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Cover Photo

Stranger

by Lisa Eggleston
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My taste on things

and when it occurred to me that I understand the world through my senses— the very taste, touch, sight, scent, and sound of things—I suddenly wanted to eat life, sinking my mouth around the last glimpse of Inishmore as I stood at the cliff’s very edge, the wind only catching on my right cheek, turned. I wanted to let my tongue slide in-between the land’s masses, imagining its earthy flavor, the salty scent beckoning me to dive in, plunge down, cannon-ball style into that strangely colored ocean that lapped the shore I came from and once wiggled toes in. Odd, it was, thinking how this must be the same water I let crawl to my neck, caught in the waves off the coast of Cape Cod, and if it was the same water that wrapped me in then, would it recognize the color of me as I stand knees awkwardly bent contemplating the fall, how long it would take, and the size of the splash once I finally hit—for I was sure I’d survive and then climb out, half naked, bearing stories of my thoughts as the water crept up the caverns of my nose.

and when it occurred to me that I understood you through my senses, the very taste, touch, sight, scent, and sound of you last month before the time I spoke words of truth—I suddenly wanted to eat language, licking away the words that dripped from my mouth like the bathroom faucet when you’d forget to turn the knob all the way to the left. Although the essences of you could only grip pieces of me, before they fell to the floor, it was enough to make me understand Whitman and why he felt he needed to write. The plunge of your tongue into me and I’m pretty sure I can still feel—no, taste—no, know—the parts of you that made you nervous. Your staggered, sharp gulps of breath that you didn’t know you breathed—against my face and I wondered why I had never heard those before, you…but I think when you left, or when I left (maybe never even being fully there)—the center of me split open, cracked and gaping like the creases in the cliffs that summer I stood at the edge. Though it was strange how I could never stuff the crevasses back in—I only sensed you for such. a. short. period. of. time. And even stranger yet is how there is little to no consolation in the fact that we would’ve never really worked out.

Allison Ehrhart
uninvited.

Secluded, just us two (three?), on an old, patch-work garden blanket, sitting—wrapped in a cloudless sky—out of the reach of cold city shoulders, dark stares, and closeted sin.

A faulty pair (two and a half?) lying quietly in the mid-summer sun on a hot, lingering afternoon—musing through a smoky olive haze on the lawn.

A pregnant silence saturates the air between us—a wordless conversation. You are me, and I am you, both aware of life soon lost—we spare our heart question.

—silent humility and surrendered still—we’ll wait for private pardon rendered.

Jess Stack
We, The Passionate

The Sun still rises and I know not why, the sea is dark, and the horizon hides our desires; our flames within the lamps.

We escape the Night, where the clamor for sacrifice drives mad with pipes, and wine the howling hunger…

We must hide beneath the Laurels, each leaf an oracle; each leaf a lyre played by Apollo; Do you hear the melody in the wind?

Familiar cities, streets, houses, hills, fields, forests are foreign to us now; we must follow the Sun across the land until we find the sea

Where we may traverse in a golden chariot of fire the midnight that has set upon us, and free ourselves from the lamps.

In our solitude, we are one—bound together by a single Chord and not the passing breath of a single Note.

From the Shaded Land we ascend, and can not look back; sleep and death claim all, but we remain as one—within the Sun.

James Macris
Raise the Roof

by Jacqueline Reed
Speak No Evil

I want to know what kind of deranged person comes up with this shit. I’m watching as the guy tries to push this concept on the audience; you take a bicycle pump that works in reverse, use it on a container where you put this special one-way band-aid, and then you use it to store food. He’s using it to inflate marshmallows while trying to convince the audience that this is an absolutely natural occurrence. He wants applause, he wants fame, he wants credit cards, and I’m stalling.

Come on, focus. I came here for a reason, mainly because I’d be found as soon as possible. That’s why I’m here in a vomit-yellow motel room watching bad TV and wondering how I’m going to do this. I’m not at home in MY lounge chair, in front of MY TV and eating MY food because I didn’t want to make a mess. But I’m forgetful, I’ll admit, and I came here without any weapon or medication to do the job.

But I can’t focus, because there’s a rhythmic pounding coming from the room above mine. I’m this close to going up there and giving them a piece of my mind, but I’m still deciding on whether I’m going to tell them to knock it off or to ask if I can join in. I knew what they were doing even before their bass line duet, because I saw them check in ahead of me. She was wearing a short skirt, leather boots and fishnets, as though she was scripted for a bad made-for-TV movie. The guy just wore jeans, a t-shirt and a smile because he only knew certain parts of what he was getting into. The both of them looked at me though; I had no luggage, like them, but I had no accomplice. The motel clerk didn’t give a damn either way, just so long as he could sell a room.

Damn, I wish I could have a job like that girl. She just goes by natural talent, has a little fun, and then gets a huge reward. I feel like I’ve been cheated when I see people like that. No one ever told me that I could grow up to be a millionaire, be a porn star, own my own business, nothing. I was just told to keep my head down, think realistically and do my part, and I hated them for it. I want to be someone else, but I’m not, and that’s why I’m here in the first place.

Aww, shit. Is that the fire alarm? Bad timing, I guess. I’m happy I’m on the first floor, at least. I know, I know, I came here to do this, but not by fire. That would take too long, and I don’t really have that kind of time. So yeah, lazy my way out the door, walk out into the parking lot, and turn around to watch. It’s a lot like that channel they have on at Christmas time, the one with the Yule log for people too poor for a fireplace. The only difference I can see is that people are escaping out from underneath it. The guy and girl are outside and pant-less, which doesn’t bother me at all. There are only a handful of people running out besides them and the clerk, and one of them is a heavy woman in a flowery cape that’s
clucking as she paces back and forth sobbing. She turns to the rest of us, and tries to stop crying long enough to talk. Oh no! Can it be? It’s the cliché, the heartbreaker that happens when she says...

“My son is in there! I was so panicked that I didn’t notice that he wasn’t behind me!” Everyone else steps back, but I’m just too lazy to do so. Her watery eyes beg me to do something to save her precious kid. Gasp! Will the reluctant hero burst through the door, rescues the helpless child and carry him to safety?

“Fuck, why not.” I’ve been watching too much bad TV. She is shocked by my response, by smiles awkwardly anyway since I’m going in. Either one of two things will happen: one, I’ll save the kid and be a hero, or two, I’ll kill two birds with one stone if I fail, and no one will fault me for it. Wait, almost forgot.

“Which room is it?” I yell back over my shoulder, and I’m pretty sure she yells back “203”. Great, upstairs, less chances to live. Just my kind of deal, don’t ya think? I can taste the smoke as I get closer to the building; it’s sour, and it feels like that terrible tang of morning breath magnified a couple hundred times. My eyes water as I approach the stairs, which probably makes me look all the better for ‘weeping at the plight of an innocent child’. So the stairs don’t really give me any trouble, and I’m almost at the room, and I realize that anyone could have done this. I’m just being nice for once, and I really don’t think I feel any better or worse for it.

The door is open, because the big girl in the parking lot just didn’t care, so there’s no exciting door-kicking. The kid, probably about five, I guess, is standing in the middle of the room, wailing. He’s probably more upset that his mom is gone than the smoke coming through the vents. He’s just standing there, in little jeans, striped shirt, awful shit. He has brown hair, which would probably turn black if he stayed. I go to grab the little rug-rat.

“Come here little guy” I grab his hand, but he pulls away and screams,

“No!” That little prick! I’m trying to be nice, to take him out of danger, and he pulls this because he doesn’t trust a stranger. What the hell, your own mother forgot you, how much worse can I be than that? A tank explodes somewhere, causing the whole building to rumble and the faux-chandelier to fall and shatter. The kid screams, and I’ve just about had it up to here with all of this absurdity.

“Listen here, you little shit,” I scream above the alarms, and he comes to attention. “Either you come with me willingly, or your next choice is whether I throw you into that broken glass or the fire!” He nods, suddenly enlightened by the combined danger of myself and the fire. So we walk out, his hand in mine like I’ve known him forever, and we reach the balcony to find that the tank that blew was just close enough to the stairs to destroy the bottom half.

