from Southern California to Washington State, where both my parents had their roots. Summer evenings were long in Edmonds and Tacoma, with salmon dinners served late out of doors and the light holding as my cousins and I twirled and dizzied ourselves until we couldn't walk straight, couldn't stand, couldn't tell east from west. We lay on our backs in the grass and watched the tops of the trees spin and settle until a mother or uncle or grandparent told us it was time to come in and sleep.

I am nearing fifty. Each night's sleep means less time left. These long days before solstice are not enough. I need light and more light; I want a land where solstice hovers ever ahead never arriving. Though summer stretches before me, I know her warm days will soon shorten until, in sultry August, I feel the very moment when autumn steps into the breeze.

But today is long and tomorrow, longer. The sun rises, and I throw my windows open to gather, while I can, the light and cool of morning.

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LISA OHLEN HARRIS' creative nonfiction has appeared in journals like *The Gettysburg Review*, *River Teeth*, and *Brevity*. She is the author of *Through the Veil*, which was a runner up for Drake University Emerging Writer Award and was a finalist in the 2011 Oregon Book Awards.

The Gift

Elizabeth Wade

We did not feel celebratory, but Mother insisted on presents. My husband and I had planned to spend the holiday states away from our families, eating Chinese food with friends from our grad school years. Mother had planned to mail us a holiday check. Instead, three days before Christmas, we buried my younger brother. The next day, Mother went shopping.

We needed nothing store-bought, but I gave her a list of things to purchase—whole bean coffee, roasted almonds, dental floss. I wanted nothing permanent.

Mother strayed. Now, whenever I scour the coat closet for a misplaced scarf and inadvertently unearth the things she bought—the houndstooth gloves for me, the video game for my husband—I think, *those are the dead brother gloves, that is the dead brother game*. There was also *the dead brother candy*: white chocolate truffles—my brother's favorite, purchased for him, but repurposed, tucked in the top of my Christmas stocking.

I had never liked white chocolate. I believed I would throw the truffles away, that they would sprout mold in an Alabama landfill alongside my brother's first collection of porn—the VHS tapes I had taken from the bottom drawer of his dresser so Mother wouldn't have to face them when she went through his belongings.

I could write about epiphany, about how I drove home with those candies on the backseat, about the night I watched as one of our friends kept returning to our kitchen and slipping his hand into the silver-plate bowl, pulling out another truffle to savor. I could write about the day I finally decided to sample one of them, or about the morning weeks later when, eating brunch, I stole a spoonful of my husband's white chocolate bread pudding, promising *I just want a taste*, then made the entire table wait forty-five minutes while the chef prepared another serving just for me.

But that's another story, one for my mother, perhaps. This one is not about revelation. This is about absence. This is to say how I empty the bowl, how I keep refilling it. This is to say how I live with a thing named for something it lacks, how the sweetness coats my tongue, how there's always a moment when I have to force myself to swallow, how I have to choke it down.

Invocation

Her brother went by his middle name, Austin. When the hospital chaplain decided he should come to the private ICU waiting room to pray with her family, he never asked for her brother's name. He must have looked at a patient list—the hospital must keep lists of the dying—and found her brother listed by his first name, Douglas. The chaplain, who must not have liked Douglas, decided to pray for Doug. The second time the chaplain's prayer mentioned "your servant, Doug," several members of the family said loudly, "Austin." The chaplain kept praying for Doug. As he was praying, she thought about geography. She decided that because they were in the Bible Belt, the chaplain may have believed they were saying "Amen" rather than "Austin." She did not say "Amen." After the chaplain finished praying for Doug, she said firmly, "His name is Austin." The chaplain apologized and put his hand on her right shoulder. She did not like this, did not like being touched by a man she had just met and did not particularly like. Now, any time she is touched by someone she does not know or does not particularly like, she whispers her brother's name, Austin, as if it were a prayer.

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ELIZABETH WADE holds degrees from Davidson College and the University of Alabama. Her work has appeared in *Kenyon Review Online*, *The Rumpus*, *Oxford American*, and others. She spent a lot of time last winter teaching herself to make napoleons. She blogs at elizabethwwade.tumblr.com

Fixed

Timothy L. Marsh

I took my dog to get neutered yesterday. It had to be done. He was disgracing things, tall slender objects especially. Poles, legs, saplings, the vacuum, legs. It was annoying.

I took him to the vet and when I picked him up he was different, as you might imagine, a little dazed and subdued, a touch of robotics, definitely not his usual self, whatever that might've been. And naturally, the immediate meditation commensurate with the occasion was: *What if someone had done this to me?*—when I was a young mutt straying my ass off, sticking my nose in all sorts of shit—had taken me in, strapped me down, and right as the anesthetic suppressed, caressed my fretful head and said, Just lie still and relax, kid. This won't take long. Just a quick snip and life will get nice and simple. No more arbitrary aggression, no inconvenient litters, no more running in circles for the dumb fun of it. Focus will come, organization and restraint. Prudence will rule and your hormones will bow. You'll quit chasing tail; the power of the female ass will diminish, eventually it will vanish; you won't even know it's there. How nice will that be?

Yeah, good boy. *Such* a good boy. How nice will that be? Never doing anything stupid for the sake of a few sharp tingles and muscle contractions, never having a broken heart, never following the wrong girl halfway around the world for the work of her mouth around your crotch. You'll stop careening, for Christ sakes. No more rifling through interesting dumpsters. No more running with the pack in the dead of night, getting into things, eating God knows what, drinking from holes, sleeping in the street. You'll stick to one place, get a Costco card, find a favorite sitcom, establish a common bedtime, lease a sterile suburban bungalow with a neat lawn. You'll shuffle that lawn in flannel pajamas and wool-lined moccasins, you'll know every inch of it by heart, it'll never change and neither will you. We'll latch the gate, just in case.

