

Milk Money

Vol. 4: *Weird Workout*,
Winter 2008/09

Founding Editors:

Ian Wissman

Maija Zummo

Editors:

Ian Wissman

Maija Zummo

Layout:

Maija Zummo

Cover Art:

Jared Marr

© Copyright 2009

Milk Money is an independent literary journal published by generous donation. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher. All copyright reverts to individual authors upon publication. Printed in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Table of Contents

Posthumous Like a Cumulous <i>by Tommy Baas</i>	1	Lego Reptiles <i>by Adam Pettit</i>	17
Funeral <i>by Alex Bennett</i>	1	When a Nation Ignites <i>by Adam Sievering</i>	22
The Hunt for Autumn <i>by Alex Bennett</i>	1	The General <i>by Amanda Smith</i>	22
69 <i>by Alex Bennett</i>	1	Automatic Urinal <i>by Madison Smith</i>	32
Cleveland <i>by Jeffrey Blocksidge</i>	1	Florida <i>by Liv Stratman</i>	32
Universe Shapes in America <i>by Christopher Campbell</i>	1	Damned Spot <i>by Liv Stratman</i>	34
Hibernare— “To Pass the Winter” <i>by Allison Davis</i>	3	Southern Oaks <i>by Liv Stratman</i>	36
Farewell to Arms <i>by Charlie Gibson</i>	3	Election Night <i>by Leslie Wilson</i>	38
Scars <i>by Michael Henson</i>	3	The Request <i>by Travis Wissman</i>	39
I Remember <i>by Michael Henson</i>	3	You are Russian <i>by Rebecca Young</i>	39
No Other Gift <i>by Michael Henson</i>	4	Season of the Shark <i>by Rebecca Young</i>	39
Don’t Gong the Gong, Chapters 1-6 <i>by Paul Katz</i>	4	Roll Over <i>by Adam Vorobok</i>	40
Constellations <i>by Chris Kittrell</i>	12		
Untitled <i>by Kyle Mace</i>	13		
Clamor <i>by MaryKate Moran</i>	13		
Din <i>by MaryKate Moran</i>	13		
Fragile <i>by MaryKate Moran</i>	14		
Counter Space <i>by Don Peteroy</i>	14		

Foreword

Ok guys, time to warm up. Let's stretch those hammies, touch your toes and crack those knuckles- this one's going to be a workout. We've got another batch of fiction, poetry, and prose for you to feast on. Tons of carbs to build up your energy for a comprehensive head-to-toe, brain-to-heart, full body exercise. We have some of your favorites returning with new dabbles in the written word and some great newcomers you're sure to love. So throw on that leotard that's been collecting dust since freshman year of high school when you thought you wanted to be a gymnast, maybe pull out that sweatband from your tennis lessons, and a pair of wrist weights so you can break real sweat along with a mental one. Ready? One and two and turn the page.... This is *Milk Money, Volume Four: Weird Workout*.

Posthumous Like a Cumulous

Tommy Baas

raindrops in my morning coffee
a book set on its spine
the smell of wet dog all the morning after not
quite a headache but a loving
plastic sunflowers like wheels in the wind
& one wilting yellow rose on the dashboard
odometer burning up
newspaper knowing nothing
mailbox with its jaw dropped open
in awe for the sun which comes
posthumous like a cumulous
lawn chairs which withstand all thunder & rust
let the dog out
& heat up some water

Funeral

Alex Bennett

My father's father's funeral
Revealed a pattern
Deeper than the pattern
Of dead men dying

Falling fathoms, ethereal
And pending paternity
I see for once eternity
Speechless, crying

You don't have a say
If you have a son
What else you've done
Doesn't matter anyway

You are their hate
You are their love
You represent God
You give then you take

The Hunt for Autumn

Alex Bennett

Precipitation supplies cut off
Insurgent sac worms
Divide and conquer
Distinguish color
Hidden by
Change we deem
Inevitable

69

Alex Bennett

A fish swam out and ate
my car as I drove
you existed in my mouth
and I loved you
all ceaselessly

Cleveland

Jeffrey Blocksidge

Middle-aged man, black hair and balding with
spacious hands in flannel and falling jeans
wearing a tool belt. Silent. Big glasses turned
toward fixing a door latch in a Ukrainian
church.

Universe Shapes in America

Christopher Campbell

Rays of sunlight cast human form walkers
escaping from salt-water sea-prison covering
their eyes with their palms crying to the
heavens through car skeletons, listening to
funeral bagpipes playing in the distances. A
history of confinement, a history of sexuality.
Human tainted everything.

Christopher Columbus sets Jesus'
dirtied feet on America's avarice ridden streets,

nothing short of paradise on earth running along solar system racetrack discovered by brain. Colonies sprout good and bad crops for wintertime hibernation away from snow shitting clouds, George Washington thrusts his crotch into the air over the Delaware River and all is saved and all is safe. American families ushered into and out of the White House claim insanity over telephone wires seen from oval office windows. Planes steering toward man-moneymade architecture future warp crack and crumble to the groundstage where children in the darkness pick names from the rubble and shake off the dust and take them to their homes and use them as mantle pieces and watch them never grow.

Deaf man stops to rest under a shade tree and cries to the muddy rushing river, tow bridge overhead dropping apples at his feet. Men carrying their fleshguns to copy machine office lubed fuck stations. The orphan falls from the uterus and cannot breathe earth ocean air pulled by moon tides, taken by busted Virgin Mary long soft hands to a dumpster still bloody and twitching naked and wrapped in its mother's warm organic vine.

Deer brains scourged ground platform busted head stringy shit worm throb junk on hooves cry stifle eyed, scared shake of dying animal lost half its body to the driving daybreak coffee drinker singing his heart out watching his breath move to his hands in the cold damp sweater morning, kids and wife at home preparing for yet another December school day. They make themselves ham sandwiches and eat looking out the window at the dull light shining through the rolling Monday cloud playground.

And somewhere in their line of gaze on a moon an ocean resides, whales swim underneath ice cakes layered layers upon layers of life. A dirty boob floats in its waters.

Helpless, superb semiotic sun convoluted thought, practice explosion its remnants rain over Neptune; purple ash-sun pyrotechnics glittering in the directionless cosmos. The wake of the computer era millennia to come, dawn of new age technology used primarily by public for pornography and language connection; a more authentic level of communication. Capitalism holes potted with schizophrenic soil, organic made temper tantrum excitement saying goodbye to Pangaea! saying goodbye to Prussia! saying goodbye to Czechoslovakia! saying good evening to the endless mixing of substances!

And the machine reads on: Anthology of ducks, anthology of her strumming the piano wires with her delicately aged fingertips, anthology of pillow case designs, anthology of sidewalk trips home knee ache season change, anthology of opening doors, and anthology after anthology of steel structures inhabited by mushy American human blood substance. The excitement never ends in the machine's braindream electric mechanics land. A question of identity: where in it do we live? We demand our basic rights! We demand totem poles! We deserve this tree lined avenue the righteous man says shaking his fist above his head!

NUCLEUS SENDS TALK
IMPULSE THROUGH BLOODWAVES OF
SKIN GENERATIONS. THE UNIVERSE
BECOMES VIBRATING LIQUID
EXPANSION METAPHOR.

We're all citizens here and we forget umbrellas when it rains and we turn off and on our faucets daybreak through daybreak, greased ends of our hair strands bound between the claws of our decaying vacuums tumbling into nothing along the floor: dust ball ballerina genesis baby chimpanzees left alone forever in Fruit of the Loom cotton forests.

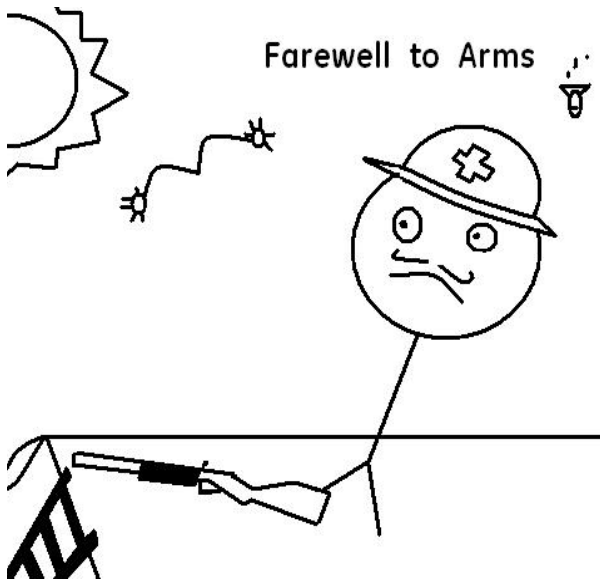
Hibernare— “To Pass the Winter”

Allison Davis

You awake by knocking your foot against
A cold steel bed frame
On a winter morning—
Not a morning where the sunlight
Gleams off of the snow
But one where the mailman’s footprints
Barely leave marks in the muddy ground
Half covered in slush and half decomposed
Fall leaves, and he leaves no good mail before
Trekking to your neighbor’s yard, only
advertisements
Addressed to the generic “member of household”—
On a morning like this, when from your warm bed
Flesh strikes steel, retracts, the ankle flexed,
The calf tightening until every nerve rings
Out in languages prime and dead, you think
of animals hibernating. You do not think
of how mail carriers pass the winter.

Farewell to Arms

Charlie Gibson



Scars

Michael Henson

There are secrets in your scars.
Each has a name,
though I never speak it.
The flesh, disordered,
is a text.
I study the path of stitches.
I trace with my tongue
the cicatrix lines.
I brush with my lips,
the wounded dimensions -
a smile
a pallid spider
a wedge of melon
a sickle
pale as moon.

I Remember

Michael Henson

I remember
that evening walk
to the swelling river.
The spring rains
had left a carpet of silt
and a scatter of driftwood
among the willows.
I remember
the fecund, muddy smell in the air.
I remember
the living green light
at the lips of the maples.
I remember
the husk in your voice
and the print of your heel in the sand.

No Other Gift

Michael Henson

So here I stand waiting with my hands in my pockets
and nothing in my pockets but wind and some paper
and nothing in the wind but a fitful whisper
and nothing on the paper but a string of words
and I don't know any of the words!

And here I stand wondering with my hat on my head
and nothing in my head but these cloudy brains
and nothing in the clouds but eight days of rain
and nothing in these brains but fits and blunders
and all of these cinders and sparks!

And now off I go with my pack on my shoulder
and nothing to declare but my windy notions
and nothing in the wind but clatter and noise
and nothing in the noise but the chatter of birds
and the birds are all flying north!

And here I lie down at the foot of your bed
with no other gift but this basket of words
and nothing in the words but a hum on the wind
and nothing in the humming but an old sad song
and I don't know any of the words!

Don't Gong the Gong

Paul Katz

Chapter 1

I wake up, bewildered at where I am and how I ended up there. Taking stock of my belongings I figure out my phone is gone, but my wallet and cigs stuck it out with me. I dizzily shuffle off the bed and onto my feet, gaining composure after some motivational

thinking, dress and slink out of an unfamiliar house. Outside reveals little to me. I walk down the street a little bit to find I'm on Mount Vernon Avenue, a street I know vaguely. Almost unbelievably, a cab comes rolling down the street and it stops to pick me up. The cabby is an Armenian that smells of lilacs and fried chicken, a rather conflicting and vexing smell.

In my mind I picture the cabby half-walking, half-dancing down the street with a handful of lilacs. He walks up the steps and into an old house. Inside he is greeted by his smiling wife and a big bucket of KFC. The American dream.

We arrive at my buddy's place then hold a spirited discussion about my lack of money. The cabby leaves unhappy and unpaid. I ring Joe's door for a while before he answers, clad in a purple robe.

"Wow," he says.

"Where did that robe come from?" I ask with a mix of admiration and suspicion.

"Where did this robe not come from?" he replies.

"I think I've seen the old man that lives down the street from me wearing it."

"He obviously is a fashionable older gentleman."

"That he is."

I follow him inside and slump onto his couch.

"So how did last night turn out?" he asks, in a condescending way that says he already knows the answer.

"I remember leaving for the bar. Then my memory dissolves to black. Care to fill me in?" I say while kind of not wanting to know in case I had acted a fool.

"Does Cassandra ring a bell?" he throws out with the same condescension.

The command center in my brain has

all its little bells and sirens clanging while my neuron army runs around trying to come up with an answer. "In a way, don't all names ring a bell?" I say, waxing philosophical.

"Well, you and this girl went from strangers toasting over tequila to acquaintances chatting in a booth to a drunken pair kissing outside in about an hour."

"And how'd she look?" I venture.

"Like a big, tan bowling ball," he says, starting to smile.

An image flashes through my mind of a five-foot-five bowling ball rolling down the lane toward me and then crushing me for a spare. My unease shows on my face and Joe jumps on the chance to finish me off, "Then you lovebirds left together."