Damn it. The kid’s screaming again, I can see the mother reaching up to the balcony and wailing as well, and the only thing I don’t hear yet are sirens. So there’s no help,
and it’s just me and the screaming duet. Well, the kid doesn’t want to be part of this, and I really don’t care. I just see the pavement, which is the ultimate goal of both me and this kid, so I figure I might as well. I pull the kid close to myself and vault over the railing. The kid is finally quiet, too shocked to scream at what I had done. The mother is just as quiet, and I’m fumbling as quickly as I can to make sure I’m on the bottom, hitting the pavement first. There’s no white light, there are no dead relatives. Just a thump and the fading wish that I had should have spent my life up until now as a gigolo…

It’s a hallway, like one of those in an office, and I’m waiting near the back of the line. That’s all, a line to take a number and wait forever. I can’t say I’m disappointed, but I also am confused as to why it’s like this. A yuppie in a suit is busily tapping me on the shoulder, and I stare at him for a second, wondering if I should give him a tap that might be a little bit harder.

“If you could come with me, sir” he states officiously, and then skirts around the line to the front. I guess I must have had reservations here. But the walk is so long, and I’m starting to see clothes on people that I’m pretty sure didn’t survive the eighties.

“How many people are waiting to get in?”

“We are a little behind, I have to admit,” he stops to look at the clipboard which I just noticed he was carrying. “Presently,” he frowned, “we are processing souls as far back as the American Civil War.” When he says this, I look immediately at the wall, away from the line. I don’t want to see dead relatives, I don’t want to know any stories or hear them fawn over my untimely death. I can hear whisperings in the line, and I guess that either people are jealous that I’m getting in ahead of them, or that I’m in really deep shit. So I follow the yuppie for, well, I guess it feels like a week, and we finally pass some Confederate and Union uniforms that I notice out of the corner of my eye.

“We’re here.” I’m ushered into a small office, with a desk and two chairs, one on either side. I’m tempted to grab the bigger one, the boss chair, because I might as well live it up before they stamp my papers for a one way trip to hell. So why not, I do, and when the guy comes in to interview me, another yuppie, he only smiles.

“Not the most humble person, are you?” He calmly sits down in the other chair and pulls out a pair of glasses to put on, which I think is a funny gesture for being in heaven. “Now, I think we are having a few problems with your case…”

“What, you mean I’ve been denied life insurance?” He only glances up from his papers at me, then looks back down. No one has a sense of humor anymore.

“I’m talking about your mode of transportation here.” Isn’t that cute? ‘Mode of Transportation’. Even in the afterlife there’s political correctness, with every other person tip-toeing around the subject. “The reason why we have moved you up in the line is that there is a conflict in protocol,”…more jargon.
“What are you really talking about?”

“What I’m talking about is a man who, after doing absolutely nothing of any moral consequence for his entire life,” the interviewer sneers, “you suddenly decide to risk your life to save the life of someone else, but with the wrong intention. The usual rules for martyrdom and self-sacrifice don’t apply in this case, and you’ve basically become my problem until we work this out.”

“Who are you, Peter? Who let you into this job if you’re going to be such an ass-hole?”

“I’m here because of a family friend.” This doesn’t surprise me at all.

“Well, anyway, if I’m such a huge ‘problem’, what do you want me to do about it? I’m sorry I’m not so cut-and-dry.”

“Well, normally, we’d have enough evidence to decide if people should come here or not, but look at you. You grew up in a suburb; you kept to yourself as a child, as a teen, as an adult, and then you moved to the city for a change of pace. Typical: check, check and check.” I hate this guy just a little bit more now. “Then you decide to end your own life, something which just for the intent I could nail you for right now, but you used that intent to justify saving an innocent person. I can’t understand why, but I know that whether I reassign you to the lower offices or let you in here, I’m going to be swimming in red tape for the rest of existence.” He puts his head in his hands, taking on the defeated pose, when he suddenly sits upright and smiles again.

“What is it?” I really don’t trust anything this guy smiles at.

“I believe that we can arrange for a little more time to reevaluate your position. You may go.” He waves his hand towards the door and smiles one more time, wide and white and just enough to make me want to kick his face in. But I really don’t care, so I just open the door and step out. Into nothingness.

And then there’s falling. Falling into the abyss.

Everything is burning, and I can taste rubber. I really hope Hell isn’t as bad as people make it out to be, but it sure hasn’t made a good impression yet. I can’t see, and it feels like I just sat on a car battery naked.

“He’s coming to!” What? Who the hell is that? I open my eyes, and there’s a serious looking guy, probably in college. Shit, it’s an EMT. I feel like garbage, and I kind of wish I was back waiting in line. “We gave you … to wake up … do the trick…” His voice is fading in and out, and I really don’t want to know what exactly it is that he gave me. I’m thinking of bad TV again. Adrenaline? A slap in the face? Smelling Salts? Defibrillator?

Damn it, the heavy woman is right next to him, and she’s throwing her kid in my
What? Did you realize that I might make a better parent then you? Do you want me to be his seat cushion again?

“Thank you so much!” She’s crying again, big blubbery eyes. “I wanted Jimmy to thank you too.” Oh man. Jimmy. This kid is going to have it rough. He’s going to be that guy, you know the one, the guy who bugs the crap out of everyone and has no friends except other rejects.

“Thank you,” he mumbles, and then hides in his mother’s folds. She pulls him out though, and throws him at me one more time. In front of me again, Jimmy wraps his arm around me in a mock hug, and I seize up. I’m pretty sure my arm is broken, thank you. Why am I not moving to the hospital yet? I can feel the cold metal of the stretcher, but I’m getting no movement. These aren’t loved ones! I don’t care! Move me, you rent-a-nurse!

“Let’s get you in the ambulance and to the hospital!” The EMT is back, and yelling like I’m in an old man. “Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay!” Optimistic prick. Of course everything is going to be okay for him, mainly because he’s not me. Hey, we’re moving now. Great. It hurts like hell as they shove me in and I settle with a clunk. I hope to God that I wasn’t left with some cheerful note in my pocket, a little post-it with “Good Luck” written on it.

Matthew Kiernan
Still Remains

Old,
worn out,
rusting,
for four years they remain unworn;
faded and dull,
olive green with bent posts;
dissimilar backs of different color;
misshapen from her many late night dates,
the black and white photos
help me to remember;
the original polish
now stained,
worn during countless good times with grandpa
creating countless memories,
unforgotten,
shared,
passed down from my grandmother,
untouched
in a box on my dresser,
when the time is right,
I will wear them.

Kacy Wilckens
Vanderbilt Gardens: Hyde Park, New York

by Tisha Dunstan
Mistaken Intent

Health class, third period, is the only time that I get to see my friend Naomi who sits in front of me. Usually I like to tease her with gentle pokes to her side or running the tip of my finger along the back of her neck. She doesn’t complain, she thinks it’s as funny and friendly as I do, so there’s no harm done nor is there a greater intent. However, yesterday, she was wearing a black-hoody and I ran the tip of my finger gently down her back as the casual playful thing that I do. I was expecting her to turn around and smile at me, which is her usual reaction. But this time she just turned her head, not quite looking at me but referring to me, and she told me that it felt good. So I decided to play on the joke and I kept on dragging one or two of my fingers gently across her back. After about five minutes it turned from a joke to making her feel good. I would use three or four fingers and only across her middle and lower back, because her hood was covering her top. I would move slowly up, down, side to side, and occasionally let one finger brush against her most ticklish spot; her side. This carried on for about fifteen minutes or so. She didn’t say anything to me while I was doing it, so I figured that I was doing a good job. She would stop what she was working on when I let my fingers glide up across her spine. I didn’t see anything wrong with it and neither did she. I found out later on that day that the certain kind of touching that I was using was a form of flirting. I was immediately thinking, awe crap she thinks that I was flirting with her. At that point it was too late to talk to her because I couldn’t find her past third period.