Trust us, kid, it's all for the best, they might've insisted, the way I insisted now, watching in the rearview as my dog curled up in the back and went easily to sleep (perhaps his new typical), ameliorating the atrocity as shrewdly as I could, again and again: *That's a good boy. Who's happy to be a good boy?*

TIMOTHY L. MARSH is a writer-in-residence at the Montana Artists Refuge. In the last year his writing has appeared or been accepted in *The Evansville Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *Pear Noir* and *Weave Magazine*. Recent honors include a 2010 fellowship residency at the Vermont Studio Center, a 2011 scholarship residency at the Montana Artists Refuge, and a 2009 Arts Jury Award from the City Council of St. John's, Newfoundland. His work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Web, 2011.

Learning to be an Animal

Gail Hoskings

With bold feathers on my head I reach for the sky, all height and sight, and I am suddenly flamboyance with waves and synapse. A tail grows long and does its own searching from a place where I could not otherwise see. It slings itself back and forth patiently while my feet, like giant panda paws, pick up vibrations from sounds left a million eons ago.

To learn to be that primal, all red and pink, lace and glitter, all ripe belly and open heart, is to mingle with the breeze of bees. It's to feel my way back into self where cell and membrane meet.

To learn to be an animal is to enter a cave on hands and knees with faith in eyes and ears, breath and curiosity. In the darkness a tiger appears in watery hues, half wild, half domestic, but vivid as a bowl of oranges on a summer windowsill. He gives me no false promises, only the feel of his thick thighs, the rhythm of his pace, his tight naked muscles.

It could be a savage moment, or you could say this is an errand of madness. But those commanding thighs, too alive to argue, assure me that I have a taste for the journey. If I tell you I can become that tiger, can actually feel the measure of his ways, will you re-imagine our lives? We are in great need of getting away from the familiar.

sweet

4.1

Of Biblical Proportions

Once there was a beginning.

Then there was an end.

Without the drama of the Bible, some things remain the same: shared ribs, children, sacrifice, good and evil.

We beget the next generation with our sons, and maybe they will create the next. Or maybe not. If not, it will have been a good ride, as James Taylor sings. A lovely ride. I could spontaneously make a list for you. But for now, living gets me up each morning to teach and write, tucks away the past into quilts, avoids floods and interprets dreams. Now I fold these up at night, he there and me here, our bodies in separate chapters.

Sometimes I place memory into drawers of forgetting. Sometimes I trade something old for something new. Sometimes bird feathers count for nothing, or maybe you could say this is all we ever really had.

We had these moments, remembered or not. There was a beginning.

Then there was an end.

Don't

Leave if you must, but don't say, please don't say I didn't work enough. You in graduate school and me as new teacher standing on the concrete of a cold basement entertaining five-year-olds with memorized songs. Cleaning up after that little guy who failed to get to the bathroom on time. Don't tell me. I stacked books at night and filed receipts while you studied. Let's not forget the weight of grocery bags or laundry bags or diaper bags. Hot meals. The secretarial pool on the eighth floor of Blue Cross. An ill-equipped classroom in a Jewish Day School. A biology teacher for bilingual students. A screaming toddler being carried from surgery to car, mother and child alone in a snowy parking lot. Presents wrapped for family birthdays you were allowed to forget.

Don't say I didn't document our growing family with photographs carefully placed in albums. A kitten. A puppy. Goldfish. Mario the hamster. Pots of soup. Nursery school. Soccer practice. New glasses. New sneakers. Wrestling shoes. A book written in between dryer cycles—a paragraph here and then there. Passover Seders. Don't forget the shank bone and the oven that must not leave a trace of last year's crumbs. The recipe for Aunt Edith's matza apple tart, margarine instead of butter so the meat won't mix with milk. Mail sorted—yours, mine and ours.

What to throw out? What to keep? Boxes packed and unpacked. Passport forms. Toys to entertain while traveling. A proofreader in an advertising firm here. A public relations department there. Temperatures taken at midnight. Dancing a cranky infant in the dark. Get rid of this job. Take on that one. Live here. Live there. Sweep the porch. Walk the dog. Take him to the vet. Clean up as one century turns to the next. This country. That one. This need.

Don't.

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GAIL HOSKING is the author of *Snake's Daughter*, a memoir published by the University of Iowa Press in their Singular Lives Series. Her essays and poetry have been published in places like *The Florida Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and *Nimrod International*. She teaches creative writing at Rochester Institute of Technology and loves to eat flan pudding or Indian rice pudding as often as possible.

Peacekeeper

Harrison Candalaria Fletcher

My father collected guns. Vintage Western pistols. He sold most before he died, but kept one – a Colt Peacekeeper. My mother hid it in the hallway closet where we kept his things.

One afternoon while we were supposed to be napping, my big brother and I slipped away to find it. "I'm the man of the house now," he whispered. "The gun's mine."

Standing on his toes, he ran his fingers along dark cardboard shapes until he settled on a small wooden rectangle at the back of the shelf. Holding his breath, he brought down the container, creaked it open, and angled a shiny blue barrel toward the dim light filtering in from the living room window. As I reached for it, our mother swung open the door.

The pistol wasn't loaded, but she wouldn't stop crying.

The next day, with my brother in grammar school, my mother and I drove to Doc Holiday's pawnshop. I remembered the outlaw's name and the bars on the windows.

I pushed the door. A silver bell tinkled. Two men behind the counter stopped talking and looked at us. The tall one elbowed the short one and smiled. They always smiled. The mailman. The butcher. The gas station mechanic. My mother squeezed my hand.

At the register, she squared her shoulders, set the wooden box on the counter, and opened it. The tall one stroked his beard. The short one whistled through his teeth. While they talked, I stared down at the glass cases of man things, hunting knives and fishing knives, handles carved from antlers, handles carved from bone, blades bright as mirrors.

*

On the way home, the wooden box empty beside her, my mother dabbed tissues under her Jackie O sunglasses. I stood on the backseat and touched her shoulder.