Joe directs his attention toward the TV and lets me sink in to a world of unsettling thoughts. I snap out of my trance a while later to Joe and my other buddy Marv giggling.

Joe and Marv and I had been friends since we were old enough to play against each other in sports. We all went to the same high school but split up to go to college where we all idiotically graduated on time only to figure out our mistake after we had already completed all the coursework. When choosing colleges I had without a second thought chosen almost solely based on the quality of the football team. Joe had been wise and had picked a school where the women flowed like the salmon of Capistrano. And Marv, I don't know why he chose to go to the little po-dunk school he went to. But here we all were again, in our hometown, up to no good at all.

"Marv," I say in greeting.

"Oscar. Get up, let's get some food," He responds.

"I told Marv about your wild ride last night," Joe says as we walk to the diner down

the street.

"I lost my phone last night," I say, skirting the real subject.

"And your dignity," Joe gets in before I cut him off.

"As far as I know you made that up," I say, trying to turn the tables.

"Apparently you went home with a basketball," Marv interjects. "All soft leather and round like."

"Are you calling her a leatherface?" I say, raising my voice.

"It's cool, you were working on your night moves," Marv quips. "Just you and the ball, putting in a little extra practice. Perfecting that stroke."

"Alright! That's enough. How's the job search going?" I ask Marv.

"It goes one day at a time," he replies. "It's not like you have a job, or Joe over here with his faux one. What did you say your title was again? Assistant secretary of payroll?"

"That's true," I say, piling on Joe. "I wish I could crunch numbers all day until I dreamt of a big calculator chasing me though a maze walled with expense reports."

"That was vivid," Joe says. "You must have fucked up dreams."

I nod wearily, then say, "Your company is barely in the red."

"That makes no sense."

"It doesn't have to."

We get to the diner and sit down at a table. The breakfast hours had just ended to which Marv muttered, "This place is barely in the red."

We order food and then bitch about our miserable pro football team for a while. We get our food surprisingly quick and all talking stops for a few minutes. As Marv slows down he starts playing with some broccoli on his plate

and asks where broccoli comes from.

“It’s a kind of tree,” I say. “Comes from South America. The Portuguese introduced it there.”

“A tree?” Marv says suspiciously. “Like a fur?”

Chapter 2

“Why don’t we just open a bar?” Will asks as he and I amble through the mall on a Monday.

Both of us being without jobs and not as worried about it as we should be, I had recently figured out how sweet the lull between college and working was. It’s kind of like being in a relaxed purgatory before getting sent downward into the misery of work and taxes.

“It very well may come to that,” I reply while starting to ponder the idea. “We would need a really good idea for it. Something crazy and sexy like TLC would do.”

“You know Left Eye would just burn it down.”

“She’s burning mansions up there now,” I say while pointing two index figures toward the sky.

“What about an aquarium bar? The walls, the floor, the bar. All glass and water and pike.”

“Pike?”

“Pike,” Marv says like it’s the most rational thing in the world.

“Have you ever seen a Pike before?” I ask.

“Have you?” he nimbly counters.

“No. And I don’t want to.”

A group of prowling teenage girls pass by.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” Marv says, beating me to the punch.

“Saying that doesn’t absolve you.”

“I don’t even know what absolved means.”

“It must suck to have such a small brain.”

“My brain is huge, it should be in a museum. My brain would kick your brain’s ass.”

“Oh. You want to have a brain off. I will brain you into oblivion.”

We walk into Odds ‘N Ends, the store that could instantly turn into a garage sale if it changed locales.

“This is the closest we’ll ever get to a gypsy’s cave in the hills,” I say, completely serious.

“They sell their wares here for real dollars as opposed to gypsy dollars,” Marv says.

“And gypsy dollars are what?”

“You think I’d be here if I knew that kind of info?”

“No you’d be running through the woods right now carrying a bunch of loot.”

Marv nods his head while dreaming of a simpler life of thieving and being shift.

“Back to the bar idea, I need to get something going so that my job search can end and I can start living less above my means,” Marv says in all seriousness.

At the back of the gypsy store there is a gong with a sign saying PLEASE DO NOT GONG THE GONG. Marv gongs the shit out of the gong. We are promptly kicked out by the counter girl who glares at us as if we had just said something bad about the really unfunny Chelsea “Lately” Handler.

“What about an American-themed bar?” I ask.

“Aren’t most bars American themed?” Marv counters.

“We could have flags all over and

pictures of great Americans like Hulk Hogan, John Wayne, Little Wayne, etc.”

“You know,” Marv says, “nothing says America like a good aquarium.”

“Do you think there are any fish that are red, white, and blue?” I say.

“We can find out,” Marv says pointing ahead to a pet store.

We enter the shop and start quizzing the girl behind the counter.

“Do you have any red, white, and blue fish?”

“Do you have fish that aren’t embarrassed to act patriotic? Or have served in the military?”

“Is there any way to paint a fish’s scales without killing them, but for cheap? Cause we’ve got a business to run.”

“I like where your head’s at.”

“Do you have any aquariums that could also double as a floor, and if so, what section are they in?”

The girl had no answers and a look of terror on her face, while at the same time she seemed to be intrigued. We start walking through the store and stop at some hamsters scampering around their cage.

“What if every night at the bar we had hamster races?” I ask Marv. “People could bet on them. And then eventually we could rig the races by giving certain hamsters steroids. Straight cash.”

The girl at the counter must have heard us talking about juicing the hamsters because she refused to sell any. Probably so she could host her own rigged hamster races.

“What if we put a bar in a kiosk at the mall?” Marv asks. “The mall would love it because people would be buying all sorts of crazy shit after a couple cocktails.”

“That idea might have just won you a

blue ribbon in the small brain community.”

“That means a lot to me. You know, even if we don’t start a bar we should still do the rigged hamster races under a bridge or something. There’s always money in gambling. It’s recession proof.”

“Maybe that’s what we should do. Start an underground betting parlor where all the games are rigged. People bet against rigged games at carnivals all the time. As long as we have guns and a couple big shady thugs backing us up what’s anyone gonna do?”

“Aside from calling the cops for having an underground gambling bazaar?” Marv asks.

“Aside from that. Actually, maybe we could just get some crooked cops to be our security. We could kill three birds with one stone. The guns, paying bouncers, and the rampant illegality of it all are covered.”

“We could get some guns ourselves though.”

“Absolutely. With all those winnings the guns will protect us from the crooked cops.”

“Foolproof.”

Chapter 3

While buying Colt 45 six shooters and shoulder holsters, the brimstone skinned guy behind the counter assures us of why America probably will never succumb to a land invasion, be it from terrorists, aliens, or more possibly than the others, Canadians.

“You boys don’t need a background check, you’re American,” he reckoned. “It’s your god given right to carry six shooters under your coats. I feel safer with you boys totin’. What if some A Rab tries to blow hisself up in the same Hooters as you? I’ll tell ya what. You can send him back to that Desert he came from without any souvenirs.”

“Amen,” Marv says reverentially.

We swagger out of the store wishing we were stepping out of a saloon, but the Buckets of Bullets parking lot would have to do.

“Let’s go get some ski masks and pay Joe a call,” I say.

After getting some ski masks we bust into Joe’s unlocked house and find him asleep on the couch.

“Don’t leave your door open when we be rough ridin’!” I half yell to wake him up.

Joe wakes to two guns pointing at his eyes.

“What the . . . don’t shoot me!” He yelps. “Take my debit card, the numbers.”

“Where’s your duct tape mother fucker?!” I say in my thug voice.

He tells us and I go get it while Marv asks Joe about his experience in the rape department. I come back and duct tape him into a nearby chair.

“So, how did Cassandra actually look?”

“What?” he says, and then slowly figures the ruse out. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. You fuckheads.”

“You didn’t answer the question mother fucker,” Marv says, still acting.

“She wasn’t fat. She was normal.”

“Alright,” I say. “Let’s get outta here.”

We leave, go get ice cream cones, and come back to Joe writhing on the floor, in a tipped-over, duct-taped chair, really pissed off.

“Someone’s been having fun,” Marv says, letting Joe know we’re back.

“This isn’t over. Where did you guys get guns? Are those ice cream cones? Mother fuckers,” he says in bursts of speech.

We cut the tape off eventually, after finishing our cones. Then we show him our guns.

“I’m definitely going to have to get one of these,” Joe says. “Especially after today,

people be rough ridin’ too much not to have protection.”

“Yeah, the old guy at Buckets of Bullets warned us already, you gotta be strapped on these streets,” Marv says in all seriousness.

Chapter 4

“Did you read about how elephants can smell hunters?” Marv asks out of nowhere while we’re sitting at the bar. “It’s in the papers.”

“You have too much time on your hands,” Joe says.

“I heard about that. It’s kind of like how sharks can smell prey from hundreds of miles away. Then they just set their course and it’s only a matter of time,” I say. “It’s really only a matter of time before they start venturing inland for meals.”

“That’s the end for humans,” Will says matter of factly. “We might as well just give ourselves up now.”

“I’d like to see a shark smell the end of this,” I say, opening my jacket to show my holstered shooter.

“That is such a bad idea,” Joe says, looking around to see if anyone noticed.

“You’re gonna be sorry when a gunfight breaks out in here and you don’t have one,” Marv says as he and I nod in agreement to each other. “You’ve gotta protect yourself on these streets.”

“Streets?” Joe says. “We’re in a bar where the only crimes committed are using a fake ID and being high on drugs. Who are you guys going to shoot it out with?”

“Maybe those sharks that travel inland will be packing,” I say seriously.

“Yep, they’re crafty,” Marv interjects. “Why do you think they’re called killing

machines?”

“Huge jaws filled with rows of razor sharp teeth,” Joe answers.

“No,” Marv says condescendingly. “It’s because they play dirty. If you have brass knuckles, a shark will have a knife. If you pull out a knife, a shark will bring a gun.”

“So what are they gonna have now that you guys have guns?” Joe asks, thinking he’s about to win the pseudo-argument.

“Probably anthrax. Or whatever they’re cooking up in their unchecked ocean floor laboratories,” I say.

“Exactly, they’ll always have the advantage,” Marv confirms.

“How do they get around on land without legs?” Joe asks, searching for any crack in our shark theory.

“Segues. They steal them from old people outside Cracker Barrels,” I say.

“What about them breathing above water?” Joe asks, still searching.

“It’s like Waterworld, where Costner has gills, only reversed,” Marv says.

“Unbelievable. I wish I could have the last five minutes of my life back. Let’s get out of here,” Joe says.

“Alright, we’ll cover you,” Marv says, as we get up and slowly move towards the door, a hand inside our jackets.

The Gambit

Marv and I are sitting at the counter of an old time diner- the kind that has a picture of someone from long ago staring benevolently into a camera with his thumb up.

This diner inexplicably has Hersey Hawkins signing his name on the bun of a burger as their center stage photo. We are eating our food as we hear two guys talking behind us in a loud whisper.

“Those goofballs are really going to make a play at our business,” said a guy probably in his mid-twenties, checking his cell phone while wearing sunglasses in the diner. “And expect everything stay normal?”

A guy with a clean-shaven head across from him responds, “They know we’re numbered. It makes sense to prod us with a stick and maybe gain some yardage.”

Mr. Sunglasses says back, “Why don’t we just inflate our numbers briefly and make them second guess trying to blow our house down?”

At this point Marv and I look at each other and then swivel around in our chairs to make our presence known.

“We’re hired guns,” Marv says.

“You two?” says the bald guy. He looks at us approvingly and then looks at his friend with smile. “What would you do for us?”

Marv and I nod our heads to each other and then I say, “We will find your problem and solve it.”

“That’s a broad description for what we’re talking about,” sunglasses guy says. “Do you two have any idea what you’re talking about?”

“Not a clue,” I say while Marv nods an affirmative to them.

They laugh for a couple seconds and then tell us to sit down.

“I’m Oscar. This is Marv,” I say.

“Reggie,” the bald guy says and then points towards the sunglasses and says, “Vern.”

“You two are something, for sure,” Reggie says. “Let me guess, you bought guns recently.”

“How’d you know?” Marv says interestedly.

“We’ve all been through it,” Reggie says.

“It’s a rite of passage,” Vern says.

“Next thing you know you’re robbing Hooters’ cash registers and blowing it all on a blooming onion buffet catered by Outback,” Reggie says as he shakes his head wistfully.

“The good old days,” says Vern while staring out the window.

“So are we hired? Guns?” Marv asks.

“No, you’re not,” Reggie says back.

“You two need to come up with your own game. Think. Your mind is your best tool.”

They finished up and our food arrived quickly after.

“Do you think someone ended up eating that burger?” I say, pointing to Hersey.

“If I were Hersey I would have demanded another one and a replacement top bun and then eaten both.”