So the next day when I saw her in class, I had totally forgotten to apologize to her, in case I had given her the impression that I was flirting with her, because I wasn’t. Absent mindedly allowing the thought to slip my mind, I focused on the bare back in front of me. She wasn’t wearing her hoody, instead she was wearing a fashionable pink sweatshirt that exposed her upper back just above her shoulder blades. Today I thought that she wouldn’t mind if I continued the whole “feel-good” thing. When her hair was at the side of her neck, I gently brushed the rest of it that was covering her neck aside and lightly drew the tip of my index finger down between her shoulder blades. She didn’t say or do anything to acknowledge that I was doing anything, until I carefully slid my fingers, as I did the day before, around her upper back. At this point she was faced away from me but a little to the left, so I could see the side of her face; she was blushing. I did the same as before, but this time, I was touching her bare skin and my fingers were cold. I noticed she stopped what she was doing when I did this. I thought maybe she had stopped to think about something, but I thought otherwise when she wasn’t doing anything for four straight minutes. She just stared off into the nothingness. Her head was faced toward her hands, but she wasn’t really looking at anything. Before, I had let my finger occasionally brush against her side, but this time I would let my pinky finger glide across the side of her neck. She seemed to be lost in the feeling
it was giving her. I stopped when she had suddenly shuddered and gasped. I asked her if she was okay. She nodded and smiled, her face still blushing. We had been friends for over a year now, but nothing we had been through could prepare me for what happened next. After class she had grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. At first her head was down; she was seriously contemplating saying something. A second later she raised her head, her eyes meeting mine, with a look in her eyes like she was about to say something she had been holding in for a long time. She said that if I wanted to get closer, to meet her at her house on Saturday at noon. Before she turned to walk away, she licked her lips and smiled at me. At the time I was naive, and didn’t understand what her true intention was. I thought that she had meant get closer as friends, and I, of course, couldn’t turn down the opportunity. It was Friday; I only had twenty-four hours to discover just how naive I was. When I got home, I told my mother that my friend Naomi was having a get-together with a bunch of friends and that I was invited. She was happy to hear that I would be getting out of the house and complied to give me a ride.

Saturday rolled around and my gut was rolling with it. I was excited that I would be able to spend time with a friend later that day, but something about the way that she presented the invitation didn’t quite settle. I puzzled over exactly how it happened the day before. She looked nervous, or more like she was containing something. She spoke softly, as to not let anyone else hear. She walked away, smiling and licking her lips. No matter how much I thought about it, it didn’t quite sink in. But regardless to the fact the my head didn’t get it, my gut knew something else was going on. The odd feeling continued until eleven-thirty, when my mom had suggested we leave so that I could arrive on time. I put on my jacket and shoes and prepared to put my gut to shame by proving to it that nothing was wrong. Naomi lived about twenty or so minutes away. On the way, my mom had asked me some questions about what was going on at the “get-together.” Questions like, “How many people were going to be there?”, “Will adults be present?”, usual parent questions. I more or less made up an answer to each. We’d pulled into the driveway of a large two-story white house. As I unbuckled my seatbelt, my mom told me to call when I was ready to get picked up, I nodded and told her I loved her and exited the vehicle. The trailblazer I arrived in pulled out of the drive as I approached the scarlet colored front door. Before I was able to lift my hand to knock on the door, the scarlet portal swung open. Standing in the doorway to greet me was Naomi, who was decorated with a short black skirt, a light yellow t-shirt, and her no-longer innocent looking smile. I smiled back the best I could trying not to look confused, managing to utter “hey” before I noticed the awkward emptiness of the room behind her. It appeared to be leading into a hall where the livingroom was clearly visible, and clearly empty.
I walked inside and took off my shoes next to the entrance. Naomi was barefoot, taking a couple steps back to let me in. As I entered, I noticed that to the left, the direction Naomi went, was a spiral staircase that lead to both the floor above and below.

“Is anyone else here?” I finally managed to ask.

“Nope” she answered with the same smile that seemed to have lost its innocence since school.

“Is anyone else coming?” I allowed my gut to ask, suddenly feeling that maybe something else were going on. She just shook her head, her smile now showing teeth as if she was holding back giggling. Finally, my gut couldn’t wait any longer and decided to get right to the point.

“What’s going on here? Am I missing something?” Trying not to sound too defensive. She continued to smile while biting her lower lip before saying,

“Aw come on, it’s just you and me here. You don’t have to play anymore.” she said as she allowed herself to relax against the railing of the spiral staircase behind her. I shot her an unsure and even further confused look. Her smile didn’t fade as she sighed, “Don’t worry. My parents are out and won’t be back for a couple hours. And my sister is out working until later tonight.” Suddenly my entire facial expression went from concerned/confused to surprised as my eyebrows shot up. The feeling in my gut died away almost instantly, as if to say, “I told you so.” I cleared my throat trying to find something else to say, coming to the sudden realization that I wasn’t prepared to give what she was expecting to get. Suddenly thinking to myself, if only I had straightened this whole thing out yesterday. She thought I was flirting with her. And apparently she took my “play” as a sign that I wanted to...

“So you just gonna stand there?” Her voice cut through my thought process like a knife and snapped me back to reality. I let my eyebrows lower to where they were before, trying to act calm. I needed to think of something to say to get myself out of this. I already arrived, which told her that I was there for only one thing. But how could she so easily assume that I wanted to do that with her? And accept it? She must have liked me before. Actually, I remember a year ago someone telling me that she had a crush on me. Oh god, what have I gotten myself into? I was set up, by myself.

“You know what’s funny” She spoke softly as she slowly stepped forward off of the railing putting one foot in front of the other as if she was walking a tightrope. “At first, when you started to touch me, I wasn’t sure what to think. Then I thought, he knew that I had wanted him, so why would he touch me like that unless he was trying to say something to me?” She had halved the distance between us by this time, causing me to take a slow step
back. “But my suspicions were confirmed yesterday, when you did it again. You know you almost put me in a trance? I saw you look at my face when I blushed.” She bit her lip again before continuing; I took another step back. “You knew what you were doing to me.”

_Obviously, I didn’t know, I thought she was just taking it as a massage or something. I didn’t know I was turning her on!_

“So I thought, he must really want this. And I knew that no one would be here for at least a couple hours.” Her head tilted as her gaze went from me to the floor and back to me, but her eyes returned a sinister look that cut into me, which told me that I needed to think of something fast before this situation goes any further in the wrong direction. It was true that she was attractive, being an ectomorphic athlete with light skin an short dark hair. But she was my friend, and I didn’t feel for her _that_ way. I needed to say something to give myself some more time to think.

“Hold on a sec.” I managed to blurt as I put one hand in front of me as if to ward off something threatening. She stopped just two feet away from me with a sudden look of confusion. “I think” I paused, “ that there's been some huge misunderstanding, that lead to another.” She assumed a more relaxed pose and folded her arms, keeping the same confused face.

“I uh, I've kinda just realized how screwed up this situation is right now. And I mean no offense to you at all. But this whole thing is my fault...”

“Fault?” she cut me off. “What do you mean _fault_?” She unfolded her arms allowing her arms to fly through the air in exasperation. “Wait a minute. Then you weren’t trying to...”

“do anything other than play as a friend, is all.” I finished for her, “The poking, the teasing on your back, all of it. I did not mean for it to be anything other than play. And I am so sorry for giving you any other impression.” The look in her eyes was loss; her eyes searched the room for something to hint to her that this was just a bad dream. She closed her eyes placing her hands on her head as she turned to lean back against the wall, she slid down the wall into a huddled position wrapping her arms around her knees. I felt horrible. I crouched down next to her to try and consol her. I placed my hand on her shoulder.

“I am so sorry Naomi. I am so sorry. I didn’t realize what you thought was going on until I got here. When I saw you blushing yesterday, I didn’t think anything of it.” I half-laughed to try and lighten the situation. “And I never thought I would be apologizing to a girl for turning her on.” She looked up at me with the innocent smile I knew her for and laughed at my comment. I smiled back finally seeing that things had cleared up and that we were okay again.
“But I am sorry for sending you the wrong message. And I did know that you had a crush on me a while back; it just slipped my mind when we were in class together.”