"Don't worry. I'll protect you."

Blowing her nose, she glanced in the rearview and tried to smile.

In the black ovals of her eyes, I saw myself.

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HARRISON CANDELARIA FLETCHER is the author of *Descanso for My Father: A Life in Fragments*, forthcoming in March 2012 from the University of Nebraska Press "American Lives" series. A finalist for the National Magazine Award and Bakeless Literary Award in Nonfiction, his honors include a New Letters best essay award and Pushcart Prize special citation. His work has appeared in *The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, *New Letters*, *Fourth Genre*, *New Ohio Review*, *Water~Stone Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Palabra* and other journals.

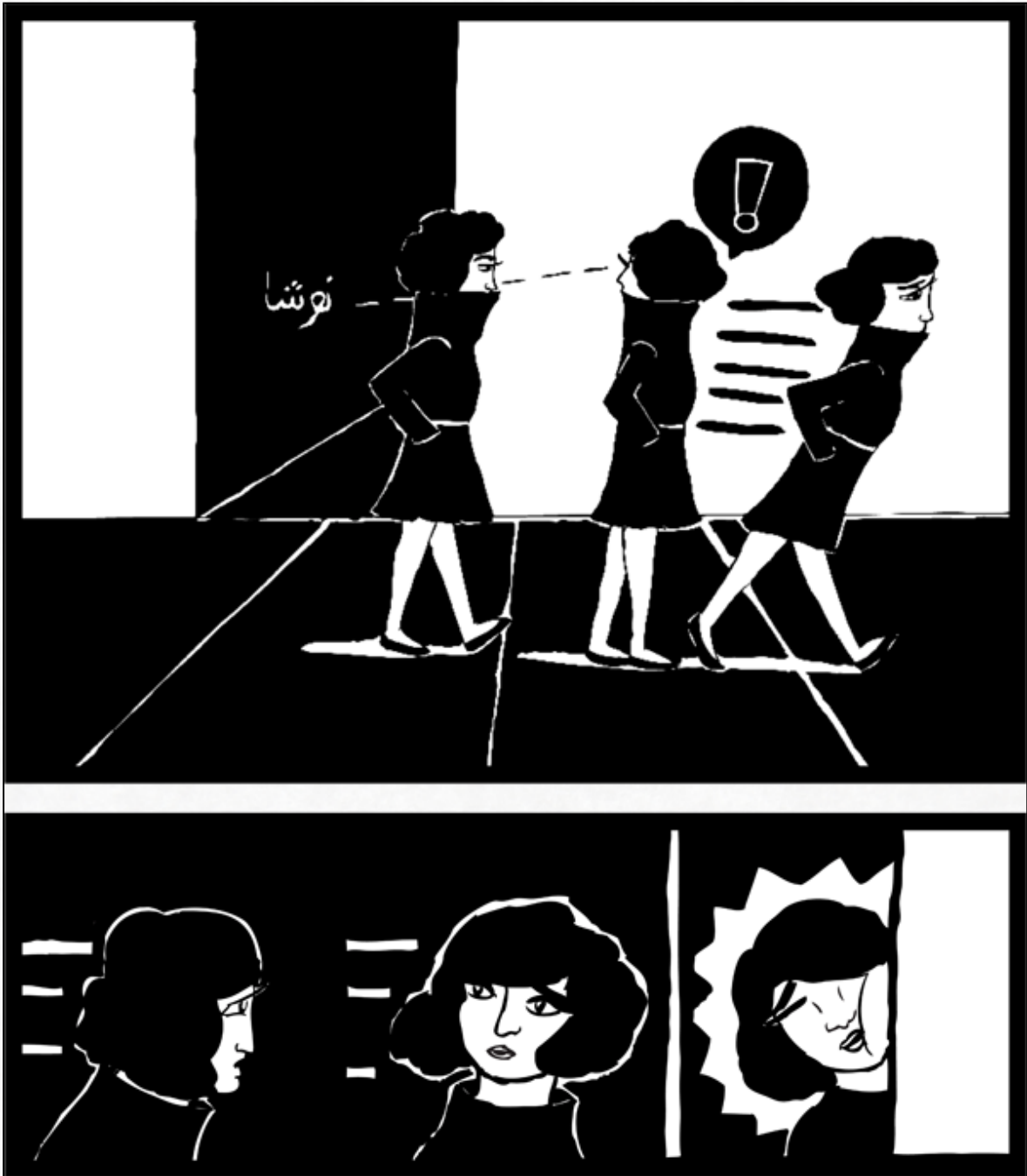
Reproduced from *Descanso for My Father: A Life in Fragments* by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher by permission of the University of Nebraska Press (Forthcoming at the University of Nebraska Press, Spring 2012).

Nusha Ashjaee



PROLOGUE

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sweet

4.1



THE STORY

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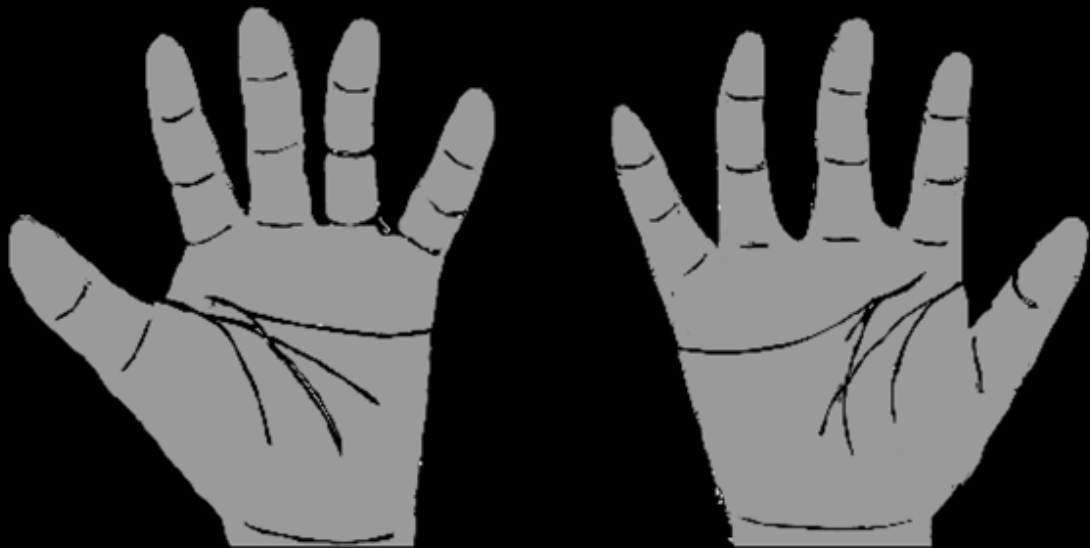