“Hersey’s time isn’t free. He probably ended up with a stake of this diner afterwards,” I say. “Hersey told them that him signing a bun is a binding contract of ownership.”

“That was his best year when he passed the bar and started seizing things in baffling legalese,” Marv says.

The Ploy

Over the next couple weeks Marv and I realize that either you make it over on other people by taking their money, or they will make over on you. So we slowly started to put together a plan to make money, and more importantly never have jobs. The kind of soul sucking job that makes you want to critically wound yourself when your alarm goes off so that you have a good excuse to not go in that day. Our game was going to be gambling, and we were going to model ourselves off of the ingenious carnival folk who make the game impossible to win.

We go over maps. Read rigging books.

Write ideas on a chalkboard. Ride horses. Buy hamsters and steroids. Write more ideas on a chalkboard. Argue. Pull our guns on each other whether drunk or not. Sing duets with piano accompaniment. Test our tropes and gambits. Do some reworking of the tropes and gambits. Get a groundswell going for our bazaar by talking it up to cabbies. And enlist crooked cops with an ad in the newspaper.

On or Off duty police needed. Will be handsomely rewarded for services provided. Bring nightsticks and tasers. Must be flexible on hours & morals.

Call 513 576 3388

The bazaar had been open for a couple weeks and Marv and I could not have been more right about the lucrative aspect of a rigged gambling joint. We had it set up underneath a bridge in a rundown part of town. The two cops we found, Hamburger and Helper Pickleheimer, have everyone terrified of them, including us. So far we had both made a couple grand plus the odd car title and whatnot from the busted out players with nothing else left to give.

“What am I going to do with this guy’s fake leg?” Marv asks as we close down for the night.

“Give it to H & H, they’ll like it,” I say.

“Or we could start making a scarecrow out of it,” Marv throws out. “To warn the gamblers not to try anything funny.”

“Hamburger, Helper, you guys can go for the night,” Marv says.

“Ay ay boss. You sure you don’t want us to do some stabbin’ before we go?” Helper says, apparently unsatisfied with his lack of bloodletting for the day.

“No stabbin’ tonight fellas. Sorry,” I say, wishing I could slowly back out of the situation.

They leave in their motorcycle and sidecar.

That night I have a crazy ass dream. Joe and I are riding through our hometown when this Chinese taxi driver turns around and says some astronomical amount for cab fare. He and I start arguing over his route and whatnot. He's shouting about how he's no Indian, and to pay him his money. All of the sudden Joe says to pull over cause he's gonna puke. The guy pulls over, Joe pukes. Then the cabby gets out, says something about it being a close call, and fishes a beer can out of the grass on the side of the road. While he chugs the beer Joe sneaks into the driver's seat and hightails it. The cabby chases after us and while I'm pointing at him and laughing he starts to turn into one of those parade dragons. He looms over us as a half Chinese cabby, half parade float. We pull away from him but he's right next to a police station and turns towards it. Right then we pull up to an intersection where there is a military Jeep with cops in it. I wake up. The next day I tell Joe about the dream and he says that it seems about right.

Chapter 6

Marv and I are walking down the street, eating ice cream cones, when a limo pulls up next to us. The window rolls down and a hand with a gun in it beckons us toward the limo. The door opens and we get in, not wanting to upset the hand with the gun. Inside there are two men. The one with the gun is a big guy with a mustache and eye patch over his right eye. The other is an older gentleman in austere dress with a top hat on and a cane with a golden snakehead as the handle. I suppressed the urge to ask if the older gentleman was the evil sultan from *Aladdin*.

"Hello Oscar, Marv," The sultan says in

a suave, civil, captain of industry voice. "You boys have made quite a racket for yourselves the last couple weeks."

"Thanks," Marv says, "Are you here to give us an award?"

"More like a chance," the sultan says. "Usually when people step on my toes like you two have, I let Eugene over here send them to hell. In your case, it would be a shame to throw away such a lucrative operation. So I'm going to let you two keep running your little ramshackle casino in my town. All you have to do is pay me two grand a week. Mr. Eugene will collect it every Sunday after your outfit closes down."

Marv was about to protest but I cut him off before he could.

"Done deal sir," and shook the sultan's hand. The door opened and we slid back out with our melted ice cream cones.

Once the limo drove off Marv wanted some answers.

"It's better to let them think we're going to go along with them while we start scheming," I explain.

"I say our next move is leaving town with our money before that mustachioed Cyclops rains blows down on us," Marv says.

We continue to walk while my wheels start to turn.

"Nope," I say. "We sick H & H on these fools and see if things right themselves. If things don't, we skip town."

The rest of the week we act as though nothing's changed and fleece all our patrons ruthlessly. We also start priming the H & H brothers for Sunday. Hinting to them about a potential cash windfall coming their way for some wet work.

Sunday night rolls around and Eugene shows up to collect. We give him the two grand,

he leaves, and we tell H & H to follow him back to wherever he was going, get the money and whatever else he has, and leave no one alive.

H & H follow Eugene back to a closed restaurant where he enters through a side door. They pick the lock on the door he just entered. Once inside they hear voices coming from a room down at the end of a dark hallway. Hamburger has some throwing knives. Helper has a grenade out and a pistol in his other hand. As they approach the door Helper pulls the pin on the grenade and throws it into the room. The voices go silent and the room explodes. After a second or two H & H enter the room and extinguish whatever life remains. They take the briefcase Eugene had been carrying with him plus the other men's briefcases inside the room.

They leave through the same door and hightail it back to the bazaar. Once back, H & H unload all of the loot they had taken onto our makeshift desk.

Marv and I sort through the assembled suitcases. Our two grand is in one of them. In the others there are papers from regular jobs, bank statements, oddly a couple of scripts and headshots of Eugene and the Sultan, and other things of no consequence. H & H also reported that they had appeared to be playing poker.

"This is fucked up!" I say.

Just then Joe calls my cell phone.

"Payback is a bitch?" He says.

To Be Continued...

Constellations

Chris Kittrell

You go away like constellations
in the colder seasons. Covered
up by clouds of rain. No more pictures
in the stars of your moles. No more birds.
No more planes. No more breezy kites.
I miss the way we laid stacked- chest
to back. Now autumn rains coming down.
You pull away like the sun at six. Dark
dark dark. The dusk of the church bell.
I tune my autoharp and lament
about the miss of kiss and my hard
chest against your soft back- soft
as cream. Why do I yearn for togetherness
when the cold comes creeping in like water
into summer rafts? Why did the holes begin?
Growing wider at the seams as time
passes like clock ticks. Tragedy
of the vintage coat. Back seams ripped-
frayed at the cut. You stared at me once
climbing up the stairs. A beautiful scene.
Lost it's meaning when the cold crept
in like cat through crack- a window unsealed.
Single paned. All the air leaking in froze
the flow of us. How do you move
when fluid's froze? How do you push
the buttons gloved? I look to the wet dark
streets for answers. It calls back blank
as clouded skies. Dense air the only comfort.
Early dark. No stare from you. Just a glance
to say I know you're still there like a bruise-
the pain you loved. Too blue to keep around.
Afraid to lose your mind in the love of
constellations.

Untitled

Kyle Mace

Listen;
I am dreaming
Do you hear?
A synapse firing
Lucid steam
Projecting
You're interrupting
Shut up
Don't wake me

Clamor

MaryKate Moran

Esme came home to find Thom on the couch, writing in his notebook. He didn't look up. His black framed glasses were hanging off his nose; she wanted to walk over, put her finger on the bridge, and push them back into place. Shove them.

She let her high heels clack on the wooden floor instead of taking them off. She had been back from the funeral for a day and they still hadn't talked. She didn't know what to say, so she'd let the noise speak for her.

She pulled open kitchen drawers and let them slam shut instead of crying or yelling. She watched Thom through the serving window.

Thom had told Esme he'd decided to move out, and then came the news about Sean. At the time, all Esme had thought about was driving home for the funeral, and how nice it was going to be to have a quiet apartment once she returned. But when she dragged her suitcase through the door yesterday, she realized that was not the case. Scratch that, the apartment was quiet, but Thom was still there. He hadn't packed anything. He didn't even have boxes. Thom was like a ghost.

In her frenzy, she reached for a drinking glass in the cabinet above the sink, but dropped it. It shattered, glass granules spreading into a constellation across the floor.

"Careful," Thom said.

Din

MaryKate Moran

Esme drove two hours to visit her best friend. Her best friend wanted to take her out with a bunch of people that Esme didn't know. They seemed nice enough, but not worth shouting to in a club. She wore shoes that hurt her feet because she knew everyone would be wearing shoes that hurt their feet. Esme's heart began to sink when her friend and her friends got really excited over songs Esme had never heard.

A guy approached her when she snuck off to the bar for some Jameson. She frowned at him. He told her his name and she forgot it instantly. She told him her name was Jessica.

"That's a nice name," he said.

"Sure it is."

"Jessica, you really don't look like you're having a good time. Can I buy you a drink?"

She wondered if Thom was at the apartment, finally packing up his things, leaving his key on the counter.

No, no drink, she said. He tried to insist, going on about celebrating something. A promotion or a bonus. His words were lost in the music and Esme was thankful. She thought about her own job, and was embarrassed for feeling like she knew Ben in Creative after reading over his expense reports.

Fragile

MaryKate Moran

The Sean that Esme knew was the Sean that had killed himself. Meaning, she had seen him so little in the two years before his death that she hadn't witnessed the changes she was sure had to have taken place. She had memories from middle and high school and reunions on summer holidays, and she had to reconcile that with the closed casket.

She thought of this as she took the last of Thom's boxes out to the truck. It was a friend of a friend's truck he'd borrowed for moving out. He looked ridiculous behind the wheel.

He had more boxes than she'd expected. Maybe she owned less than she'd thought.

Thom slammed the tailgate, probably because he thought he had to. "I'll call, ok?" he said. His glasses were askew and she used her index finger to nudge the rogue end back into place. He looked tired, or perhaps older. Same hazel eyes, same shaved face. Still, older. He hugged her, but then his hands hovered above her waist. She pressed his hands into her sides, but pulled away before he could push too hard.

As the engine of the borrowed truck drowned out all other noise around her, Esme realized she had very few pieces of few people, and that she had to stop being okay with that.

Counter Space

Don Peteroy

The new yoga instructor asked everyone to bring an appliance next week. We didn't ask why for fear that we'd come off as distrustful amateurs. After all, Progressive Pathways provided our lessons for free as part of a grievance.

When we returned to our homes we told our husbands, "The new instructor is great. She's got a different take. There's nothing to be angry about anymore."

Before yogi Frank died, we considered him the living embodiment of Progressive Pathway's philosophy. He once said, "Eastern enlightenment in the Western world is impossible. For Americans, meditation means hitting mute during commercials." We believed him and mindfully suffocated Mazda advertisements, touching the remote's buttons as if it were a lover's face. We discovered the bliss of answering call waiting, and enjoyed the simplicity of a careful text messages. "It's as close as you'll get," he'd say. And we were close. Briana had taken classes with Frank as far back as 1998. She started spoiling her child then: Sega Genesis, a Lance Mountain skateboard, Blink-182 albums and posters and calendars, a pager and cell phone and HP Computer. Her son's now studying microbiology and has a 3.8 GPA. We learned not to resist indulgence, and it worked.

We joined because we saw the Progressive Pathways beginners classes ad in the May 2004 issue of *Local Seekers*. After two sessions with Frank, we all tried to end our children's misery. We all went shopping. We didn't tell our children it was enlightenment or meditation: we told them it was materialism. Enjoy it. If anyone ever accuses you of spending too much time online, tell them that you're aware of it. That's the closest you'll get.

Frank told us to dismiss the new age way of life. He said, "Yoga is about area. Nothing is connected so make the best use of the space around you. Enlightenment is occupation. Take up all the space you can, and at the same time, let everything occupy you."

Frank had a heart attack a month

ago and when his parents came to empty his apartment, they found a candle, a six-pack of Coke, and a bag of rice. He'd slept on a yoga mat.

He was a traitor. He had nothing. No attachments. No ego toys and lots of room.

Progressive Pathways didn't refute that we'd been lied to. They gave us Yogi Hanna and insisted that she's reliable. She had a new kind of yoga.

When we went home after our lesson and we stared at our appliances, we thought we knew what Hanna would want. She'd ask us to lay them down at our feet, to harness the chi, the anger, the sickness, and bash and smash the things we own. And we wondered-but wouldn't ask each other-if every week she'd demand bigger appliances: stereos, TVs, cars, husbands, children. We'd learn to bend around mangled plastic and stand on broken glass, to feel the phosphorus tickle our toes, to balance disconnected speakers on our tilted foreheads while humming the sounds of creation.

Our husbands saw us run our fingers over egg beaters and Foreman grills. They saw us fighting for detachment now. We unplugged our microwaves, knowing this was a big step, and they asked us, "What the hell you doing?"