“So, you did know then. You knew that I liked you?” she uttered putting her head down again as if ashamed. “Yeah, I remember someone telling me last year.” I suddenly realized that I just added to something that made her feel uncomfortable. “Which isn’t a problem or anything. It’s not like it makes me uncomfortable around you or anything.” My hand still on her shoulder, I rubbed my thumb against her shoulder joint. “We’re friends, okay?” She lifted her head, finding reassurance in my words. “There’s nothing wrong with having differing feelings for each other.” Her eyes now showing understanding as her gaze met mine. I decided to try and lighten the situation again, “Besides, I find comfort in knowing that you like me.”

“Why, so you can say that at least someone does?” She cut me off, killing the humor.

“No, so I can say that at least someone I like does,” I said smiling. Her look went from serious to surprised.

“What?” was her only response.

“I may not like you the way you like me, but I do like you.”

“Because we’re friends,” she said, allowing herself to assume that I was just saying what I said to not make her feel bad.

“More than a friend,” I smiled lightly. She let her facial expression change back to surprised. “But, in no way am I ready to...” I gestured with my hands to the place where we were standing before, “do any of that with you,” I said trying not to sound like a child. She just laughed lightly at my attempt to avoid saying “have sex.”

“It’s okay. I guess I can take what I can get,” she said jokingly to even out who was being serious and who was being funny. She relinquished her knees from her arms and turned to wrap her arms around me, resting her head on my shoulder. Being caught by surprise by her embrace, I, at first, didn’t return the favor. A second passed before I found it in me to wrap my arms around her in return. We released each other and stood up, both feeling a little silly for how the whole situation carried on. We stared at each other for a second trying to find the next thing to say.

“Uh” she managed to say as she looked down at what she was wearing. “Guess I should change into something a little more, uh, appropriate,” she said smiling the innocent smile I had known her for having. “I mean, considering what was said, we like each other, but in different ways but more than just friends. Which I guess means, no sex?” she laughed. I tried to reply without laughing back.
“Yeah, no sex.” Smiling on the brink of laughing. We both knew it was a joke.

“Okay then, I’ll go change.” She laughed as she turned for the staircase. I shook my head as a particularly entertaining idea slipped into my head. She was halfway up the stairs before I finally managed to say,

“Hey” getting her attention, she stopped and turned to me from between floors. “If you don’t mind, being that we said what we said.” Anticipating what was to come next, she smiled and tilted her head with a cocked eyebrow waiting for me to spill out the rest. “Do you think maybe, we could go out sometime?” Now I felt my face turning red, but I felt good knowing that I said it, even after what happened. She bounced once on one foot smiling.

“Of course.”

Richard Brayton
In Loving Memory

by Krista Lippincott
Kitchen Table Sets

We moved all the time before we finally stopped.
(It was nice when we moved)
In this kitchen,
at least the oven wasn’t installed in the days of fallout shelters.

(In the new place, (the house was actually really old but this was))
our new kitchen,
mom splurged and bought a new table set—
she said she wanted something just our size,
now that there were only four of us.
I just think she wanted to start new
(but I also think all the stains and scuffs in the old one
from old family food fights finally got to her).
I remember when we finally got it
awkwardly placed in the surprised
(and undersized) room with its six chairs.

My brothers and I weren’t allowed to do homework
at the table—
mom said because what we wrote would
imprint into the soft wood.
I think now we can use it as
a writing surface.
The case was the same with the plastic wrap that covered
the cushions
of the six matching chairs.
Now, there’s so many missed mouthfuls splattered into the cloth.

One time, I stayed out too late—
two days late, actually.
When I finally came back, the coffee was on
and mom was painting over the lime green walls.
I used to think she thought I was dead somewhere;
Now I wonder if
I reminded her too much of someone who scuffed and stained
her last kitchen table set.

Steve Mullane
Good American

Sweat and coconut oil cover my face and my purple uniform as my ears pop from the screaming children daring me never to bare any of my own. A false smile and hello as they move like stacked candy—an everlasting supply. Anything for the consumer.


“Enjoy your movie sir.” Please go away. “No think about it. If no one littered where would they work?” I want to throw up. “You’re a good American.” He says winking.

Tisha Dunstan
Peppermints

One night
before the cancer
my grandmother pulled
mints for me
out of the pocket of her leather jacket
dropping them like seeds
into my cocoa.

I sank into her couch
marveling at her glamour,
smoke drifting from her cigarette
held daintily between manicured fingers.
I watched the smoke
instead of George Bailey
and was hypnotized to sleep on a familiar shoulder.

Smoke is but a vapor
that appears for a short time
and vanishes away.

Tonight I sit in front of a fire
in her leather jacket,
cold.

Tonastacia Dennis
Wistful Child

by John Janitz
Absolut

A perfectly crafted frosted glass bottle,

Blue letters under a silver crest.

Shots

Of

Liquid Happiness,

Ultimately unfulfilling,

Taste of vodka and regrets.

Kyle Mullins
Thick Fire

Inspired by: Patrick Lawler

A thick bone of fire
Shatters in our lakes. There, nothing
Is

Softer. The foreign years
Stay by them, glide
Like darkness

Out of the slice of a shoe.
The nightmares
Come in their ears. If
It’s two things,

It’s one, and no more.
Heat piles on the floors
Of the mansions.

The heat that has risen
From the hairy road in the field
Is out of the disarray of devil’s horns.

Vijay DaCosta
The fire hydrant who has the snow up to its nose

by Katarina Louisa Stuetzle
To Patrick:

I spend most of my week days

floating

inside dreams of California—

miles away from memories of you, wedged into the wrinkles of my

new york brain.

I imagine the air,

thick with sea salt,

taunting my tongue,

tickling my taste-buds.

I imagine myself,

naked,

sprawling across soft morning sand—

relaxed,

waiting for the tide, The Beatles singing softly in my mind—

ob-la-di ob-la-da life goes on…

lalala life goes on…

Jess Stack
Classic Jazz

Ta-Ta-Taptaptaptaptap
Banged out on a snare,
Ba-ba-boomboomboomboom
In distorted electric,
Ting-ting-BING
Echoes acoustic,
Da-Da-Dum
On the bass awaits
Vocals “All Aboard” —

Sounds of an Alco C424
Now in my control,
Takes me years before
Waving goodbye to Daddy
On the morning train.

Kyle Mullins
Snowy Dog

by Lisa Eggleston
Playing the Game

A man stares through my window each day at dusk. He walks to my mailbox then turns to look. I hide behind my curtain so he can’t see that I can see.

This man will make love to me one day. He will inject his vigor inside and come out with shedding skin. I will eat his hair like spaghetti, slurping and smacking, and we will be like one person. Or two. People. And yet he stares into my window and I’m so afraid that he’ll see through the curtain, even.

One day he will walk up my stone path. He’ll knock and when I open the door, there will be no one there. I’ll keep it open and go back to my hiding place. He’ll come inside a few minutes later and finger my knick-knacks, my toothbrush, toilet seat, pillow drool spots, and lingerie. He will retreat when he is satisfied and be on his way.

When he stares, only sometimes will he knock. I always leave the door open and go back to my spot. I am a chameleon to my curtain, and he will never see me seeing him.