I was born Nusha Pauline Ashjaee. Up until the age of five, my name was the only evidence I had to tell me that I was different from your average white American. It wasn't until they started teaching about diversity in the kindergarten classes that the concept of race was ever explained to me. Unfortunately, my teacher saw race as a simple black-and-white concept...

...blah blah blah blah
BLACK PEOPLE blah
blah blah blah **WHITE**
PEOPLE blah blah blah
blah...



...and I was a bit of a gray area...



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After school...

-Mommy, what color am I?
-What do you mean color?
-Am I black or am I white?
-Oh no, honey, we're Persian.



At home...

--Black, white, green, red,
blue...Where's Persian?



After my brief confusion of what exactly race was, I began to learn about my own race and all the negative stereotypes associated with it. I found some of them to be true, some false, and some I might have made up on my own.



TERRORISTS



STUCK-UP



HAIRY



LOUD



BIG NOSES



MATERIALISTIC



DRAMATIC



"SUAVE"



As I grew older, my negativity towards my culture became worse and worse. I no longer wanted to consider myself Persian, and so I rejected anything that would connect me to my culture, including going to Farsi classes, celebrating Persian holidays, and socializing with other Iranians.

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So, instead, I immersed myself into American culture. I did everything I could to distance myself from my Persian background by adopting America as my only culture. However, this idea didn't seem to work both ways; though I considered myself American, America was only seeing the Persian in me. And so, I found myself having the same conversation about my



-So what kind of name is Nusha?
-It's Persian.



-I love Persians! Do you speak Persian?
-You mean Farsi!



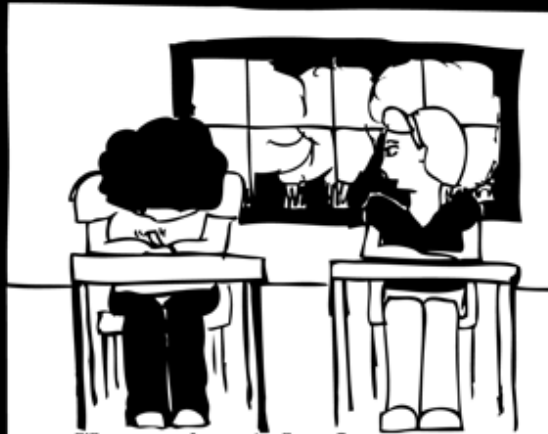
-You're Persian!
-Yeah.



-Where are
Persians
from?"
-Iran.



-Were you born in Iran?
-No.



-Have you ever read 'The Kite Runner'?
-No.



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I was frustrated and didn't know what to do. No matter the situation, my race was always brought up, becoming the focus of the conversations. I didn't feel like an individual, but, rather, a representative of all Persians.



It was then that it occurred to me that I was the Persian to a bunch of Americans, but if I surrounded myself with other Persians, I would just be me! I did still feel apprehensive towards my background, but if it meant regaining my individuality, it was well worth it.



Unfortunately, I had successfully distanced myself from being Persian that I was now the American joke in my community.

HA!

—Look at what she wrote!

HA!
HA!

HA!
HA!
HA!

—She can't speak Farsi!

—Listen to her accent! She's so American!

HA! HA!

HA!

HA!



—She can only write her name! Ha ha! She's like a fucking Pokemon!



HA! HA! HA!
HA! HA!
HA!

—Pikachu, come back!



All by myself...



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I felt confused.

I had wanted to distance myself from my culture and once realizing that I had, I was upset.

I had to clear my head.

It seemed that I had lost something I had been taking for granted.

Whether I liked it or not, my culture was a big part of my identity. Without it, I was lost.