We said, "We don't need this anymore," and, "If we learn to take our time and cook, we'll be happier people," and, "It's broken, don't try to fix it, messing with the filament will give you cancer. Even when it's unplugged."

When we returned to Hanna we were quiet. Sometimes we giggled, but we maintained our spiritual composure. We made sure our spines were straight and neck muscles loose. We brought old can openers, electric rolling pins, stove lamps, croc pots, and microwaves.

Hanna had brought nothing.

We asked her if she owned nothing, like Frank, and she assured us that if she died right now, we'd find her home stocked with the latest upgrades. She even had a hybrid lawnmower. She said, "It's ok to own things, but when things own you—"

She had read that somewhere. Frank never quoted things.

Hanna made us stretch. Hanna made us make animal faces. Hanna made us do jumping jacks and then laugh and stop and breathe through this nostril and out that one, to imagine the air is white light entering our lungs, to feel the current tickle our nose hairs, and to know that there's an eternity in each molecule and that at a fundamental level, we're no different than oxygen and water and even oil. "Don't hate the oil," she said. "You are no different from it."

She said we're enlightened, we just don't realize it. That commercials last for eternity, we just haven't watched them with our eternity goggles on. We thought about our husbands, how they loved their rotating tie racks, how they sometimes peeled the labels off their beer bottles and crumbled them and kept them in their palms for three innings and threw them at the TV when the game got too frustrating, how they didn't say much in the morning and sent short e-mails from work, talking about lost keys and who should buy the detergent. Frank told us these people - the drones- they know something valuable. They're as close as it really gets. Hanna said they know nothing, we are their teachers.

Hanna's husband wrote crossword puzzles. She said that he has the answer first, then the question. He thinks in terms of boxes, compartments, a holistic answer consisting of a chain of signifiers, letters that mean nothing

unless in relation to each other. She told us not to live a fragmentary existence, to have a unified personality, to be one identity in one universe, and we wanted to smash everything in our lives that indicates we are not whole, that our multiple identities are subject to the immediate environment.

“Clean them,” she said, handing us towels and disinfectant spray. “Slowly. Mindfully. Let me tell you about my husband.” We wiped our appliances and she said, “In order for him to maximize efficiency and produce a puzzle a day, he must live in consistency with his creations. He tries to do everything backwards. But he can’t. You can’t cook backwards. You can’t finish the book and then start it. But you can think the other way around. It’s awareness. He has the answer, then the question.”

“Try it,” she said. We didn’t know what to do.

And she knew we didn’t know what to do because our faces looked confused, asking questions, like how is that possible?

We wanted to tell her that time flows one way: Frank insisted on it. A Mazda commercial leads to a Pizza Hut commercial, whether we can hear it or not. We wanted to tell her she’s full of shit, we know not to trust Koans and Zen mind games: the sound of one hand clapping is fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.

Frank once said, “How many miles are there in the color orange?”

We expected a trick answer. He said, “None. It’s impossible.”

We’d believed the answer was the non-answer.

And the big question that we weren’t supposed to ask was: why did we bring appliances today?

We wondered if she assumed we’d

assume that we’d smash them, so that’s why she had us cleaning them. We knew this ploy. She’d subvert our theory of non-violence and ask us to ruin all the materials in our lives: they lead to presuppositions and fragmentation and ego this and ego that and grasping and samsara pain suffering. She’d say, “The next time you ride your exercise bike, look at the wheel and know that’s you: spinning from one life to the next. Feel the air coming off the wheel. That’s your breath, passing, quick, impermanent.”

No, we thought. We threw our towels down.

She’d never seen a revolution before. She said, “What are you doing?”

It was a question.

Phony fucking bitch. We wanted Frank back because he didn’t have questions and he hated his own answers. We said, “We’re not doing this any more.”

She said, “Why?”

She realized that we’d caught her not knowing the answer in advance, and she smiled and wobbled her index finger at us. She said, “Ah, this is part of the lesson, never trust—”

Commercials.

Appliances.

Briana freaked. She screamed, “I don’t know what to think anymore!” She kicked her stove thermometer across the room and charged at Hanna. She backhanded her in the ear and knocked her down and screamed about Progressive Pathway’s conspiracy to drive the freeloaders away. She kicked Hanna in the gut and said, “They pulled you off the street.”

Hanna crawled, and Brianna kicked her again, the air popping out of Hanna’s throat. We wanted to stop Brianna but we didn’t know what to do. Hanna had told us last week to be non-judgmental observers.

“Get her off of me,” cried Hanna.

Brianna took a step back. She straightened her spine and breathed. If we had the ability to see auras, like Hanna did, Brianna might have looked like a microwave's radioactive filament, sizzling us with rays of deadly light.

Hanna had a scrape above her right eye. We decided to comfort her, but there was no compassion in this; we were just doing what was appropriate in order for the class to end. We were hungry. Brianna left, and she was probably going to get a vegetarian burrito somewhere.

The wound was small, so some of us wiped Hanna's tears while others dabbed at her sweaty neck. Hanna sniffled and said, "I don't know if I can come back here."

She smiled; she felt ashamed, but she assumed we were empathetic. A team that learned to love Brianna's flaws with detachment.

Hanna said, "I hope you all don't think I'm a flake. I mean, I sometimes help Charles with the crossword puzzles. I do things that aren't yoga. I just hope I haven't scared you all off."

We assured her it was ok. We'd remain faithful. We just wouldn't do the appliance thing anymore. Hanna laughed, "Lesson learned. No more appliances. It was a silly idea. You want to know why I thought of it?"

We didn't, but we said ok.

Hanna said, "My kitchen. It was a mess. We have too many things, gadgets. And I thought it'd be fun if we all did something to an appliance. I didn't know what. I had nothing planned. I was going to improvise. That woman... Brenda? She was improvising. Why did you all stop cleaning? Was it because I was asking questions?"

We told her not to worry about it. That

was the past. Time is linear, no matter what spiritualists say.

Hanna said, "Then let's get linear and think about next week. Maybe we'll meditate on women's rights. It's women's suffrage month isn't it?"

"Yes," we told her. "It's supposed to be."

We jangled our keys. We checked our phones. We told her it's time to go. We'll be back next week. Get some rest.

And the truth was, we weren't sure if we would ever go back to Progressive Pathways again. There were other places to do yoga, places that talked about chakras and crystals. Places where you got to pay. But before doing that, we thought it might be a good idea to have our own funeral for Frank. Maybe we'd break some appliances there. But we also knew we'd never do it. It was just an intention, a cheap way to provide an answer. We had other things to do, things Frank would have approved of, like enjoying the inevitability of a phone call. Like picking up crumbled beer bottle labels from the living room floor. Like buying new locks for our doors. Like arranging our kitchen appliances better, in effort to make maximum use of counter space.

Lego Reptiles

Adam Pettit

Her voice says, "We are all made of atoms," through the speakers and I don't know how old this sound is. Four days? Four weeks?

I'd found a recording she made for me, full of rantings and ravings and reasons and non-reasons as to why she was splitting in half. I found it on the table. No explanation.

Before she left all of us, Elle's room

had been covered with splatterings of loose blocks from broken Lego Reptiles. Walking through it had been a nightmare. Most of the blocks were green, some red for their tongues. They would kick up everywhere when you'd take a step, and they'd crunch under your feet and scatter this way and that. It was one of the few places I felt like I always needed shoes. Even simply lying in her bed was a mess. They would stick in your back and leave imprints in the shape of three little holes. There would be rectangular lines on my skin that would last for hours if I'd slept there the night before. I would find them in my socks sometimes, or they would end up in my bag or my clothes- all dead dinosaurs, all dead lizards.

I remember long ago, the last night before she'd become obsessed with them. It had been raining and I'd run to her house from mine and I was soaked to the bone, my clothes sticking, drenched and tight to my body. She'd greeted me on her front porch with a smile that swam around inside me, and she kissed me so intensely my senses were spiked like too much coffee and she'd whispered, "Lily, Lily, you're such a beautiful person, you're such a wonderful person, you're such a beautiful person," over and over in my ear and I'd never felt so flattered or felt so close to anything before.

She'd taken me upstairs to her room in the attic and dried me off and warmed me up and stripped me of my wet clothes. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and shivered together, my cold feet making her whole body jump, my wet hair staining the pillows and dripping across her neck and shoulders.

We kissed more, touched more, and our bodies together made a tent out of the covers. It got darker outside and the moon slid to the other side of the sky like it was on train tracks.

We watched it through the windows when it would peak through the blue night clouds. It would rain on and off and we would love each other on and off, timing it with the raindrops and the patterns that the rat-a-tats made on the roof above us. The shadows that the roof beams made on the walls shifted with the hours, and when they disappeared and the sun was up, we were still up, and she pushed the black hair out of my eyes and said to me, "Lily, I've discovered something about ourselves. I finally know what it is that we are."

"We are all made of atoms," her voice says through the speakers, and I can't help but roll the windows down and yell out the side, the wind and my shouting tearing at the landscape. That was the day she began building them.

Here's a story. My little finger once got a splinter that was so big, but so hard to get out, I spent two or three days noticing that I thought more often about my splinter than other things. If I had to go to the store, I would forget milk or oranges or bread because my goddamned splinter was distracting me, picking at my brain, taking precedence over non-splinter situations.

It's funny how little things can begin to overwhelm you.

You see, there came to be so many toy creatures, so many toy bricks, it was hard to find things, like lost rings. I remember how I would hurt my toes on them, on their tiny corners. I still have bumps at the tips, all red.

She began to cry more often, too.

We would watch the rain together and we would watch the sunrise, lost in an ocean in her attic, an ocean of green blocks. There were piles for the Reptiles and piles for the colors she didn't need, the ones she would throw out.

But, I must admit it was cute to see her with them at first, her Reptiles sitting everywhere in her room. David, the iguana stood on her dresser, and Charles, a brontosaurus lived on her windowsill. Freddy, the alligator lurked in her shower. I would build them with her, even though she was better at making them look more realistic and less like enormous staircases than I was. Still, at this time, she was happy and we would still giggle together and talk about growing old. I think she knew about what was growing inside of her, though, beginning to form itself all black and limitless between her eyes. I may have even helped nudge it, nourish it, give it a healthy dose of fertilizer. I should have tried to talk seriously with her about the Reptiles. I should have tried to tell her I knew it was more than one of her cute phases. Nobody her age latches on to something like this without a reason. In her case, I saw it there early on, but it didn't make a difference. I didn't do anything. And, terribly, I guess I tried my best to not understand her, too. Obsessively so.

Some of the things she talked about on her recording for me were much like some of the things she'd tried to tell me earlier.

"Lily," she had said when she still seemed so happy.

We were sitting on a rug and I was playing with her hair, trying to decide if it would be better green or purple. "We all seem to be like bits of static on a TV, buzzing around together, don't you think?"

The window was open and it was blowing the curtains toward us, behind us. I remember the breeze blowing on my back, so chilly.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, sitting Indian-style behind her, my hands lightly

drawing invisible circles on her head. Her hair was so lovely, so nice to hold. She was building a Komodo Dragon.

"I don't know why I feel nervous talking about it," she continued. "I think about it all the time."

"So say it."

She built her dragon silently for a second, avoiding his mouth for fear of a bite I'm sure, afraid of the bacteria they use to kill their food. But, even though I was behind her and couldn't see her face, I knew her eyes were staring blankly forward, processing so much clutter. I could feel that vibe, I could feel that immense build up inside her waiting to come out.

Finally, she said bluntly, quietly, and directly, "There's some kind of understanding that we all have, I think, and I feel like we both realize this when we turn our attention to each other."

She said it softly, distantly, elderly. Her elbows stiffened.

"Like, like we all know we're just bits flying around, all together in the static."

She coughed and stared at the swirls of the rug beneath us, all warm colors.

"I can't help but always needing to look into your eyes when you're near. There's something about the eyes of other people. It's like they're there so we can understand each other and our closeness."

She turned around to look at me, my hands still tangled in her hair.

"But, I'm afraid to do that all the time, and I'm afraid of everything and everybody. I'm afraid of talking."

"You don't need to be afraid of anything," I said as gently as I could. "I'm here for you."

She didn't look changed or comforted,

but she didn't look away from my eyes. I felt a shiver of her fear, and I felt a shiver of understanding with her, like maybe she was right, and I felt both human and unhuman, like an animal and something beyond.

"One day, we are all going to die."

And I couldn't focus on anything except for her face then, so serious and lost. I couldn't even feel her hands squeezing my arm, the pressure leaving fingernail marks.

"Even though we're here now, there's going to be a point when we're gone," she said breathlessly.

The curtains flapped loudly in the breeze. I continued to stroke her hair, only slower now.

"Oh, don't think about that. We still have a while, I'm sure," I tried to say, but the piercing look she was giving me and the strength and confidence she'd said it in were overbearing and I understood what she meant and it was frightening.