Tamara Keeney
I think it was Morgan Road
I used to cross after I shut the last cover of
the last book, in my last class
“class,” she’d say—my mother—“he never did have class”
and maybe that’s why she hated him…

or maybe it was because she imagined him stripping me,
Layers of her protective ribbon unraveling by the will of his fingers, and me,
just allowing him to—

the wrinkles of my brain tightening every time he’d mention Tahoe,
a place I never lived,
(nor wanted to)
but I’d let him speak that to me, as if my own tongue had no ability to lick the
corners of my own dreams,
allowing them to be articulated

I’d pull at the bottom of my shorts, in spite of her, him, and me
just to see how far I’d go before I told myself the truth

and I told her—my mother—many years later, that I always knew why
she hated him
that I knew he’d slip between others after shutting the front door of my house
leaving me within, my thoughts whispering truths
of him spooning against them (despite
last sunday when he slid his hand down the curve of my knee
in the last pew…)

No, I’m sure it was Morgan Road
I used to cross
my fingers, hopping she wouldn’t call, asking me where I was going
because, clearly, I didn’t know
and I was never really good at telling lies to her or
(to me)

Allison Ehrhart
The Lost Memories

by Eric Fenclau
Dear Angie

‘Dear Angie,’ writes Shelby from Minnesota, ‘I have been living with my boyfriend, who I’ll call “Tim,” for over three years now. I would like to get married and begin a family. He led me to believe we were headed in that direction when I first moved in, but now whenever I bring up the subject, he gets irritable and says he’s not ready for that kind of commitment. Should I stick it out with Tim and hope he changes his mind, or is it time for me to move on?’

The thought that first strikes me is why the hell is she asking me for advice? Sure, I am a relationship advice columnist, but I’m also 32 and still single—not exactly great qualifications for advice of this nature. The longest relationship I’ve ever had was with my vibrator, who I’ll call “Jim.” Jim never talked back or complained about how much money I spent on shoes. He didn’t litter my apartment with beer cans and empty pizza boxes. Most importantly, and this is kind of a big one for me, Jim never tried to give me herpes, chlamydia, or any other unfortunate disease of that nature. Regrettably, Jim recently died on me. The old man just couldn’t take it anymore, and I guess I just haven’t had the heart to replace him.

Shelby should really be asking my current boyfriend, who I’ll call “Not Jim” for advice. He’s just terrific with commitment. He’s been married for nearly ten years now. His wife’s name is “Charlotte” and she’s beautiful. Her face is classic, like Audrey reincarnated. She has the kind of body that you just know, even through all her expensive clothes, doesn’t have a single stretch mark on it, unlike my own which is a virtual map of little lines marking every pint of ice cream I’ve eaten in the last fifteen years. But as Not Jim points out, beautiful girls are never good in bed because they don’t have to be. Women with elastic hips and slack waists, however, can be fantastic just as long as you close your eyes.

Regardless of what advice I give Shelby, I already know she’s going to stay with Tim. She’s waited over three years, indicating she must know that no other man has any desire to be with her or else she would have been long gone by now. Plus, if she had any ability to make demands to Tim, say like oh I don’t know ‘you need to propose in the next three months or I’m gone,’ I sincerely doubt she would have put it off all this time. If it takes three years to work up the courage to insist on a real commitment, trust me, you don’t have the courage at all. You see, I know girls like Shelby. They’re finally able to find a man who after the third date, after he’s gotten what he wanted, is actually still coming around. Because this so rarely happens, the Shelby girls cling to the notion that this man must be the one. To ensure that they’re able to hold on to him, they wait on him hand and foot, praying every night for the proposal that never comes. He, of course, has all of the power at this point. Why would he want to throw all of that away for marriage? The only shot these Shelby girls have at getting married is if the Tim men eventually realize that they can’t, in fact, do better than a Shelby girl. In most cases, this epiphany never happens as man is by nature an egotistical beast. Their best bet is to marry their gay best friend, who just happens to be an immigrant and needs to marry to stay in the country.

Of course I can’t give any of that advice. Instead I tell Shelby that she sounds like a loving and devoted girlfriend that any man would be lucky to marry. I tell her she should sit down with Tim
and in a calm manner explain her needs and expectations from the relationship, and if he doesn’t think he can meet them it’s probably best if they part ways. I tell her it’s neither of their faults if they just want different things and at least they’ll know they gave the relationship a real shot. Then I tell her to consider counseling if she starts feeling too down about this whole unfortunate situation. Finally, I wish her the best of luck and realize my job is a load of bullshit.

I sigh and pick up the next letter. It’s from Caryn in Rhode Island. “Dear Angie, I am currently dating a terrific man, “Dave.” We’ve been together nearly a year now. He has a good job, he’s caring and attentive, buys me flowers, compliments me… really he’s all I could ask for. There’s just one problem—he’s married. I know I should break it off, but I’d hate to give up someone who is otherwise wonderful. Besides, sometimes men do leave their wives. What do you think?”

I think this could be my life, minus all the terrific, caring, and attentive qualities. And the fact is I realized quite some time ago that men very rarely leave their wives, and when they do it doesn’t take them a “nearly a year.” If they’re going to leave at all, they’ll be gone within the first month, you can trust me on that. Though I think it might be refreshing if I still had some Caryn’s naivety in me.

There was once a time, a very brief time, when I have the thought that maybe, just maybe Not Jim will leave Charlotte. After we have been together about two months he asks me how I feel about spending Christmas with his family in New Hampshire. “Charlotte hates to leave the city even for just a few days,” he explains. “And I simply can’t handle my family by myself.”

I am caught off guard to say the least. I can’t imagine anyone being so bold as to take their mistress home for the holidays, but I find the idea strangely attractive…frightening too, as I figure his family can’t possibly find my presence there appropriate. Even if they are aware of the affair I can be quite certain they wouldn’t want to see it right under their roof. Then again, maybe he could just be completely honest and unashamed with his family. The notion of this audacious honesty excites me, I have to admit.

“I’ll tell them you’re my assistant and you weren’t able to spend Christmas with your own family,” he continues. “They won’t think anything of it,” he says with a wink, making the implication that I’m not the first “assistant” he’s brought home before. “We’ll be staying in separate rooms of course, but I see no reason why we shouldn’t be able to manage some late night visits.” Lowering his voice he tells me his parents are quite the heavy sleepers and he gives me another wink like this is supposed to be the most charming thing I’ve ever heard.

Heat rushes into my cheeks and I recall feeling like a complete fool. I politely decline and say I have already made big plans with some friends to spend the holidays in London. Not Jim raises his eyebrows in surprise at the idea that I have plans, or maybe that I have friends, I’m not sure which. His surprise is merited since I spend that Christmas with my mother and her three cats in a small trailer that smells like tuna fish. When Not Jim asks to see pictures of my trip I tell him the airport lost my bag that had my camera in it.
I can’t tell Caryn this story, though God knows it’s so pathetic that it probably would have her break off the affair just to ensure she doesn’t end up like me. But if I were to reveal anything relating to personal experiences I would be out of a job in a snap. If I can’t even manage my own life how can I possibly be qualified to provide answers to others about how to live their lives? This, by the way, is something I think about every second of every day.

“Dear Caryn,” I start writing, “The relationship you are in is a very destructive one, not only for “Dave” and his wife, but for you as well. The odds of Dave leaving his wife are incredibly slim”—and by slim I mean zero—“and you deserve to be with someone who you can have a future with. Furthermore, try to put yourself in the position of Dave’s wife and think about how she would feel”—because clearly I think about how Charlotte would feel—“if she knew her vows were being broken. I urge you to break off this relationship as soon as possible, and you may want to consider counseling to help you make better choices in the future when it comes to men and relationships. I wish you the best of luck!"

I don’t think I could feel much lower. Here I sit doling out all the wisdom and advice in the world, and yet I can’t follow one shred of my own advice. Sometimes I think I ought to just call it off with Not Jim. Actually it’s nearly all the time these days. Christ knows I’m not in it for the sex. Not Jim’s idea of foreplay is to take off his shirt and say “You ready?” Then he spasms on top of me for about forty five seconds, looking very much the way my goldfish did the time I accidentally knocked over his bowl. Then he makes this ridiculous looking face, and as if by some form of special jiz magic I’m supposed to have received pleasure from this. All it does is make me long for Jim to still be alive. I really ought to replace him soon. And of course Not Jim has no idea of the extent to which my dissatisfaction goes. He truly believes he’s some kind of stud. I actually caught him winking at himself one time in the mirror right after.