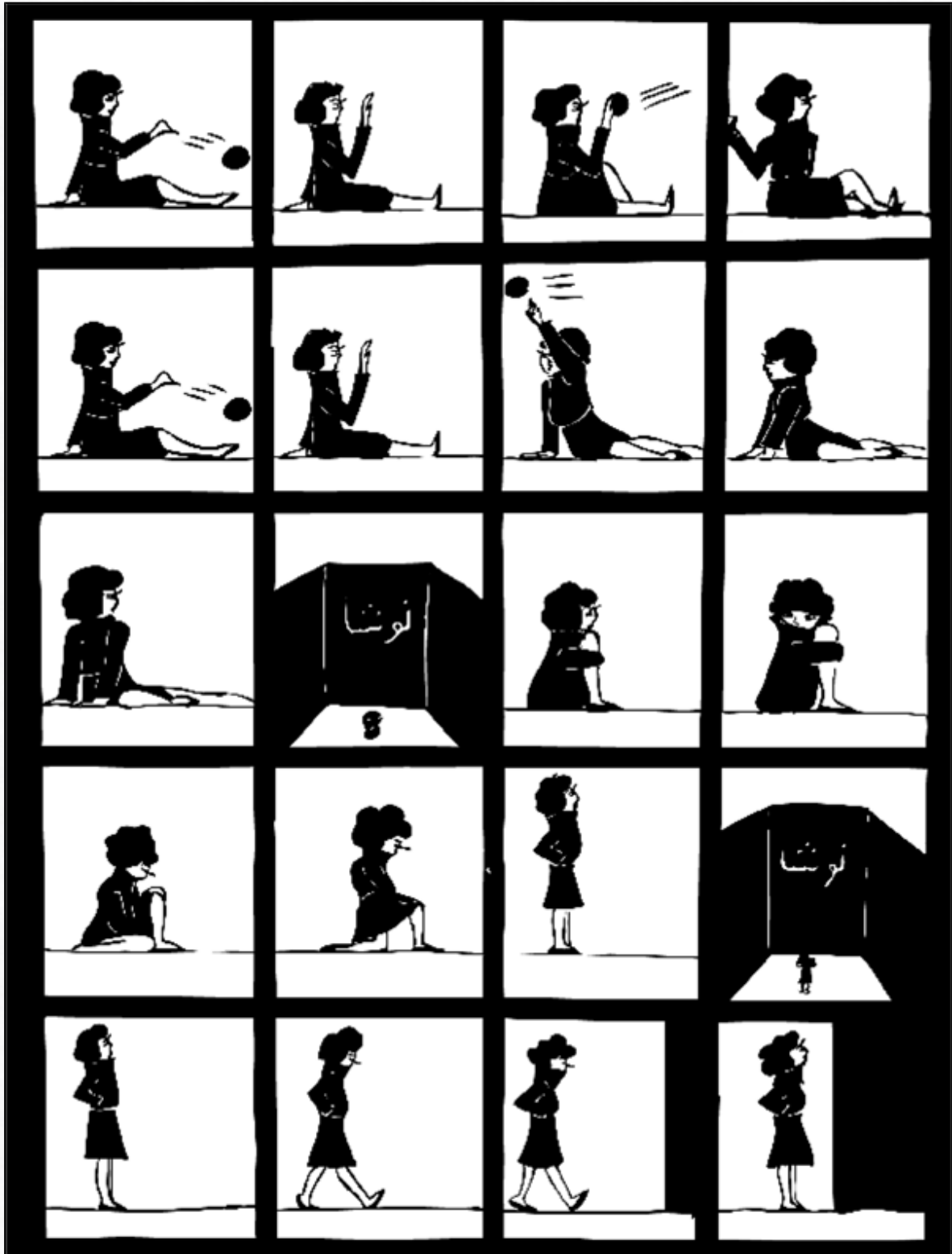
I was going to have to accept my heritage sooner or later...

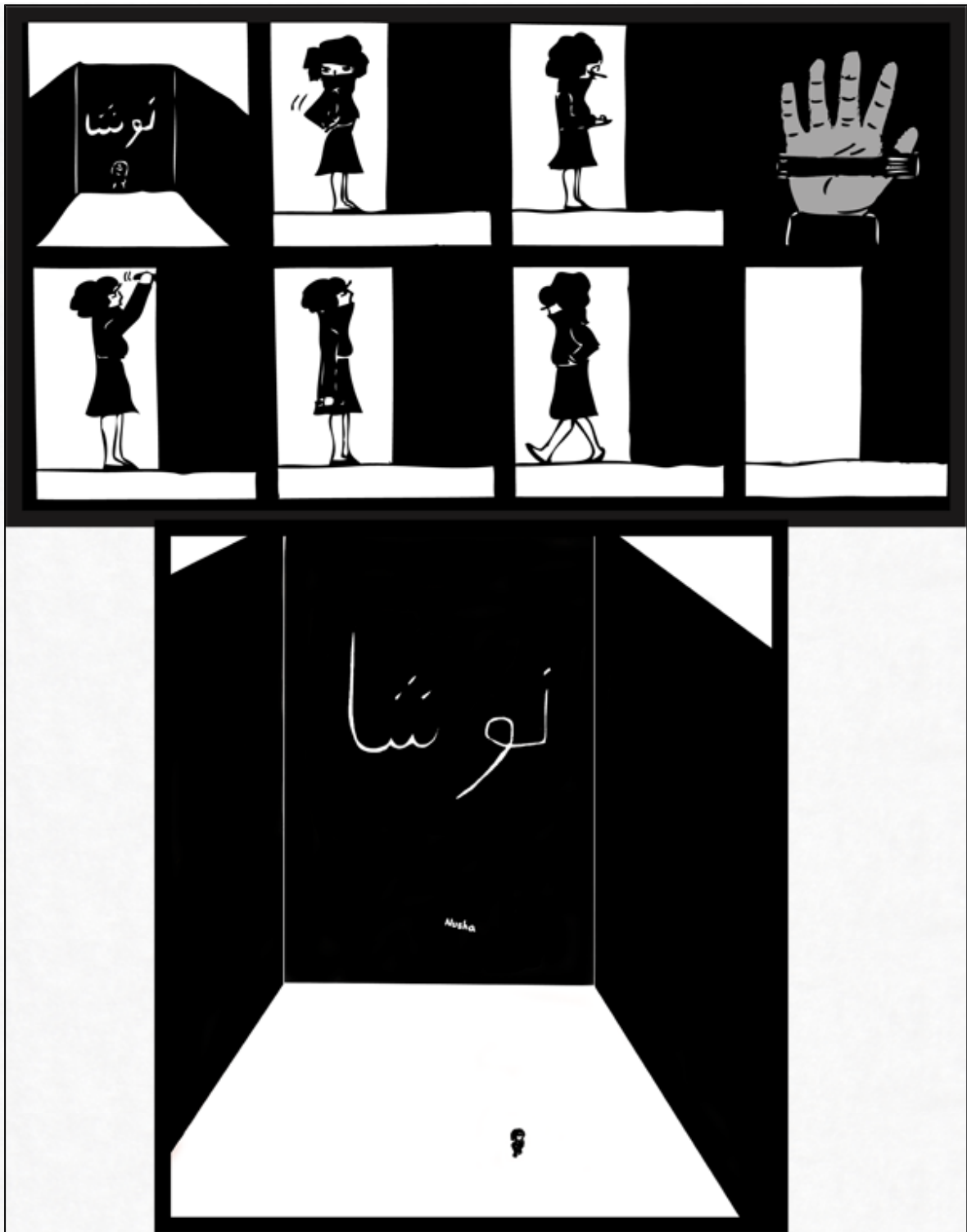
...or sooner.