"What if what we think we are isn't what we are? We hardly think about it, but we're all made of something that we don't think of as us and it's everywhere and makes up everything."

She turned to face me and put her forehead to mine. She closed her eyes and I could feel her shaking. "I can't stop thinking about all this."

I put my hands to her cheeks and held them there and I closed my eyes for her and pressed myself as close as I could with my forehead, our brains being as physically close as possible.

"We are all made of atoms," the recording says, and as I drive along the hilltop, a place to relax, a place to listen to her, that shuttering fear comes back to me and I briefly

feel the sickness I know she couldn't stop thinking about. I know we're all made of the same things. There are trees, all orange and auburn, blowing around, spaced out from each other along the hills that roll on and on around this place I'm driving across. Even the houses separate farther from each other here. The sky is a dome above me, and the space around and above it never reaches an end point.

A perspective can be a frightening thing.

As the months had progressed, and Elle quickly slipped further and further into her thinking, more Lego Reptiles were built, more money was spent on blocks, more days were spent shuttering.

"We live in a world flowing with visible and invisible electromagnetic waves," she would say from out of nowhere. "We are stuck in different points of space-time while riding on a constant stream of motion through it."

I would read on her bed and she would lie on the floor or on top of me, zombie-like, and at the most random moments she would spurt out the little things that were bothering her, but sometimes it seemed like she could find beauty in it, and other times she would have trouble breathing.

"What if there is no physical reality and we are just bits of dust trying to accomplish a sense of togetherness?"

She would build and build and build. She would make cities of Reptiles. She stopped naming them. She got better at shaping them. It became scary, it became unhealthy to me. I would look into her eyes, and she would look into mine, trying to find the purpose of each other.

"Oh, Lily, what have we been thrown

into?”

I took Elle out on a date and we dressed up together in the other’s nicest clothes, and although she was paler these days than she used to be, she looked great in my green dress while I just felt awkward in her black one. We went to the fanciest restaurant in the area, a place I’d never been, and there were candles and men in tuxedos playing a variety of unusual stringed instruments.

Her knuckles looked blue and were fidgeting.

“Elle, what can I do?” I asked her. “How can I calm you down?”

“You can’t,” she answered quietly.

She twirled her fork, her eyes on her plate. She scratched it back and forth and it made a terrible sound.

“There’s nothing? I can’t give you a back rub or make you a bath later?”

“Those would be nice things.”

She continued with her fork.

“What do you think is wrong?” I asked, after a pause. “This is supposed to be a fun night. I’m doing this for you. Why are you so distant from me? Why can’t you tell me things?”

She looked up at me.

“I have been telling you things,” she said. She sipped her drink, kicked it back. “I’ve been telling you everything. It has nothing to do with anything you’re doing.”

“Then what is it?”

Her eyes sparkled a bit in the candlelight, her dress, my dress, matching them in color, and she smiled a bit in the corner of her mouth but her lips trembled back to a frown slowly.

“Life,” she said.

I chewed my food slowly.

“We can’t keep, I mean, you can’t keep thinking like this,” I stumbled. “Everybody gets a little into these ways of thinking every now and then. You have to look past it.”

I reached out to her and grabbed her shoulder, gently rubbing it.

“My life would be awful without you. You know this. Can’t you enjoy that we’re here together like this, regardless of how strange it all feels?”

She looked out the window next to us, the candles reflecting in the glass. It was too dark to see anything outside.

“Sometimes it’s all very beautiful.”

I continued to rub her shoulder.

“Of course it is. I mean, look at us. We’re working through this together. It’s very, very beautiful.”

I saw her smile a bit, but she ducked her head down. I retracted.

“I keep having this feeling, not just with you, but when we’re in large groups of people that somebody’s going to stop everyone and make them see each other.” She put her hands together like a child building a church steeple. “And we’re all going to merge with each other.”

I sipped my wine slowly.

“What do you mean? What else are we going to do? Why else would we be here? Why else would we be alive?” I asked.

The waiter came and gave us our check.

“We all want to say it, but nobody ever does. We’re here and we don’t know what we are. Science, art, religion, it’s all there to solve or interpret the great wave that rushes beneath our lives. We’re stuck in this game, Lily,” she looked up at our waiter. “You’re stuck in this game.” She glanced sharply through my eyes. “I want to figure it out, Lily.”

I backed a bit away from her, looking to my plate. The waiter looked confused.

"I'll come back in a moment," he said.

"Don't you think so?" she asked as he walked off. "Lily?"

There was a vent above my head and it was blowing cold air all over me.

"There are lots of reasons to be alive, Elle," I shivered.

"Well what are they? I feel like I'm waiting for somebody to tell me nothing's real and then watch it all detach and fall to pieces in front of me. How many dimensions are there again?"

My jaw was open as I searched for the words, my gaze at the tablecloth.

"We're never, we're never, we're never..." I was extremely conscious of the air on my back, blowing down my neck, but the thing I wanted to say was lost to me. Her look seemed encouraging. It seemed to urge me on. She knew what I was going to ask. "Elle, why do you build so many of the Lego Reptiles?"

She reached for me this time and softly grabbed my shoulder. Her face was feather-light.

"When you know that, we'll never have any problems again."

To be continued...

When a Nation Ignites

Adam Sievering

When a nation ignites like a burning ship,
Sinking into the rising sea,
And our captain smiles in his rowboat,
Saluting as he glances back at me,
And I remember my pride that burned brighter
Than the sun and gave me goose bumps
When we left the world behind,
I know that oil is dangerous cargo
On a wooden ship that holds fiery minds.

And when I cling to the splintered mass that
Flew our sails and I feel that first fabled
Burn of salt on my winded lungs,
I'll know that not even all the forests in the
world
Could have built enough rowboats to save us
and that
Peacefully drowning is only a bedtime story
We were told by our captain.

The General

Amanda Smith

I am sitting in the office of Hampton Standish, Esquire, a lawyer I located on the Internet. He combs through a two-inch stack of legal brick-a-brack I acquired at a business meeting last night. I try not to focus on the movement of his lips as he mouths the words with painstaking slowness and silence. The pile never seems to dwindle. It's like waiting for water to boil, and I look nervously around the room, attempting to distract myself. Everything seems pretentious and too big for the space: the ferns planted in oversized Grecian urns and the framed print of Pannini's Picture Gallery with Views of Ancient Rome. 'A true Southerner,' I think to myself, my fingers tapping against the gold

riveted arms of the chair. It's clear a scolding is inevitable. The first thing Hampton will want to know is how I can even think of dissolving my family's estate of almost two centuries to make a quick buck so a couple of developers can erect tract homes on the land where my ancestors helped shape American history. Knowing every good Southerner can spout her lineage like schoolchildren the alphabet, I begin practicing in my head. If I can demonstrate that, he may not think me entirely a traitor.

My great-great grandmother Aurelia was the niece of the Civil War General George Stepford, who raised her. She married Tobias Pemberton and had three children, the oldest of whom was my great grandmother Minnie, who married Alfred Lawrence. Their son, George, named after the general, was my grandfather. He married Rose Barrett and also had one child, my father Nathaniel, who married Victoria Tuttle and had one child, me, Aurelia--named, of course, after my great-great grandmother. Of all of these people, I am the only one still living, the last remaining link to a bona fide Civil War general.

My nails are nubs by the time Hampton flips over the last page.

"You could get more."

That's it. No elaboration. No admonition. Just, "You could get more."

I ask him why. He counters with a lengthy explanation about royalties, Homeowner's Association fees, and a lot of legal jargon. The stack of paper seems heavier as I walk to my car feeling just as confused as I did last night.

The road home is forested and boggy for most of the way. I love the moss that drapes the oaks, despite the fact that it's parasitic and kills them. Driving slowly, imagining I'm go-

ing someplace other than home, I push harder on the brakes when I reach the bend just outside of town where the banner comes into view. It straddles the road a little past the welcome sign, proudly displaying, in large red scripted letters, The General's most famous words: "War is inevitable, Mr. Lincoln, when matters of discord threaten the loss of liberty or property."

So said The General to Abraham Lincoln days before the Civil War broke, according to legend. The veracity of the claim has never been substantiated. Though, in these parts belief is rarely differentiated from fact.

My car little more than rolls past the courthouse on Stepford Boulevard, the main thruway that slips out of town and past the plantation like a ribbon that has come undone. Besides the boulevard, there are reminders of The General's importance everywhere; General Stepford Library, General Stepford Park, General Stepford Monument, and Stepford Plantation, where I grew up but they now conduct guided tours for \$7.50 per person.

Taped to the door of the carriage house where The General and I now live—well, he haunts it--is a note from the curator rambling about things falling off the walls and down the steps. I wander up toward the main house, the note folded neatly in my hand. I have every intention of explaining that The General might be prone to fits of anger right now. I do not anticipate revealing too many details. The curator is friendly, an incredibly knowledgeable local historian. But he's kind of twitchy and quick to jump for cover when he gets nervous, like an old hare. He doesn't know I'm thinking of selling the place. None of the employees do.

The plantation was my inheritance; a pompous exhibition of Southern excess set apart from the main world by a dirt lane stretching nearly two thirds of a mile. The General's

father, Phinneas Albert Stepford, settled the surrounding area; a fact long since eclipsed by The General's Civil War plight. A former cotton plantation that once comprised 140 acres, it's now barely more than thirty, having been sold off in pieces to finance the exorbitant lifestyles of ancestors who lived largely on the propriety of name.

The main house is a white Federal-style mansion anchored by a row of columns and a veranda running the length of the front. In the center is a nine-foot oak door crowned by a fanlight. There are twenty two rooms inside, which sounds impressive, but most of them are servant's quarters and barely larger than closets. Only ten are the kind most people associate with old Southern mansions, a detail conveniently left off the brochure.

I hesitate just inside the door, disoriented. Everything is set perfectly, like a theater stage before a play begins. The air reeks of sterility and lifelessness. I jump in on the last tour, as if I am just another tourist.

Valerie is the guide today. She is already well into the scripted speech explaining the estate's lineage. She knows me. All of the guides do, even though I've never actually taken the tour. Not the full one anyway. I've never really seen the need to be shown around a house in which I lived for much of my life.

Bemused, she spots me standing at the back of the group. I smile discreetly, hoping she won't single me out. She does. Everyone grins as they examine me, as if they're admiring another object in the house, like the grandfather clock to our left or the Spode china tea service displayed under a plexiglass case on a table to the right.

"Now, if y'all just follow me," Valerie announces in her best effervescent South Carolinian accent. A graduate student at Clem-

son University up the road, she's actually from Buffalo. She's studying for her Master's in Historic Preservation, but I think she should have considered a career in theater. Her drawl has become quite convincing.

The guided tours are a campaign of desperation designed by me to generate income. When the estate passed to me three years ago following the sudden death of my father, it took only a few months to realize that I'd inherited years of accumulated expenses amidst rapidly depleting funds. The plantation hadn't been operational for well over a decade and getting a job in this part of the country is not an option for a Stepford (the outright foundation for a gossip factory, in fact). Half the county was owned by our family for over a century and a half. My name on the W-4 of a company owned by anyone else would be nothing short of blasphemy. I rationalized opening the estate to the public as a necessary evil of being the end—literal and fiscal--of a line. There wouldn't be enough money to maintain the main house if we charged less than \$6 a head. That means only \$1.50 of each ticket is profit. Translated into laymen's terms, that equals barely enough to get by. But at least the house lies in a belt of historic sites or we probably wouldn't break even.

Scanning the crowd like a pageant contestant waiting to be crowned, Valerie prefaces her scripted speech about the double salons, the first stop on the tour, with a fixed toothy smile. "Multiple pocket doors separated the double salons. Here in the front room, the family received visitors. For parties, the doors could be opened and the two rooms made into one for dancing or large dinners. I'll demonstrate the windows, which can be opened to allow a person to pass through."

Warm, moist air pushes into the room as she slides the window up and steps underneath. A few people step back to avoid being hit by the blue velvet drapes fluttering out toward them. "This also allowed for extra air circulation, which was essential during the sweltering Southern summers, way back before air conditioning. I don't know about ya'll, but thinking of what that humidity did to those poor women's hair is enough to make a girl have nightmares at night. Would anyone like to walk through one of the windows?"

No one volunteers and almost everyone wears an expression that says they hope the next room holds something more exciting than windows. Valerie comes back inside and hastily shuts the window as she ushers the tour into the next room. I wonder if I am the only one who notices the drapes are still rustling. Any hope that The General will remain benevolent fails when a waft of heavy, royal velvet smacks the woman in front of me purposefully. She looks agitatedly toward the window then back at me as if I am the guilty party. She seems irritated, but, thankfully, not unnerved. I had intended to linger for only a couple of rooms, but now I decide to stay.