There are no flowers, no chocolates, no cute little cards. There is no Valentine’s Day for me, not even a quick phone call. There are no dinners out. In place of hand holding we have quickies on his lunch break. And I have no idea why I’m doing this to myself. A distant father, the need for male attention? Too easy and hardly an excuse. Besides, my father was the gentle and loving type. He spent more time with me than most of my friends’ fathers ever did with them. Maybe I’m just a masochist. Except I’m not enjoying any of my, what is it they say? “Exquisite misery?” There is nothing exquisite about this misery.

When I actually force myself to think about it, I don’t even like Not Jim. He doesn’t have any of the qualities I appreciate in people. He’s isn’t charming, generous, or clever; he’s not creative or complimentary; he’s isn’t sensitive or cultured. He has money, sure, but very little if any of it is spent on me. I’m fairly certain he doesn’t like me very much either, since I don’t have the qualities he usually appreciates…that of course being beauty and/or sex appeal. I think he is with me for only one reason, and that is that he enjoys being the kind of man who has affairs because it makes him feel powerful. I’m just another device in his life to increase his ego, like his job, car, and house are…and probably Charlotte too.
I would leave him this minute if I weren’t afraid that being alone might be even worse. Maybe that’s all any relationship is—two people who don’t want to be alone. Yeah right. More like I’m just pathetic for staying in a relationship where the only thing I get out of it is bad sex with bad company. And yet here I am, telling Caryn to break it off with a man who is caring and attentive because he’s married, while I go on dating a married man who is only attentive to his own penis.

I take the letters I’ve just written to Caryn and Shelby and I roll them into a wrinkled ball which I toss across the room. I begin a new letter.

“Dear Shelby, Caryn, and all my other advice seekers,

I’m writing this letter to let you know I’m not the person you ought to be taking your advice to. The truth is, I’m thirty two and single. My relationships have been one disaster after another. I’m currently dating a married man who treats his garbage better than he treats me. Believe me when I say I’m in no position to be giving advice on anything related to men and dating. Probably deep down, you all know what the right thing to do is anyway. The problem is you’re all too much like me—either afraid or unwilling to actually do it, and no advice I give is going to change that. I wish I could have been a better model of my own advice. Best of luck to all of you.

P.S. My name isn’t Angie. It’s Jessalyn. My editor says my real name makes me sound like a hooker, and who wants advice from that?”

I leave this letter on Paul, my editor’s, desk and then I decide to take the rest of the day off. I go home and sometime that evening I get around to checking my email. There’s one from Paul, which I had pretty much expected. He was no doubt pissed about the response I had written. I open it and it reads:

“Dear Angie,

The truth is it really doesn’t matter if your own life is in the crapper. You can still manage to help people if you can just manage to leave your personal baggage out of your work. There are no doubt doctors who smoke and dieters who eat McDonald’s. Sure, they’re hypocrites, same as you, but it doesn’t mean their advice isn’t worth something. Try and get your shit together because I expect to see some real responses by 5:00 pm tomorrow. You may want to consider counseling if you are unable to get it together. Best of luck!

P.S. Your real name does make you sound like a hooker, and if you pull a stunt like this again you’re fired.”

There’s little else I can do but smile and start sifting through the letters in my email, trying to come up with more of the bullshit that’s made my career.

Colleen Ghee
Right.

by Eric Fenclau
The Wineglass

My mother is dressed in her usual fatigues:
An old t-shirt, stained yellow
With the sleeves cut off,
And yellow rubber gloves that stretch
Halfway to her elbows.
She perches on her knees,
Shoulder rounded,
Back bent,
Scouring,
Like Lady Macbeth,
The invisible stains
Left by the piss and shit
Spattered on the rim of the toilet bowl.
Her rough green sponge,
Saturated with generic Clorox
And something that smells like lemons,
Scrubs to the steady beat
Of salsa drums
Blasting from the boom box
In the adjacent room.
Occasionally,
My mother drops the tempo,
And with a gloved hand,
Grasps the stem
Of the wineglass
Balanced
On the edge of the sink,
Gently Swirling
The ruby-colored Cabernet,
In adherence to the proper etiquette,
Before bringing the glass,
Purposefully,
To her lips.

Anonymous
Sometimes, Even Poetry Fails

Guitar.

Steve Mullane
The Trumpet Vine

by Krista Lippincott
The Truth About Limericks

Limericks aren’t as hard as you think,
I’ll write one as fast as you blink,
Just take some time,
To think of a rhyme,
And hope you don’t run out of

Scott Schaar
Gallus Domesticus

The forest green counter,
Scarred by the blades of knives and time,
Lies worn with new coats of curry and gravy.

The heat makes the wood warm
From the steam of white rice and July sun.

As clanks and clunks of pots and pans
Pitter-patter the steel basin,
Mother’s pruned and brittle skin holds together,
Defying the laws of chemistry and labor.

Through a perpetual perseverance,
Love defies the laws of patience and tolerance.

The preparations of the dead have now come.

They are soon laid to rest.

Two lifeless bodies inside
A cold and death-panged coffin
Wait to meet a sweltering end.

If only they knew what they were in for.
If only they knew Mother’s needs and plans.

They say we all meet our end for one reason
Or another.

Either way, they were not human.

Because of their fate,
Tonight we dine.

Vijay DaCosta
Maria

Jacqueline Reed
Finding love

She was one of the artsy types, a really dramatic one, passionate about everything ya know? Some people call that overdramatic, I think that that word isn’t right, sounds like she’s doing something wrong. When really, I think she's one of the few who have it right. Anyways, today, she was wearing this cowgirl shirt with the biggest red-beaded jewelry you've ever seen. She told me once, “I only wear this crap for attention,” but I know she only says that so people don’t think she actually likes it. She was so dressed up, all dressed up and she was wearing chucks. That killed me; she was always wearing chucks, it didn't matter what else she was wearing. I mean once in a while she wore heels and that’s when she really knocked you off your feet. I think that’s why she wears those shoes, to knock you off your feet. She had her hair in a ponytail but left this small piece out of it. Anyone else, and it would have been an accident, but it being her, it wasn’t. God she really knew how to knock you off your feet.

Jessica Piper
The Pull of a Gravitational World

My doctor, filling another syringe, looks over his glasses at me and says, “Kali, I wouldn’t go where you’re going come hell or high water” and I smile to myself and he injects me. These microscopic worms are going to protect me, not from losing myself on the streets of Amman, Jordan, nestled right next to Iraq, but from Typhoid and Hepatitis A. I turn my smile on him because it’s my right to be smug. I’m doing something he wouldn’t dare to do because he’s content, believing he can know the world by reading about it or not even caring to know.

People that ask me why I’m going to the Middle East don’t want to understand so I don’t tell them. To them it’s ridiculous even to think that there’s more to life than what we see and know right now. But to me it’s everything. It’s part of my personal legend; it would be blasphemy not to go and I know this, but the only person I explain it to is Atreyu and he doesn’t understand for a different reason.

As a Marin en route to the War on Terror two days after Bush’s “Mission Accomplished,” he was injected too, he was shot, more times than me, but it wasn’t his choice. He tells me now that he can feel the little bacteria worms crawling through his solar system and it makes him sick to his stomach. He wishes that I wasn’t allowed to choose to go and I snort with laughter across the continent that separates us—1,652 miles: Boulder, Colorado to Buffalo, New York—and tell him I wish he didn’t have the ability to choose to snort coke.

He says this to me, that I don’t realize all I have to be grateful for living a middle class American life, over the phone a few days after I got my first vaccinations while I’m standing in the dark washing weekend dishes. I don’t know why I laugh at his concern. Maybe part of it is that I don’t have a clue what I’m doing or even why I’m really going but also it’s because his voice is tense in a way that I don’t want to hear.

He responds to me incredulously, “Do you ever even think that maybe there’s a reason for things that I do to myself?”

Baby, baby, I think back at him, when I was with you I didn’t even want to go there, didn’t want the dramatic understanding, didn’t want to know your pain, didn’t want our souls to touch. I twist the hot water on and let it fall down, ill up and overflow making shot glasses into volcanoes, “So tell me then.”