نوشا

EPILOGUE

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NUSHA ASHJAEI is an undergraduate Writing & Literature student at the California College of the Arts. She was the Fiction Editor for CCA's undergraduate literary arts journal, *Humble Pie*, and is currently a Deputy Editor for *Artcards.cc*. She currently resides in Berkeley, CA. You can follow her tumblr at <http://nushma.tumblr.com> or e-mail her at nushaashjaee@gmail.com.

Florigraphy

text and photos by Benjamin Vogt



Pulsatilla vulgaris – Pasque Flower

Mid spring at sunset, and the first pasque flowers come up from the soil. The foliage unfurls like a coil and is only a few inches off the ground. Covered in a peach fuzz halo, it almost seems ticklish—when the night temperatures drop the flower closes and the leaves shrink back toward the ground, at peace, ready for tomorrow's resurrection.



Tulipa 'White Triumphator'

As a kid I remember my mother buying hollow candy eggs, Easter dioramas about the size of a real egg. Inside there might be some flowers or butterflies in pastel colors. I don't remember what they're called, but I remember I kept them for weeks, never eating them, never breaking their white, sand dollar shells. Like a kaleidoscope, I'd hold one up to a squinted eye and pretend I was inside.



Lilium 'Netty's Pride'

I think most people see things either from a distance or from a personal frame of reference, or filter. There's no in between. When this lily first bloomed I briefly admired it and walked on. Then I came back. First I took a profile shot framed by other plants, then a grouping of lilies, then one single bloom, then only a part of the bloom. Though an image can dissect and find meaning, an image can also recreate meaning—a petal is more canvas than flesh, or more flesh than canvas. A petal is a thumbprint of a flower's heartbeat.



Tulipa 'Queen of Night'

Within one bloom is the echo of itself across petals and into the stamen. There's symmetry even in the diversions. Sometimes it seems that a bed of similar flowers are the stop action animation of one flower swaying in the breeze, frozen frames stretched across the space. If you look closely at one, you may see that same echo brushed into the surface like a record.



Echinacea pallida – Pale Purple Coneflower

In nature apparent wildness is a mathematical equation, a fractal. Chaos is created by repetition, perfect symmetry, and what was once will be again. It's a verse in Ecclesiastes—nothing is truly new. And yet by the personal act of human perception and reflection everything is new, so much so that it can feel overwhelming, chaotic. Which, perhaps, makes the world more comforting if chaos can be mapped at the center of a prairie flower.

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BENJAMIN VOGT has a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in two genres and has recently appeared in *American Life in Poetry*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Diagram*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *ISLE*, *Orion*, *Sou'wester*, *Subtropics*, and *The Sun*. Benjamin is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection *Afterimage* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press) and two chapbooks. He is also the author of a blog, [The Deep Middle](#), where he rants about writing and his 1,500 foot native prairie garden.

Nathan Holic

MY LIFE IN GADGETS



#78:
George
Foreman
Grill

BACK IN COLLEGE, I HAD A ROOMMATE NAMED PIGFORD. "PIG," FOR SHORT.

PIG LIVED UP TO HIS NAME. THE REST OF US HUNG POSTERS IN THE APARTMENT, EASY TO REMOVE...



BUT PIG GLUED FRATERNITY LETTERS TO HIS DOOR.

SOMETIMES HE TURNED HIS STEREO AS LOUD AS IT WOULD GO, THEN LOCKED HIS DOOR AND LEFT.

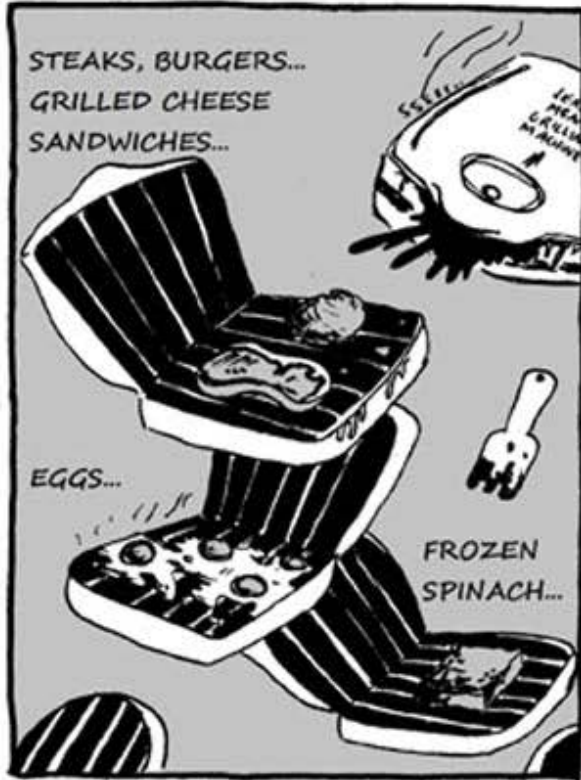


BUT HE WAS ALSO THE ONLY ONE AMONG US WHO HAD A GEORGE FOREMAN GRILL.



AND BACK IN COLLEGE, WE WERE IDIOTS. THIS WAS THE ONLY COOKING DEVICE WE KNEW HOW TO USE.

WE COOKED EVERYTHING
ON THAT FOREMAN.