The General's ghost is regional legend. Everyone claims to have seen it. Everyone but me. I only feel him-- all the time. He's a constant presence, the only one at this point. A couple of ghost hunting teams have visited and even a cable television program about hauntings. The General doesn't like those people, though, and usually stays quiet until they leave. I wouldn't anger him by letting them come, but they offer pretty hefty convenience fees for the privilege. I thought he would understand this and play along. He didn't. We were still compensated, though, a relief for me and a temporary boost in the bank's growing lack of

confidence.

From the back salon, Valerie continues the tour, "When partitioned off and not being used in conjunction with the front salon for entertaining, this room typically served as a hobby room, a music room, or a learning room, where the children could take their school lessons." She glides to a stop next to the grand piano. The keys let out an abrupt, low moan. Her eyes shift downward with anxious vigilance but her smile stays behind in firm reassurance. She lingers for only a few seconds before hurrying into the hallway, where she stops.

"Typical of this style of architecture are the matching doors at either end of the house, allowing one to see from the front to the back. They are designed to provide the illusion of extended space."

I look from one end to the other trying to hone in on The General. The slamming of the double doors behind us tell me he is making his way out of the back salon from which we just came. Everyone jumps. A couple of women giggle and put their hands to their hearts, while one of the men suppresses laughter.

I frequently try to explain to The General that we had no choice but to open the main house for tours. That such a move appears to outsiders as if we're giving them a special privilege rather than pilfering around for money. He usually responds by tipping the portrait of himself hanging on the wall adjoining the staircase in the carriage house off its nail. It rattles down the steps and bounces a time or two before coming to a stop at the bottom. Sometimes he will stomp around upstairs, which actually helped me find a plumbing leak once.

Most people probably think it quite the contrivance that one's life can be so disrupted by a ghost, but most people haven't tried to en-

tain guests on an evening in which The General is in no mood for company. He has been known to spill wine, burn food, hide articles of clothing, and, for a couple of more unfortunate visitors, pull the bathroom door shut and hold tight onto the handle so that it won't turn, in one case trapping the poor soul on the other side for the better part of an hour before I was able to convince him to let go.

Valerie takes a sharp right into the dining room. "The bright red fleur de leis paper on the walls is actually silk." Several hands reach toward it. "Please DO NOT touch! The natural oils on your hands will stain it." The chandelier begins swinging above her head, first rocking slowly then quickly gaining speed. A wave of whispered apologies make its way through the group as people, rushing to clear the shadow of the swaying crystal mass, bump into each other. Valerie tries very hard to appear not to notice, but the frequent pauses in her speech make it evident she does. "Um, the dining room is—where the—um—family ate and—sometimes they—um--entertained company. And, that seat right there is the one in which—oh dear..." The prisms clink like loose chains as the chandelier makes a wild pass out over her head. She backs against a wall and incomprehensibly mutters, as if an entire sentence is one word, "That-chairiswhereGeneralRobertELewasrumored-tohaveoncesatduringadinnerparty," and hurries out of the room.

It's my fault The General is angry. He and I have fallen out about the Busbys, the visitors we received a few nights ago and my dinner company last night. It was one of his more temperamental evenings during which he'd spent several hours knocking books off the shelf. The doorbell rang as I'd given up on attempting to pick them up, having done so several times, barely turning my back after

each before hearing the thud of another. I half expected it to be the sheriff holding a local teenager by the back of his shirt, informing me that he'd caught another one attempting to break into the main house on a dare, periodically a sport for the local youth. I always decline to press charges. It gets to be tiresome and even tempting to say yes, but I like to think that I can remember what it's like to be a teenager.

It wasn't the sheriff. A couple of very well dressed and nice looking gentlemen offered their business card before extending a hand to shake, something to which I was sure The General took immediate offense. I instinctively glanced over my shoulder, fully able to envision him standing there shaking his head in disapproval.

Busby and Sons Development. That's what the card said. And they reaffirmed it by introducing themselves as Mark and Ira Busby. I deduced they were the Sons.

"I hope this isn't too inconvenient. We've been looking around this beautiful piece of property," the one who introduced himself as Mark said. "It is a lovely piece of property," he repeated as though he thought I somehow did not understand the first time. His brother stood silently beside him, nodding.

"Yes, I know," I said, feeling The General's suspicion creeping down my neck. "Several generations of my family would agree."

"Of course," He smiled a small, thin smile. "We've spent the day looking around--the past several, in fact."

Suspicious but intrigued, I debated my next gesture as they adjusted their matching navy suits. They looked like a couple of secret service men, certainly not like anyone from around here, a quirk that peaked my interest just enough to make them a viable alternative to an evening of reruns. I took a risk and

invited them inside in spite of The General's better judgment, which he voiced by pushing on the door as I tried to open it wider. There was a momentary struggle during which the Busbys looked on awkwardly as I seemingly wrestled with my self for control of the door. The General had tried that particular trick many times before, and I knew that if I firmly planted both hands on the knob, I could win. And I did. Mark and Ira hesitated at the pile of books littering the floor until I stepped over it, leading them.

I offered them the sofa and something to drink. Then I made small talk long enough to assure myself the curmudgeon had retreated to a different part of the house before inquiring as to what, exactly, warranted repeat visits to Stepford Plantation. Their business card had already provided me with a pretty good idea. Even though the Busby sons were the first such visitors I'd received since assuming ownership, my father got them all the time: Land developers attempting to usurp the maximum benefit of urban sprawl by purchasing the remaining acreage of old estates and converting them into housing developments. I knew what my answer must be, but I found myself softened by corporate company.

"We would like to present the idea of making Stepford Plantation--Stepford Plantationsss," Mark emphasized the "s" as if he thought I was completely unable to discern the plural form of a word without help.

Something heavy hit the floor upstairs. I looked up toward the ceiling and the heads of the two men followed.

"Well," I tried to think of a diplomatic way to proceed, expecting The General's portrait to come tumbling down the stairs at any second. "What exactly would happen to Stepford Plantation if it were to become Stepford

Plantationsss?" I stressed my "s" too as proof that I did recognize the difference between singular and plural.

The two men looked at each other as if each needed to confirm to the other that it was okay to let me in on some sort of shared secret.

"The guide on the house tour told us you still have around thirty acres." This time it was Ira.

I nodded, slightly disturbed by but somewhat respecting their initiative in doing research by touring the house.

"She also said," he continued, "That the acre and a half on which the main house stands is part of The National Register of Historic Places, but the family still maintains private ownership of the property."

I nodded again. Above us came the sound of something dense rolling across the floor, like a bowling ball, which I don't own, so I was left only to imagine what The General may be doing. I was too engrossed for the moment to care, though, more perplexed about what they were telling people on the tour. Visitors were getting a lot for their \$7.50 a head.

"That means you can sell it at any-time, despite its listing on the register," Mark interjected, as if I still didn't grasp what they were getting at. He seemed to think me slow. All three of us jumped at several purposeful whacks against the wall, which I interpreted as The General urging me to demonstrate that I wasn't.

"Yes, but it's still listed with the state historic preservation society, which means that even if I did sell it, the new owner—or ownerssss"--I looked from one to the other, unable to resist the urge to stress the "s"--"can't make any renovations without first obtaining approval."

"On that acre and a half," Mark as-

served.

“But the other twenty eight and a half acres are free from restriction,” Ira finished. It wasn’t a question.

“And you’re proposing?” I waited for them to bring their spiel home while listening intently for The General’s opinion, hoping it wouldn’t involve flying objects or old guns.

A candlestick tumbled off the mantle. Mark and Ira exchanged slightly alarmed looks. I didn’t flinch.

“We were thinking fifty half acre lots. A gate. A pool. Maybe some tennis courts. Definitely something more upscale. There are a lot of moderately priced developments in the area, but not many affluent neighborhoods,” Ira cut straight to the details.

A warm feeling worked its way through me

“What better to be the symbol of wealth in this area than Stepford Plantation—or Plantations,” Mark finished, this time doing nothing to emphasize the “s”.

“Ho-” I began

“\$40,000 per half acre,” Ira answered. “That’s what we’re proposing, anyway,” He back peddled slightly, realizing his haste. “Of course, the legal details will need to be worked out, but we thought we’d discuss a good faith agreement with you before delving into all of that bureaucratic muck.”

“Good faith agreements are what the South is built upon,” Mark followed. I looked at their card. They were from Manhattan.

The sconce on the wall behind Mark fell, barely missing his head. Ira nervously shifted to the far side of the couch and Mark looked somewhat apprehensive as he picked up the sconce and handed it to me. Apologizing and sitting it on the coffee table just in case The General got any more ideas, I did some quick

calculations in my head. Fifty half-acre lots at \$40,000 each was two million dollars. I tried to think of some way to tell them in code that I was interested in talking further, at a later time and in a different location, preferably one The General did not frequently haunt.

“Gentlemen, I’m sure you know matters are always delicate in old Southern families where there is a Trust involved,” I lied. There was no Trust. But I thought it sounded good and I figured it would buy some time. The bamboozled expressions as they glanced at each other, like they were collectively trying to solve a riddle, said a Trust was news to them. But the succession of shrugs and nods that followed told me they were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. The banging of The General’s portrait on its way down the stairs was a clear sign that he was not.

“How long are you in town?” I asked as their necks strained like a couple of cranes to get a glimpse of the mahogany framed canvas now resting at the foot of the stairs.

“Huh? Oh...” Mark looked at me and pointed to the business card. “We leave tomorrow morning, but we’ll be in Atlanta for a couple of weeks. It’s more than a reasonable drive from there,” he reassured.

“Or to there,” I returned, hoping at least one of the Busby sons would catch the hint, though neither appeared to comprehend there was one to be caught.

They sped up slightly as they passed the painting lying on the floor near the door. Ira tripped and dragged a couple of leather bound classics across the hardwood before managing to break free. They both mumbled hurried thank yous and goodbyes over their shoulders as they made their way to their car. I closed the door and tucked the business card into my pocket as I bent down to pick up The General’s portrait;

the narrowed brows, angled cheeks, and pointed beard solidified in eternal intimidation. I tried to imagine him wearing the same expression as he addressed his troops, giving them a speech about fighting for what was rightfully theirs in the name of pride and dignity--no room for cowardice. But what I actually envisioned was a field full of teenagers, like the ones the sheriff sometimes shows up with at my door, caught in their youth between tradition and progress, ready to wet their pants at the idea of actually having to fight for either as they were bullied into battle by the stern face that stared back at me from the canvas. I felt resentful. I wanted to stand up to him on behalf of those fallen troops, to refuse to be on the losing side of an unnecessary war.

As I climbed the stairs and re-hung the portrait, I tried to make The General understand that he and I were in a very precarious situation--one that required one of us to get a job. Since he refused to show up when the ghost hunting teams and camera crews of the cable television shows came around, it was going to have to be me.

The clinking clippity clop of boots making their way rapidly across the floor above and the rattling of his newly repositioned painting on the nail against the wall told me neither was acceptable.

"Well, then this is our only option," I asserted.

Silence.

"Besides, what do you care? You're dead. You're not the one collectors are going to come after when we can't pay the bills anymore," I yelled into the empty space and waited for some acknowledgment that my words had been received.

Silence.

"You heard them. Two million dollars. I

know you appreciate money, General." Silence.

I turned toward the portrait on the wall, expecting to see it wavering again in anticipation of another tumble down the stairs.

It was still.

I waited several more minutes, listening for a sound, a stomp, a roll, a thud, glass breaking, an object falling...anything.

Silence.

I finally resigned to go back downstairs and switch off the lights, ready to call it an early night. I had plenty to sleep on. I picked the wall sconce up off the coffee table and re-hung it. As I backed away to insure it wasn't crooked, my eye caught a glint through the white sheers covering the window. I pulled them away to expose the bare glass. In the main house, the light in The General's study was on. I sighed before letting the curtains slide back into place and made my way upstairs.

As I left the next evening to meet the Busbys—senior and both juniors—in Atlanta for dinner to discuss their proposal further, I noted the light to The General's study in the main house had been joined by the one in his room and wondered how long it was going to take the staff to begin reporting strange happenings to me. I was surprised, at the restaurant, to discover the Busbys had also brought along a couple of lawyers and an accountant, all of whom seem completely befuddled that I was not accompanied by a matching army of legal and financial professionals. All but certain I was in way over my head, ill prepared for battle should it become necessary, I went straight home and found Hampton Standish via an internet search engine. His website proclaimed that he hailed from one of the oldest families in Virginia. I thought he would be perfect person to talk me out of selling.