The voice that comes back to me is not the one I’m used to hearing; it’s not the all-powerful Atreyu that I know. He tells me slowly that he didn’t go to class today. He says, “Everyday, every time we learn about a new disease I examine myself. I know that I’m infected. How can I concentrate on anything? I can’t concentrate on anything Kali.”
To me this is ridiculous. He's a biomedical major. And he's always in control. Seeing blood spill out of my chest didn't even make him flinch. Between my breasts I feel the scar that I was marked with that day, the place where my skin was ripped away leaving a hard chunk of scar tissue in its place.

It was one of our mystery trip days, a blue sky summer Saturday when I lived down the street from him in Boulder. We needed to fill the space between early morning and drunk afternoon, so we went to find King Solomon Falls because we wanted to see how high this cliff jump was that we heard had killed people just from the impact of the water. We wanted to rock hop down the stream and get dirty like we were still kids.

The only part of the day that I really remember is climbing higher and higher off the ground, grabbing at the dry sagebrush and pulling myself over sharp rocks, coming back up out of the deep gorge where the waterfall fell down into. Atreyu was ahead of me, not even using his hands as he moved up the broken rocks that once stood together to create a cliff. He left me alone to go at my own pace because he understands that I don’t need help. A hundred feet to the left of me the rock still climbed straight up in a menacing wall and the water of King Solomon Falls slid over the edge, crashing into the pool below where we swam together earlier, telling me ‘don’t look down!’ The climbing wasn’t difficult, but the rocks were loose and when I remember, my hands and felt still tingle and the breath catches inside of me.

“Treyu, wait for me!” my scream was drowned by the roaring waterfall. And then it’s like the waterfall was suddenly falling from above me. It started thundering and pouring rain, the way it does every afternoon in July, making the rocks slippery wet and leaving my sneakers with no traction.

I was only a few feet from the top, where the ground would level off and save me, so I pretended that my fear was just a trick of the way the water made the slant in the ground look. I held my breath and kept going by I slipped anyway. I remember falling hard, my stomach dropping, the front of my body hitting the sharp rocks as I slid downwards. As my feet hit something sturdy Atreyu emerged above me, reached down, and easily pulled me up onto solid ground. The rain, the waterfall and thunder, the sky that’s so close you can see shadows of the clouds on the mountains—all made me throw my head back and laugh. I miss the everyday thunderstorms.

As we an and slid through the muddy ground back to Atreyu’s truck, the rain washed away my blood and my adrenaline kept me from feeling the place between my breasts where the edge of rock had razored straight through my skin to the bone. I didn’t
even realize that I was bleeding until we were in his truck, heat and carbon emissions blasting, and then I felt the hole in my skin. My face turned pale and Atreyu calmly folded a dry red and orange “Marine Corps” shirt, put it into my hand, ad had me hold it against my chest. His hand was on my knee all the way to the hospital.

But now this new, neurotic Atreyu says to me, “I don’t know what to do. There’s still another week until I can see a doctor, but I need, I need to know for sure, to hear it from a doctor that I’m ok. Even without the stupid Pathophysiology class I couldn’t go to school because I can’t concentrate. Everything just jumbles. I don’t breathe and I drop things. And then a whole day has gone by, like today.”

The miniature kitchen has gotten darker as I’ve listened. Now the streetlights are pouring in providing only veiled light. I let the darkness and numbness steal over me because I know he doesn’t need sympathy and that’s all I can give hi. I don’t answer and instead picture him swinging in the hammock on his front porch trying to control his breathing through the thickness of moonlight.

His thoughts are going nuts; I can feel their frenzy through the phone line but I thank god can’t hear what he’s thinking...

...(I am Atreyu). Last night I crouched, miles of mountains, rocks and trees around me, and through 100 feet of cottonwoods and Colorado spruces I was face to face with an elk. His antlers shot high into the air, glared at me and showed me his manhood. I shot him to eat him, not to dominate him. I sliced down his spleen, let his guts spill. I do it out of respect for the beast’s unconquerable will.

For him this is war. He knows the sick struggle for survival, know hoe surrendering to the blackness of a bullet is not giving up but understanding the inevitable and having respect for that, that bullet and its reason for being, which is more powerful than him.

I took him to the edge of his existence so that he could understand where I’ve been, so that he could feel exalted, the rush across a desert as it rains intense explosions, the rush that is greater than any orgasm, but I didn’t make him come back to feel the bleakness of life after death.

I want to dominate Kali, smother her. This girl, the way I remember her, she gets to me, like she’s trying to let me breathe, but I can’t breathe! And she doesn’t understand me or what happened to me, the perfect world she lives in would never let her understand. I want to dominate her so that she will be here with me the way that I want her to be. I want to love her so that I don’t have to sleep alone.

Hearing his voice tell me its secrets and his breath shake as we live through a minute of silence makes me miss him. I bring my hand to my chest and let my soapy fingers trace my scar.
And then, his voice even, controlled, he says, “You think you can do anything, beat the whole world with fucking love, but if you knew the things in my head you’d have enough pain, you wouldn’t need to go stare at other people’s and pretend that it’s more real because it’s across the world. You choose to go to a place where I was forced to go like it’s not a big deal.”

I don’t know what to say to him, but it’s simple to me, not a choice but something I need to do. I realize missing him was only a trick of the light, only because I’m standing alone in a dark kitchen.

Now the dish water is draining out of the sink, swirling around the fiery orange and red plates, each with its individual chips and I’m thinking I can’t wait to make the distance between us, between me and familiarity, infinity.

Jess Maggi
Blue Moon

by Katarina Louisa Stuetzle
Downward

With sleep that is barely under the surface
it begins, a warped sleep as if a television
flickered and bounced its light off the
shadows on the darkened wall.
It flows through you—worthless sleep—
a mind coming in and out like poor
reception. A sleep of friends with guns,
pointing the trigger to your frozen temple
forcing a decision you don’t know how to make.
I am going to stay here as long as I can.
I am going to sit here and stare as if nothing
has happened. If I don’t move,
neither can they.

Tisha Dunstan
Grim battle grimace, firmly tightens on my face.  
Peering across the vast, long expanse of Fishhook Bay, between my enemy and me.  
Feet slick, slide against the rubber, leaving my platform, I launch.

Gliding above the water,  
Droplets cascade behind me left behind like shrapnel:  
they glitter in the sun, tiny stars set in motion, birthed by the tiny, big bang of my explosion.

Arms stretching out,  
slamming down to catapult my cousin off his innertube.  
Sending him on his flight, across the waters of the corner of an Adirondack lake that we call Fishhook Bay.

Dan Wilson
Peace.On.Earth

by Eric Fenclau
The Legend of Robert Jones

Blood burns brighter than any sunset. The devil plays a haunting tune, lonely like the wind blows. It strums through summers and cools into autumn. Here, we lie on opposite sides of immortality, divided by morality, past the wind up on the bridge where the devil waits down below. He plays on, knowing the shadows of my soul.

As the sun set, the 6:45 from St. Louis departed to the town of Dominion. Earlier, Robert Jones led ten men down the Big Red River and through the forests between the two towns where they were to meet halfway with the 6:45. The group had arrived at six on horseback and began tearing up the track by unhinging the nails and ties. The men carried the wooden ties across their shoulders, like the half of a crucifix, and piled them up on the track where Jones instructed, about thirty yards before it gave out. The rails curved and moved into a straightaway where they set up. The ten men lined the track with lanterns leading up to the ties.

As night fell, Jones stood on the track while the sound of the train began rolling in. Its headlight shone through the trees before the turn and then directly lit Jones on the straightaway. It would either stop for him or smash through the ties and end up derailed. The conductor chose to stop. The train came to a blasting halt launching sparks and echoing screeches and whistles through the forest. Jones did not budge. His face was masked by a black bandanna that started just below his eyes.