AND THE FOREMAN WAS RESILIENT.
SOMEHOW IT SURVIVED OUR CRAZY
FRATERNITY PARTIES, TOO...



BUT IT COULDN'T
SURVIVE PIG.
HE LEFT TRASH IN THE
CUSHIONS, TOSSED
BOTTLE CAPS INTO THE
GARBAGE DISPOSAL.



TRIED TO CLEAN THE FOREMAN WITH A
METAL FORK.



THE WORSE OUR PLACE GOT, THE MORE I ATE IN MY BEDROOM... I WANTED A CLEAN APARTMENT, THINGS THAT WOULDN'T GET RUINED.



I WANTED MY OWN FOREMAN, WISHED I NEVER HAD TO RELY ON PIG.

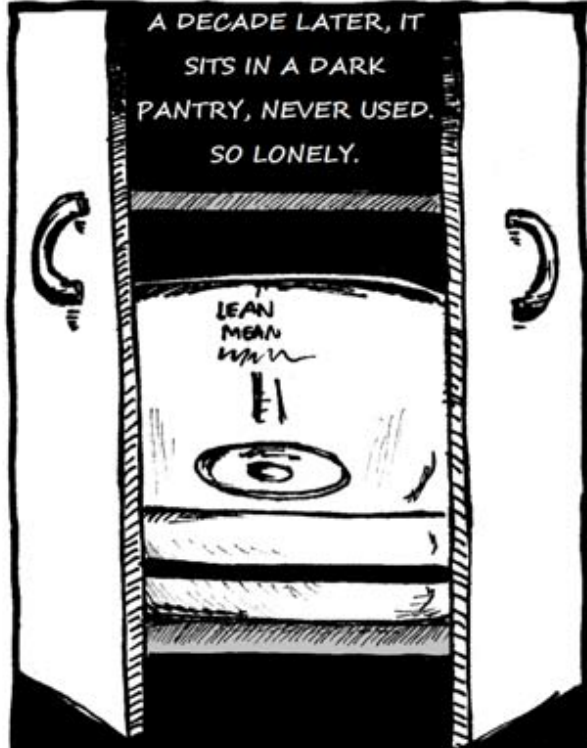


MY SENIOR YEAR, I MOVED. AND MY PARENTS BOUGHT ME A FOREMAN FOR CHRISTMAS. SO EXCITING! MY OWN STUFF THAT PIG COULDN'T DESTROY!

I KNOW WHAT THIS IS!



A DECADE LATER, IT SITS IN A DARK PANTRY, NEVER USED. SO LONELY.



MY HOUSE IS CLEAN, MY STUFF IS SAFE. I SHOULDN'T MISS PIG, THE DESTRUCTION...BUT SOME DAYS...

NATHAN HOLIC teaches writing courses at the University of Central Florida and, since 2006, has served as the Graphic Narrative Editor at *The Florida Review*, where we are currently compiling a new "Comics About Comics" section. He also works with Orlando-based Burrow Press to organize a project called "15 Views of Orlando," a literary portrait of the city featuring short fiction from fifteen Orlando authors young and old, local and far-removed, established and aspiring (the first installment was posted in early June: <http://burrowpress.com/15-views-of-orlando-an-introduction/>). His comics and mixed-media work have most recently appeared in *Welter* and *Red Fez*, and his artwork has been featured as the cover image for Lavinia Ludlow's new novel, *alt.Punk*, from Casperian Press. You can read about his horrifying Diet Coke addiction at <http://nathanholic.wordpress.com>.

Dear Billy Collins,

I don't remember the exact moment I met you. It must have been on some dark wood shelf of Barnes and Noble where I was magnetized by *The Art of Drowning*. I can see myself cross-legged on the rough carpet, skimming through pages, not just in love with the words themselves but with the white space that glares up from an un-owned book. Although I don't remember this moment, I know myself well enough to wager why I would've chosen yours over the others: the title. The title because of its violent thrashing, its implied process of perfection, and the way the cover's pastel yellow hue mutes the devastation of death.

Although I don't remember first seeing you, I do remember the exact moment I fell in love with you. I was in high school and on a trip with my family. Even though my dad doesn't fish, he impulsively decided to drag my mom, my sister, and me to a marsh, where he sat for hours waiting with no success. Held captive, I set up a lawn chair on sturdy ground and read your book from cover to cover. The grass on the shore of the marsh swayed tall and my shoulders burned red while I envisioned the embered-end of a cigarette like a train in progress.

This moment was not just the first time I remember us together, but the first time I discovered a poetry built on simplicity. Until then, I had been spoon-fed only scholarly verse like Shakespeare or Solomon's "Song of Songs." I didn't know people wrote without rigid form in their own colloquial voice; I didn't know, until then, how poetry punches the gut.

Since, I've learned to drive, live on my own, and pay my bills. I graduated high school, college, voted more than once, and moved across the country. Not only that, I don't write with clunky, forced rhymes anymore and poetry isn't just an outlet to vent. Since then, I've gone through many phases—Sharon Olds, James Galvin, Marie Howe—and I've written a lot of poems. I remembered you as a poet of my past, a gateway into my addiction.

But in the bookstore recently, I experienced the same dark wood shelves and rough carpet, the same kind of skimming. As I went through many other books, I saw yours, *Horoscopes for the Dead*, and I believed myself to be over you. Yet, I lifted yours off the shelf, cracked open the spine, and started from the beginning. In that first poem "Grave," you pulled me deeper than the other poetry books had that day, and without realizing, I wasn't skimming but hanging on the ledge of each line, once again enthralled by your clipped language. Although most of the lines function as complete phrases, your line breaks surprisingly elicit a great deal of tension. Other poets, like Tim Seibles, use line breaks to challenge the reader's understanding of the previous line—the poetic equivalent of flips and spins—so the reader continually feels off-center. But you don't need acrobatics. Instead, you

establish tension by returning to poetic basics: the line versus the sentence. You also create strength in sparseness, leaving no excess behind. And finally, you place rather serious content into a molded shape of whimsy. In "My Unborn Children," you speculate on that which never had a chance to exist, these unborn children that "never made the lacrosse team." You are philosophical and funny, spry and challenging. You aren't wilted with tragedy nor do you dismiss the contemplative.