Valerie leads the group into the hallway where we started, steering us toward the front of the house for the final tour stop before going upstairs--The General's study. The oak double doors mirroring the entryway to the front salon across the hall are closed. I noticed this when I came in and hoped it wasn't a bad sign. Valerie had shown no concern then. I figured maybe it is standard practice for them to be kept shut in order to prevent curious stragglers at the beginning of the tour. Apparently, it isn't. She wraps her hand around one knob and attempts to turn it. It won't budge. She offers a nervous apology to the group then tries the other knob. It won't move either. She makes some sort of joke, to which I am the only one who laughs, about The General being somewhat of a prankster before excusing herself to go get the key. But I already know it's not going to work.

The waiting members of the tour look at me as we listen to Valerie making her way up two flights of stairs to the third floor former servant's quarters where a few of the closet sized rooms have been converted into a series of cramped offices. One of them is the curator's, where the master key is kept. The group's growing impatience as they sigh and shift their weight under folded arms is impossible to ignore. I finally resign to politely step forward and try the doors, even though I know they aren't going to open. The curator's note wrapped in one hand and the porcelain handle to The General's study in the other, I attempt to turn the knob. It won't budge. I try the other and am met with the same result. I rap lightly.

"General," I say softly, glancing behind me at the expectantly waiting, gawking group. For the first time, I begin to wonder what is going to happen to the jobs of the employees here when the Busbys turn the main house into something tacky, like a neighborhood club-

house. I knock again. "General, open these doors," I whisper with as little agitation as I can. The knob of the left door rattles slightly and I feel something pull on it from the other side.

"General, I mean it," I say pulling back. "This is not how we treat guests." I hear the sound of something heavy sliding across the floor. He is barricading the door. I forget about the onlookers as my temper takes over. "This is NOT funny!" I bang flat palmed against the door, "Do not make me come through a window!" I continue to hear things being pushed up against the other side and kick the door in frustration.

"This is so much better than the indigo dye demonstration at the other plantation," Eddie Bauer proclaims. The remaining visitors agree through snorts of laughter. The General and I, it seems, have become an instantaneous comedic duo performing shtick on a stage that is our ancestral home, our very real conflict fodder for tourists. It has been all along. This mortifying realization only angers me more. "Try blockading a window!" I call over my shoulder, storming out the front door and onto the veranda. The tour, accompanied by Valerie and the curator, who were on their way down the stairs as I fumed out of the house, fills the open door, a few of them spilling outside, watching intently as if this is a reenactment.

Something hits the window from inside. A crack forms from the top, creeping downward to where the glass meets the wood slats of the floor, slowly at first but gaining speed the closer it gets to the bottom. I put my hand up to tap the newly split window before thinking the better of it and stepping down to the next one, eager to end the battle before the main house becomes the first casualty.

"General, I think it's time to enter into

some negotiations.”

The tourists, the curator, Valerie, and I all wait in silence. Nothing happens. I lean into the window, trying to get a look inside the study, but The General has let the usually open blinds fall. I look around, embarrassed.

“This is great stuff!” Eddie Bauer exclaims again. They all nod in agreement. I’m pretty sure I roll my eyes. I want to yell, to kick, to scream for all of this to stop. Determined to win the dual, I charge back inside. The crowd parts to allow me through. The rhythmic shuffling of footsteps behind me confirms they are it is following.

A painting charges down the stairs as I step back into the foyer. The shuffling stops. One of the women screams. Then, silence. The portrait is lying face down on the floor. I flip it over and recognize it from the spot where it usually hangs over the fireplace in The General’s room. It’s not a mirror of the severe face hanging in the carriage house. It’s a bright eyed man, barely more than a boy really, at an age likely long before he ever thought of war. Hoping The General is listening, I speak.

“This property can never be mine as long as it’s yours, General. I want my freedom.”

With that, I turn back toward the carriage house, leaving the group in bewilderment.

Later that night, I sit on my stairway with the stack of paperwork periodically glancing up at The General’s portrait awaiting—hoping for—a response. But the sharp features remain impervious to my presence. I walk over to the door and look through the peephole expecting a phantom version of the steely face that stares from the portrait. But there is nothing. I turn the knob and am met only with the lingering shadow of the main house. It’s completely dark. All of the lights are off.

Stepping into the blackness and pulling the door shut behind me, I make my way toward the main house again. I fumble with the primary switchboard just inside the door before finally managing to flip on the light to the front salon and wait, listening for movement. Stillness. I look to my left. The General’s study is open and dark. I search for the light labeled “study” and flip it, instantly illuminating the room.

Despite the earlier racket, everything seems to be in order. The only evidence of the day’s events is the crack running the length of the first window. The books are neatly lined on the shelves that run the full height and length of two of the walls. The desk is tidily arranged, The General’s inkwell and wax insignia resting on it. Beside them, his journal lies open to a page dated April 4, 1865: “Met Mr. Lincoln in Richmond and told him I’d advised Lee to surrender. These young people deserve their freedom just as much as the next person. You’re a good man, he told me. I’m a tired man, I told him. I need rest.” I decide that tomorrow I will have it framed, open to that page, and hung on the wall behind The General’s chair. Then I make my way back to the carriage house, alone.

Automatic Urinal

Madison Smith

The automatic urinal sprayed me today
The blinking red light missed
The motion and thought I had left

It hissed at me as if in revenge
Its blinking eye went off
In blind ecstasy releasing toilet water onto my
pants

Half-spheres of water on my hands
And I think of those spheres
Flattening as they find homes on my fabric

The sink is not automatic and I turned it hot
The soap had been pre-rubbed
Between someone else's hands
And I can hear
Through the wall
The girl-bathroom sounds
The furious unraveling of toilet paper
And a sudden rip

through the thin walls

Florida

Liv Stratman

Jillian's boyfriend, Lucas, leaves for the advertising job he's been offered in Tampa, where he'll earn twice what he's been making in New York and have an office view of a highway that leads to the ocean. She won't go with him, never mind the talk about perpetual summer and unfurled blue sky. Never mind his marriage proposal and the subsequent employer-paid health insurance, or the promises of a small dog, an apartment with carpet and walk-in closets, swimming lessons, wide-aisled super-

markets, room to breathe.

When Jillian imagines life in Tampa she sees herself riding in cars, which often makes her sick, and Lucas wearing a business suit, which always makes her laugh.

"Skin cancer," she'd said. "And hurricanes. Is that really what you want?"

So Lucas packs two suitcases and boxes up the few items that belong to him in their one-room apartment on Rutgers Street: several shelves of books, the computer, a set of stereo speakers, the toolbox, all the tools and one of two turtle-shaped tiffany lamps they'd received as a Christmas gift last year. Jillian stands in the hallway, which is also the kitchen, smoking and pretending to read the newspaper. Lucas takes the boxes to the post office and ships them off, puts the suitcases by the door and then he and Jillian set up their TV trays and eat canned soup and Tuna Helper on the couch as if nothing will ever change. Jeopardy comes on and Jillian responds faster than the contestants, but never puts her answers in the form of a question and is almost always wrong.

"George Sampson," she says, and then wrinkles up her face, disappointed even though she had been wondering if George Sampson wasn't just the guy who worked the door at Bowery Ballroom. "Oh! I know this one—Mount Kilimanjaro." But the answer turns out to be, "What is Mount Kenya?"

"Damn," she says, shaking her head.

When the taxi comes to take Lucas to the airport, he holds Jillian in the doorway and weeps noiselessly into her hair. Once he is gone, she hooks the stereo up to a computer speaker that she'd bought from a guy selling housewares out of a shopping cart on Jamaica Avenue. Jillian listens to Leonard Cohen and glances through a gardening magazine that she took from the waiting room of the dentist's of-

office where she is a file clerk. She chain smokes stale cigarettes and finishes Lucas's half of the six-pack that has been sitting, for some weeks now, in the back of the fridge between the baking soda and an expired jar of pickles. There is some crinkling static and the music sounds smaller and somehow less important than it did before, but the new speaker works ok.

The next day when Jillian wakes up, there is torrential rain and surf rock on the radio alarm. She does not yet realize that her umbrella is at work— taken on a rainy morning last week and forgotten because the sunny afternoon felt like a different day altogether. She does not, in fact, realize anything at this stage. There is a point at the very beginning of the morning where the events of the previous day, week or year cannot be remembered. A tiny sliver of unknowable time when one is awake but sleep has not faded completely and the senses are fresh and griefless, unobstructed by the life waiting at the other end of the moment— and so in this moment Jillian is only fumbling toward the alarm clock, only reaching out for her glasses on the table by the bed. She is not thinking about Lucas or the things she will miss: the hand-rolled cigarettes with dried herbs sprinkled into the tobacco, or how this habit made his shirts and hair smell like bonfire smoke and lavender. The ladies scarf that he wore every winter and insisted had been marked 'unisex,' at the store, through it was tulle with a floral pattern on the edges. The way he used her bobby pins for bookmarks and how he seemed to know the name of every kind of flower. Jillian is not remembering any of the times she came home from work and found Lucas napping face down on the sofa, nor is she thinking of how warm his body felt when she curled up next to him and slept through the rest

of the day. He talked in his sleep, repeatedly, about a lost and dearly-missed kite. He was so ticklish and would laugh, like a delighted child when she touched a certain spot behind his left ear. That laughter, which cracked sometimes, like ice being drowned in warm liquor. She does not think about the first time she heard that laugh, under the awning of a Utrecht art-supply store on Halloween when she was twenty-one. Winter had come early that year. There was snow in his hair. For an instant none of these memories has any meaning.

Jillian is also not thinking about a two-and-a-half hour power outage last summer while she and Lucas were visiting the Natural History Museum. It may have been the hottest day of the year but it was cool and growing quiet and empty inside the Hall of North American Mammals. They pressed their faces against the glass of the dioramas and squinted to try and determine which taxidermic animal they were not seeing. Jillian waited for a guard to come into the exhibit and escort them out of the museum and into the heat and disorder of a powerless Manhattan neighborhood, but no one ever did, and their eyes adjusted to the darkness; the black silhouettes of the buffalo, the coyote and the grizzly started to stand out from other shades and shadows down the long, hollow corridor. Jillian is not remembering this, or the picture Lucas had taken of her in the hall. She is not thinking of the bright white snap from the camera flash ricocheting off the glass behind her or of her surprise when, days later, she saw the picture developed and realized that she'd been standing in front of two stuffed timber wolves. They were lurking in a way that looked real and ominous, even with the flash superimposing Lucas's image over the picture. Lucas had written *Biodiversity- summer of 2005* on the back of the snapshot in his barely legible

handwriting.

But Jillian is not awake enough to consider any of this, though she will find the picture in a few months, buried under a stack of old mail on the coffee table, and she will look at it with a coarse, routed longing before tossing it— with the emptied envelopes and faded grocery ads, into a wastebasket. Right now she is still blinking the sand from her eyes. In another minute she may notice the rain.

Damned Spot

Liv Stratman

Gloria Allen's only child, who is also named Gloria, owns the complete works of William Shakespeare in a 38 volume, 45 piece set on vinyl, recorded and released in 1970 by a once semi-famous but now defunct London theater troupe. Gloria's daughter Gloria, who is called June (shortened from Junior) by her family, had found the collection at a police auction just after her high school graduation.

"What I want to know," Gloria said as her husband Scott carried the cardboard box of LP's up the front porch stairs, "is why in the world the police would confiscate something like this." Scott had taken June to the auction to see about getting a car— a neighbor of theirs, a detective, had told him that there were often late model vehicles in very good condition being sold for a third or even a fourth of what they were worth. Gloria had thought that it was a lousy idea; she was slightly superstitious and worried about her daughter driving around in a car that had been involved in any number of criminal activities, along with the frightening possibility that some unsavory friend or colleague of the previous owner might recognize it on the road. But in the end, all the cars at the police auction had been too flashy, too large,

too ugly and battered, or were missing some essential piece: the muffler or the catalytic converter or, in one very uncanny instance, the entire engine. And so they returned home with the records, which Scott had been more than happy to purchase for his bookish stepdaughter in attempt to bond with the aloof, quiet teenager who seemed to spend an unhealthy amount of time alone in her room, whispering softly to no one behind the closed door. Most likely, June hadn't really wanted a car, though she hadn't resisted the trip to the auction, either. She was a homebody, and had always been comfortable riding the city buses, anyway. A car would have been a waste of money, Gloria thought, it would sit in the garage right next to the bicycle that June never rode.