The engine inched to a final stop and a cloud of steam poured out from underneath which engulfed Jones completely. The men moved from the forest and lined the outsides of the train armed with rifles and revolvers. The passengers began to panic. Jones emerged from the steam, a shadow in the smoke, with pistols in each hand. “Quick, now!” he yelled. The men jumped the two coaches; their faces were masked and they carried sacks for the wallets, jewelry, and the like. Jones continued to the third car. A man leapt out. His feet slammed the ground. Jones finger slammed the trigger.

Jones climbed up the car and kicked the next door in. There was a man inside with his hands already up.

Jones pointed at the safe and said, “Open it.” The man did so without hesitation. He loaded five stacks of bills and a box of coins into a bag. Jones stepped out of the car and a voice from beside him rasped, “Hold it right there. Just hand over the…”

Robert Jones spun from his feet, hips, shoulders, hand, thumb, hammer, finger, trigger, and rotated faster than the gears of a watch on a time machine, drew a pistol and the man was dead. He climbed off the last car and followed the rest of his men who were running up the hill for their horses tied on the other side. They vanished, leaving the train lit and lost in the thickness of fog and surrounding darkness.

Jordan Judd
The Path Less Traveled.

by Eric Fenclau
I
Her belly aches with empty fortitude.
His sane touch fingers her g-spot.
The tide comes, cold.

II
It was a termite gnawing
through your ovaries like a
game of Pac-Man in an oak forest.
You let it gorge itself— you
smiled in its wake.

His vacant voice echoes in those chasms.

III
He wakes, moaning for
you. Your thigh quivers in
frozen time. He tears your flesh
with his canines, and you must stifle
your hunger. It is
his body you eat.

IV
The walls bleed ruby lilies.
You would mind normally,
but it actually helps your
green thumb. His laughter
carries into your morning tea.
V
You leave. The wind soaks you in
the doorway, holds you back. You push
forward, but the trees swing you
through his window. The broken glass
annoys him. He burns your
teddy bear, and gives you an
urn holding its ashes.

VI
She sleeps. He drains her heroine
vein, sucking out the drug
until she has shrunk significantly.
He cries. His tears fill her innie belly-
button and harden her nipples. Her hand
grasps his, and together move up
to his neck in final absolution.

She turns in her sleep and sighs.

Tamara Keeney
A Collective Your Songs of Myselves

Can I cite a lack of words, a mental void, some case of writer's block? 700 of Westcott Street, a short time after graduating from a pool of wise fools to a puddle of almost seniors.

My junior mentality and my amateur words like chicken soup for the soul in a big bowl poured from a blender and I'm drinking Big boy drinks from a sippee cup.

I guess it feels good to be out on my own Like a Rolling Stone

Gathering moss like a wrinkled sheet of fabric softener clinging to the toilet paper that straggles from under the heel of my shoe.

Back down the street and up around the corner,
Babies spoon fed spinach from Gerber jars, seniors also
Tongue their dentures reassuring their palates Ensure in liquid form, respectively.
All the while,
I pick up headlines from yesterday's Post Standard from a cold, green front Porch that sniffs the rain's dampness on some soggy Tuesday.

Can you go back to Grandma's oatmeal cookie kitchen when the rain falls too fast or the wind blows too hard?
The headlines come and go like textbooks, only less expensive, and contemporarily more expansive.
But caffeine only takes you so far, and no one has eyes made for a computer screen. So, you put all your thoughts down in new words on college-ruled paper so they can be incredibly rearranged.

Sure enough, the once proud paper scampers back with its tail between your legs and You’re either left or right,
And left to re-write, this time only using The critic's comments that you don’t agree with fully but do for appeasement's sake; Or, just hand in the same mess with which you once began.
Can we call upon some sort of something or lack thereof to help explain for us this uncertainty to myself? This is not written in fine print in the appendices of our overpriced books but can probably be found, in great detail, at the other end of a familiar number for good head we found smeared above the toilet paper dispenser in some dorm bathroom.

Can I cite Washington’s presence, or lack thereof, for my generation’s presence, or lack thereof?
With regards to that, where to start and where to end –
Begin again with the same mess with which you once began.
For example,
A senator governing from a public throne.
Knock three times on the ceiling if you want me to continue.
Knock, knock, not gonna do it. And neither will nobody else.
These words will change, I’m sure of that
Until we watch us on some newer, fresher, even more life-like scripted reality.

And the best part, the real icing on my pie:
This is my second draft.
And somehow, you walk away without a really good word for it; you lack the true translation, yet you still catch the drift. Perhaps this is the way it goes.

Steve Mullane
Loch Ness, Scotland

by Tisha Dunstan
A man and woman are sitting together under the shade of the old oak tree, watching the sun set. He has his broad arms wrapped around her, squeezing slightly to remind her that he’s there. Her long, scarlet hair cascades over the fuzz of his arms, and he shivers at the feeling. He is dressed modestly, a faded blue polo shirt and some khakis, while she is wearing a fine, silk dress of jet black. They sit for a while, just breathing and listening to the other’s heartbeat. She turns to him with piercing blue eyes.

“What’s her name?” she asks, straining to face him.

“It’s Pearl.” He brushes her hair to one side to rest in the bend of his elbow.

“Oh.” She turns back towards the sunset. Her eyes watch intently as the fiery clouds show hints of lavender and blue on the edges. Then she rests her head on his shoulder, finding that familiar soft spot for a pillow.

“Is there a reason?” she asks. He squeezes her close, wrapping himself around her, pulling her into him.

“What do you mean?” He just looks at her. She sighs, not an upset sigh.

“Does she have a lot of money?” She slides her hand out from under his arm in order to brush his leg.

“No,” he responds. “She isn’t really worth anything at all. She’s just a nice girl.”

“Oh.” She goes silent again, but keeps on running her hand up and down his thigh.

“Is she prettier than me?”

“No, not really.” He’s looking at the sunset as he talks, staring straight ahead. “In fact, she can’t even compare. She’s very plain, with brown hair and brown eyes.”

“Oh.” The woman is looking straight ahead as well. “Is she more sexually attractive to you?” She’s stopped rubbing his leg now.

“She’s nowhere near as sexy as you.” He nuzzles her neck and whispers into her ear. “You’re a goddess, and she’s a nun in comparison.”

“Oh.” She feels the heat of his breath, just as it always was. She runs her hand up into his hair, scratching gently near the ear. The two of them are entangled now, her arm wrapped up and around his head, his right arm under hers, his left caressing her waist. They are near now, faces so close that each can feel the other’s breath.

“I guess she’s more interesting than me then.” She stares right into his eyes.

“No, in fact she’s very dull” He meets her stare, equal intensity. “All she ever does is talk about her equally dull friends. She acts like shopping trips are an adventure. She wants children. Everything about her is a bore.”
“Oh.” She still sitting, listening, and staring into his eyes like so many times before. “Is it because she wants marriage?”

“How could you think that?” His face is right on top of hers. “I’ve never wanted marriage.” He kisses her; a long, passionate kiss. There is sweetness to her lips; something that he knows is nothing fake, no make-up or gloss. It is only her taste. She doesn’t fight the kiss. They embrace each other for another few minutes, kissing just so, and then they relax.

“So,” she continues. “You’ve decided then.” Her hand runs dangerously up the inside of his thigh.

“Yes, I have.” His hands do the same, and are soon inside the folds of her dress. Her eyes are wild now, but still just as sharp. He is pulsing, every heartbeat, every muscle, and every hair. The two of them are interlocked now, legs tangled, arms fastened, chests heaving.

The sun is almost gone, the clouds dark blues and purples with just a sliver of red. A light breeze rushes past, and tickles the old oak just enough to knock a single leaf down, gliding gently, swinging back and forth like a pendulum. It lands next to the couple, softly scraping the ground.

He sees this. She sees this. He lets go, and picks himself up, off of her. She brushes herself off, first her black dress, then her red curls. She then stands and faces him.

“I just wanted to let you know,” she sighs, not an angry sigh, “that his name is William.”

“Oh.” They both walk back to the car, a two-seater convertible, and drive off back in the direction of town.

Matthew Kiernan
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