Billy Collins, you are more than just a poet of the people but a reminder of the power verse has in its most clean form. You are not just a gateway; you are an architect of seemingly simple but elaborate structures. Thank you for reminding me that the intricacies of craft do not always need to be obvious to create emotionally impactful poetry.

Sincerely,

Trisina Dickerson

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Dear Mr. Strand,

I'm late for dinner. I'm sorry, not because I have done wrong, but for my own sake. My ignorance of your cooking has kept me.

I've just finished *New Selected Poems*. I saw the handwritten drafts that are the background of this book and knew that I would want to write to you. I may be wrong, but I feel that a person's handwriting is a kind of confession, and your handwriting told me I could trust you.

Reading poetry intimidates me. I don't know why, but it does. Being able to trust a poet, or maybe what's more accurate, feel as if there is flesh behind the ink on the page in the book I am holding, makes poetry more like a conversation, which is what poetry should be, I think, putting bodies on either side of a page.

I know that expressing my amazement at your work is a bit like describing a band I've just discovered to my father. "They're simple, really," I say, "but you won't believe their magnetism. Apparently, they were fairly popular in the day. Have you heard of them - The Beatles, I mean?"

Even so, I want to say thank you for *New Selected Poems*, because new to me is still a kind of new, and maybe there are others out there like me, people who hadn't yet met your words and for whom this book was an illumination.

Can I quote you? Because "[t]he carnation in my buttonhole / precedes me like a small / continuous explosion" from "The Man in the Mirror" deserves to be passed around. Your imagery is visceral, exacting to the point that I inhabit it and then begin to wonder if you are asking all the questions I haven't realized I was asking.

So many moons and so many stars! If they were my fledgling poems I would tell me to use some other celestial reference, but I won't tell you, because I never get tired of your moons. Clichés are cliché because so many say them that they get tired and end up meaning nothing to nobody, but when you say moon, my lungs expand in a new direction and I remember why the moon is important.

I recognize your impulse to watch/live/be the physical world. I recognize the speaker in "The House in French Village," who looks at the view from his front porch:

*and all we could see were sheets
of cold rain sweeping this way
and that, riffling the sea's coat of
deep green and the wind beating
the field flat sending up to the
porch gusts of salt spray that
carried the odor of fish and the
rot so it seemed of the whole bay
while we kept watch.*

In "A Morning," the "it," the "luminous room, a light-filled grave" you describe, and the solitary journey that took you to the place where you "saw for the first time / the one clear place given to us when we are alone" feels like the discovery of nirvana as much as it reminds me of my mortality. The reminder is ecstatic, like sinking under the surface of the ocean and listening to my ears echo against so many millions of gallons of water. I don't want to come up for air, but part of the sanctity of that moment is its impossibility, its inevitable end. For me, your poetry is a way to remember that ecstasy even with my head above water.

With many thanks,

Claire Stephens

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Dear Alex Lemon,

You are a bad boy. I can tell because I've seen your sleeve tattoos on the Scribner YouTube videos in which you're discussing your memoir *Happy*. You've got bad boy hair in those videos, too, black and slightly spiky, like you didn't try too hard but you still look good. A little, you know, dangerous.

It's obvious you were a cool kid growing up. Of course, I already knew that because your memoir opens with your freshman year at Macalester College before your first stroke, back when you were doing cool kid things like partying, playing sports, and slaying girls. But unlike most cool kids who grow up to be shallow adults pining for their glory years, you've taken an X-ACTO knife to your past, carving out the scope of your identity. Your memoir deals with not only your shocking physical trauma and personal darkness but, perhaps more importantly, it exposes all the strange, beautiful ways people love one another.

Plus, you've got a poet's tongue that surges through your prose (making for my favorite kind of prose). This makes sense, since you've also published two books of poetry, *Mosquito* (Tin House Books) and *Hallelujah Blackout* (Milkweed Editions). But this is not to say your words are all abstractions or flower metaphors, not a chance in hell coming from a guy with sleeve tattoos, surely. I'm talking about the kind of precise poetics that do what all good writing, especially nonfiction, should do: deliver the veritable world in ripe, bloody Technicolor so that the text becomes a living organism, heaving with the author's raw energy. Alex Lemon, your language holds deep, passionate music smashed against gritty, insoluble matter. Through your book I can feel your life spark and unravel better than I could if I were watching it happen in real time.

Oh god, I'm rambling. Bad boys make me nervous.

Maybe I'll let you do some chatting for a while. Here are just a few of my favorite lines from *Happy*:

"A fifth to feel the buzzing, cicadas chewing through my eyes. Just this, just this, just this."

"The spring air is steamed milk and metal, and Julie's hand is delicate."

"Under the shower's cold water, blood riots through my skin. Bruises map my body."

"She's wearing the blurred face people get when they think no one's around."

"The sterile walls gleam, and I'm ashamed I'm not comatose or dead."

"Holy shit—the doctor is palming my dick in his gloved hand like he's going to guess its weight."

"Ma tugs my cheeks again, then pushes away and hops back and claps and moonwalks across the street."

Your memoir is physical, and I don't mean that because it is a story of a young body suddenly breaking down. I mean this book has a pulse. It is visceral. I felt the heat and shape of light snarl off every page.

Alex, I have to be honest. Normally I don't like bad boys. My type are the safe, nerdy boys who like to watch the Discovery Channel and will never cheat on me. But after reading your insightful, achingly honest memoir, I really, really like you. Thank you for writing this voltage line of a book.

Sincerely,

Melissa Carroll

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