"That's the beauty of it," June said in response to Gloria's question. Her voice was high-pitched but breezy and yielding. "You don't get to know... it's like, such a weird mystery. The police took them from someone who maybe went to jail, and, I mean, it's, you know... so weird." She was grinning and there was a wide, open-ended frenzy in her eyes, a look that Gloria couldn't interpret. June baffled Gloria. She was very smart; it was clear and mildly alarming that June was much smarter than Gloria or Scott— always reading, often silent except when mumbling long, unremitting reports of things she'd read or heard on the radio. And, it felt like there was something wrong with June's personality— she was solitary and anxious, jumpy. Her grades were perfect all through her school years but she had no close friends and seemed uninterested in making any. She never acted obviously lonely or depressed but talked to herself sometimes and stayed in her bedroom for what felt like days, coming out only to use the bathroom and eat dinner. Starting in middle school, June ate neither breakfast

nor lunch, though she snacked on fruit roll-ups throughout the day, despite Gloria's constant, desperate nagging, which June was able to ignore with the oblivion of a deaf person; it was as though there was a volume dial in her mind and she could simply turn the world down to silence, and maybe, Gloria feared, she could turn her own thoughts up full blast, drown out whatever she wanted to disregard with a din all her own. Without the morning or afternoon meal, she had an impressive appetite at dinnertime, when she would devour at least twice what Scott was able to eat in half the time before returning to her room, sometimes whispering a slight, "Thanks, Mom," but often saying nothing at all.

"Yeah, well, she's a little off," Scott said many times over the course of June's childhood, shrugging when Gloria would worry over her. "But there's nothing wrong with being different. You were different, too."

Nothing like this, Gloria would think. Anyway, it was never clear to her if Scott found her different because of June, or for some other reason. She and Scott grew up on the same block and had been childhood playmates, but they were running in different circles by the time Gloria had become pregnant junior year of high school, and so Scott had only been a removed witness to her life as a young, unmarried mother until they'd actually started dating—after he'd finished college and moved back home. By then June was nearly five and they were still living with Gloria's parents on Old Phantom Road.

But for all her strangeness and reclusive tendencies, June seemed ok. She was healthy at every routine physical and besides her good grades, she always behaved in school and didn't suffer being teased or bullied by the other children. Teachers liked her and Gloria

could only recall one parent-teacher conference where June's social life had come up, and even then, it just seemed like an observation and not really a problem that had to be fixed. Gloria's parents adored June, and she was friendly and sweet with them, though no less reserved than usual. It was apparent how much they preferred June to Gloria's brother, Andrew's two children, who were loud and hyper and demanded attention, acted in accordance to their age and generation. So she worried sometimes, and hoped that June would come out of her shell, and waited for it, but by the time June and Scott came home with the record collection, which was just one more cardboard box in a pile of weird junk that June spent her time accumulating, Gloria had given up worrying and waiting. For the most part. And the sound of exasperated British accents and stage music seeped through the walls for the next few months as June made her way through each of the plays, but even when Gloria could clearly discern what was being said, she couldn't understand it and, walking past her daughter's bedroom or hearing the records coming through the laundry room vent, she finally grasped her daughter's skill for tuning out useless language and annoying noise. After a while, she'd know with a vague, absent part of herself that the records were playing, the actors were talking—she could still hear it, but she couldn't listen or really even notice. Like cars passing in the road or birds singing in the morning, the sound was just there, it meant that Gloria was there, with June somewhere close by; they were mixed up in each others' worlds but not close or loud or important enough to distract each other.

Southern Oaks

Liv Stratman

We were sitting at the kitchen table of my childhood home on Austin Avenue. It was late April or maybe the very beginning of May, several hours before I climbed through the bathroom window and stood on the roof to get a better look at the house burning down across the street. Dad was in the den half-watching *Murphy Brown*, falling in and out of a thin sleep while the television's blue and white light trembled across his face. Jake was whispering, I guess to keep Dad from hearing us discuss his game plan. That's what he kept calling it: a game plan. Like we could win or lose, depending on our strategy. At this point we'd already known for several months that my father's memory was going, that his mind had started to wander away into some dark confusion.

There's a billboard looming over the new condos on Sunrise Highway where the bowling alley and Service Merchandise used to be. It says, "If You Lived Here, You Could Be Home By Now!" and there's a picture of a sharp looking blond couple walking hand-in-hand, wearing tennis outfits. It's Friday afternoon so I'm sitting in traffic. If this were Monday, I'd be at the nursing home already, but it's a Friday in summertime and every other car on this road is probably headed for the Hamptons. Jake's living out in Westchester County, with his wife, Ellen, and their two children now. He was coming with me to see Dad every Sunday up until about a year ago, but his own life—his family and job and the boat they bought last summer—swallowed him, and so now I go to Southern Oaks by myself on Monday and Fridays after work. I never miss a visit even though I know that Dad can't gauge the time

in between them, and sometimes lately, fails to really notice that I'm there at all. It's getting harder to believe that he's so far gone, because it's getting harder to think of his body as really his; I feel sometimes that he's some new person, and try to see him as a phoenix finally free from any pain or stress that came before or that might occur, in a life that he was conscious of having. But the nursing home feels and smells like a concrete cage. A wilted old woman with very white, stiff hair is always walking, in the opposite direction, down the hallway as I get close to Dad's room. Sometimes she stops and leans towards me, staring with a strange, intent expression; I think that her eyes move much faster than her thoughts, she blinks her milky eyes and follows my movements, but keeps on babbling to no one in the empty corridor, as if in an attempt to talk through some of her slipper thoughts.

"The library," she says. "I left my glasses at the library on the red book. They were a nice pair of ladies frames— plastic rims. I need 'em to read the paper. There's twenty dollars on the ledge with the laundry money. I bake a little something for the postman at Christmastime." I don't look at her anymore. Once, I said I was sorry about her glasses, but then she said, "What did you do with them?" and sounded very angry. In Dad's room the TV is always on. Usually I leave after less than thirty minutes.

Jake kept apologizing. "I'm sorry, Norma," he said and said until finally I felt like it probably was all his fault. "This has to be hard for you," he said. And, "I can't imagine what this is like for you." He was mostly looking over my shoulder, scanning the pictures on the fridge or peering out the window. He offered to have me come live with him and I accepted, not

gratefully, but because there was nowhere else. I kept thinking that if he'd stop looking off into the distance, we could be done with the conversation and I could be in the den with Dad. If I'd been older or maybe just kinder, perhaps the tragedy of Jake's situation would've occurred to me. His plans hadn't included guardianship of a half-sister twenty years his junior, just as my own agenda during that time hadn't counted on moving out of my house and scraping for an adult personality amidst the turbulence of my father's strange illness. It was evident already, and had been for years, that my father was an old man— at least twenty-five but usually about thirty years older than any of my friend's fathers, and that'd he's always been old. He was old when I was born. Of course, if I had been a little older, then Jake and I would have suffered a similar misfortune. By the time he was done apologizing and avoiding my gaze, Dad was fast asleep and the evening news was forecasting a few gorgeous spring days ahead. I took the cordless phone into the bathroom and called my mom in California, but of course no one picked up at her house. Taking the clippers out of the medicine cabinet, I yanked off my shoes and socks and cut my toenails.

I start all our visits with the same phrase, even when it's a lie.

"It's a beautiful day out there," I say. "We should go out and sit on the patio." Today it's true that the sky is bright and wide, but all I can think is of how the sunlight bleeds through the un-curtained part of the window, making the room stuffy and exposing all the dust in the air. Dad never wants to go outside, but today he smiles and his hollow eyes beam. He's pretending to read *The New Yorker* that I brought on Monday; I pull a copy of *Goodnight Moon* from my tote.

"Norma," he says, raising his arms with his palms up and fingers spread as if announcing me to a group on a guided tour. Norma is my name but I was named for my father's eldest sister, and that's who he's talking to. I never met her— she died in 1976 and so it was hard for me to know or accept when he first started forgetting me, starting asking questions about a past I couldn't answer for and offering a view of himself as a stranger: "That trip we took to San Francisco— the driving rain while we were walking across the Golden Gate Bridge? Remember, Norma?" No. Do you?

I could smell the Witkowski's house before I realized that it was on fire. Orange light moved in a frantic dance behind the patterned glass pane, but I took it for some human phenomenon: new security lights or a silent car alarm. People had already started to gather at the sidewalk and on some porches by the time I shimmied through the window and onto the tar roof above the den. Fire trucks shrieked onto the street just after I'd climbed back into the bathroom and unlocked the door to Jake's loud banging. We scooted back on the roof by climbing on the toilet under the window, where, other times throughout my childhood, I'd seen fireworks and hot-air balloons and once, a rainbow.

Jake said, "Jesus, Norma. All those people." I had no idea what he meant. Mr. and Mrs. Witkowski were standing outside on a lawn several houses down from the fire, which turned out to be electrical, waving their hands in desperate gestures as they talked to a medic and three cops. The fire seemed not to be eating the house but sucking at it—vampire flames that withered the walls and sneered at the gigantic ropes of water shooting out from the fire hoses.

My eyes burned the next day and my

throat was sore, my voice brittle. Dad slept through the entire thing and I didn't blame him. Sleep, I realized, was his last safe place, the one refuge for his mind as it migrated out from the shroud of reasonable secrecy and disciplined reactions. The fireman fought the blaze for five hours; Jake sat on the roof with me the whole time.

Dad's mesmerized by the television after ten minutes of circular, history-less conversation. I leave him five boxes of Junior Mints, *Goodnight Moon* and a *TV Guide*. In recent months he's resisted being kissed so I tap his shoulder with my thumb—a gesture he enjoys for some reason.

"Bye, Dad, have a good weekend, ok? I'll see you Monday." His eyes don't acknowledge me but he wraps his cold fingers around my thumb and squeezes. In the hallway the white haired lady is examining her walker. No, she's looking at her hands.

"Hello," she says as I start to move past. I smile with half of my mouth, but for once I don't speed-walk or stare straight ahead. "Who are you?" Her lips stay drooped open—the inside of her mouth is black and looks bottomless.

"I'm Norma," I tell her. "I'm the last Norma; everyone else is called Tiffany or Amber now." Her mouth stays open as she moves an inch forward, nodding and mumbling.

"Norma. Last Norma. Show me to the counter, I want to see if the postman's come yet." It takes us twenty minutes to get to the end of the hallway. I spend the whole time thinking of turning back to go watch more TV with Dad, let him hold onto my thumb and mutter about family vacations and school functions from his boyhood, about the look on my face at the Montauk Lighthouse once, when we were

still young, when dry lightning struck a tree less than 100 feet from our picnic. But it's been such a long week; I'm tired and feel like I can't possibly play along. In the lobby the white-haired lady asks me if were going for a car ride. I almost say yes.

Election Night

Leslie Wilson

hey leslie,
this is ryan from adam's party the other night.
listen i feel totally horrible about be being
rough and shoving mike and ike's in your ear
the second time. i totally meant no harm and
i'm super sorry. after you had me on the ground
and won i was just going to wait till you didn't
expect it , so i waited a minute and then did it
again. i totally crossed the line the second time
and i'm so sorry. i felt like shit about it driving
home and all today. everyone there who knows
me knows that i'm just djoking and being a kid,
but i don't know you at all and certainly not
well enough to have done that. i wish i could
say sorry like three thousand times.

The Request

Travis Wissman

When told I could live forever, I turned down
the request.

Without a conclusion what is an epic's use?

Why would one want to bear through the in-
creasingly complicated future,

Finding themselves lost in what they thought
they knew?

I believe I would regret living forever,

Although at first it seems appealing.

Much like a crimson apple with an invisible
parasite.

Just ponder the danger shade wisely before
devouring your demise.

You are Russian

Rebecca Young

the potted plant on my table is dying.

i don't know what i did wrong --

i keep the shades open for indirect sunlight as
prescribed

i keep it watered, keep the soil moist

sometimes i even sing to it -

i heard that sometimes it helps

but it's dying anyway

i feel like a part of those leaves

skin fading, turning wan --

petals falling off

and you would just sit there and wonder what
was happening

maybe the flower was sick when i bought it.

maybe you think the same about me.

Season of the Shark

Rebecca Young

i would like to receive bills at home.

to check the outlets, the stove

to romp around in the same white dress for
days.

Roll Over

Adam Vorobok

Nadia avoided touching someone if she could.

When it did happen, usually on the crowded light rail or getting on the bus,
she would instinctively touch her hands to her

chin
shoulders
thighs

expecting them to unravel into soft bundles of meat and bone.

Demonic her hands were fascinating.

How much of the world she conquers
in her fists; how much she perceives
losing from their sensitivity.

Fingers never letting go
tight throughout the screeching slide
and the hard bounce into the air.
Bendable afterwards wrapped up in white gauze.

She hated her thumb, half-gone.

She will be okay. New glasses have been prescribed.
Public squares are bearable if she could sit amid the flowers.
She has stopped eating meat.

But a phantom remains
a fingernail that will never grow back.

You finished! Great job! We're proud of you! Burns a little, doesn't it? Now it's time for a cool down or maybe some Gatorade and a cigarette. Maybe spend some time reflecting in Child's Pose? And while you reflect, think about submitting to *Milk Money, Volume Five: The Collected Works of Alan Smithee*. Submissions are due on April 17, 2009.



www.geocities.com/sacredplague

FERALMADE

feralmade.com

shake it

www.shakeitrecords.com