



Issue 6

Cartographer
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EXIT - THE



J.D. Schraffenburger

two poems

IT WAS SO HOT

How hot? So hot we collected the sweat from our brows in tarps staked as hammocks in the front yard and drank it later like tonic with limes. So hot we made beds for ourselves in the freezers and dairy coolers at the local Giant, clinging desperate to gallons of milk, blocks of sherbet, laid naked out upon the concrete floors, slurping the melted ice from rusted grates. So hot that for days, weeks, months, we touched no one, kept our distance because even a glance from another pink-faced person panicked us, made us wretched, nauseous creatures. So hot that even the night burned, even the moon. So hot that when they came at all, words sputtered from our dried-up mouths in slow anapestic beats, or else sputtered out as dotless ellipses. So hot and so dry that all the poems ever written turned to ash, and ash to dust, and dust to wind, whipping them all toward the desert, where they settled finally in the very last cup of tea on earth, turned to mud, and the mud turned to clay, and clay to crust, to paper, to us and our drizzly trembling selves.

ONCE AND FUTURE ME

Look that's me, Watch me, young me, Watch me roil and spit and fall away into nothing, little me on the bench squirting ketchup on his finger like toothpaste on a brush, the bored and drooling me, the smoking comfy one in all the yawn of hell, Listen can you spare a dollar, can you Hear it in your chest pounding, like this, and this, leave it, leave it, it doesn't matter, put your wallet away, yeah I used to draw, I used to paint stick figures on the walls of bathroom stalls and contemplate their genitalia, yes the somewhat seedy me, this funny snake before you, flirty childish me in a pair of too-big shoes, but I've been swimming in rivers at 22-below, I've run this length of railroad and swallowed fists full of pills, Watch how I can make great lists of things to say about sausage and plastic and gravel driveways in the country, Watch how easily conversation slides from this eeeeasy smile, Watch me as I walk away, Farewell Me, Old Me, The Cold and Gray One, gone half-tired down familiar streets, Bearded Me, See it doesn't matter, no your, quote, *dollar* stopped mattering five minutes ago, everything else matters, everything but your fucking dollar and leather wallet matters to no end, save your money, save yourself, I have nothing else for you, leave my dog alone.

Molly Gaudry

two fictions

BALTIMORE SONG

Somewhere in Baltimore a boy awaits her arrival. She has never been to Baltimore. She thinks Balto. Is that a dog? A famous dog? Ani DiFranco bitches up a storm on the radio. It is only a four-hour drive. Four hours and a tunnel and several tolls. Around midnight, she crashes into a pole that bends her car in halves. Somewhere in Baltimore a cell phone rings. The boy answers. He says, Yes. He says, I'll come now. She wakes in his apartment. As eyes adjust, she squints, sees. Beside her on the bed a boy with a familiar face, a familiar tattoo on his right wrist, playing a familiar guitar, his familiar fingers sliding strings. Familiar, perfect sound. She says, I made it. Somewhere in Baltimore, a poetry reading. The host explains the girl's absence. Nobody knows where she is. Last anyone heard, she was on her way. Pray she's all right. The boy ignores her, begins a song so sad she turns away. She rolls and pulls tight the comforter. It is so cold her feet can't feel. Her breath creates a fog beneath the sheet. The sun shines through. In fog and sun, breath heavy haze, the boy's tattoo quivers with every strum. She weeps. Her cheeks burn like a freezer chicken. Somewhere in Baltimore children play in a sculpture garden. In the morning, the boy brings her a coffee and a juice. The coffee steams. The juice's pulp strains between her teeth. She tastes sour, then sweet. She asks for sugar. After the coffee, the juice tarts. They do

not eat. Somewhere in Baltimore, there are cupcakes large as cantaloupes with frosting pink and brown like in a Martha Stewart magazine. The boy works. At his computer he prints, reads, reprints, rereads. Hours pass. She lets him, lets them. She returns to sleep, hears seagulls cry, wonders, How far is the water? Somewhere in Baltimore the Thinker thinks. Later, she steps into the shower and rinses the accident undone. The spray stings so hot his mirror bleeds. Her body aches. The water's stream a chorus, his liquid soap like lyrics. Her hair sticks to her back. She wants to cut it off. She will. This is what new cities are for. Making over. Making out. Out of the shower and into the night. Somewhere in Baltimore her car is waiting. For now, forget about that car. She has. He has. Stranded, she will have to stay. He will let her. Somewhere in Baltimore, a drunk attempts Here Comes the Sun in a Karaoke bar. They stand in front of the window, reflected back at themselves. She drips onto his floor. His jeans soak her up.

LETTUCE LOVE

THIS IS MY BODY FEELING EMPTY LIKE MY HEART FEELS EMPTY, AND IF IT WERE LIKE THIS ALL THE TIME I'D BE FINE BUT MY HEAD ISN'T EMPTY, IT'S FILLED WITH SUCH MISERABLE THOUGHTS OF HAPPINESS, WHAT SHE MIGHT HAVE BEEN. What Miriam doesn't say to James as he sits beside her on the hospital bed, what she hasn't even said to her psychiatrist, is that the *she* she speaks of isn't the baby. *She* is Miriam's dead mother. Her name was Lee Gargery. She was having an affair. Jefferson Gargery came home from work one Valentine's Day to surprise Lee. He walked through the front door, heard a thumping in the bedroom, heard Lee's cries; he removed his gun from beneath the living room couch; he crept nearer the closed bedroom door.

Squeaky hinges. Lee and her lover looked up. Jefferson Gargery's gun was all they saw. Jefferson Gargery did not see Miriam looking in at him from beyond the bedroom window where, outside, it was beginning to rain. Miriam could not see her mother. She could not see Aunt Eliza. Miriam was outside because she had been ordered to play make-believe beneath the apple tree in the fenced-in backyard. She was too young for school. She was too young to know about guns. Jefferson Gargery raised the gun, opened his mouth. Miriam forgot what she saw, she played make-believe beneath the apple tree in the fenced-in backyard until the neighbors found her, soaking wet, unable to recall her own name.

She played make-believe for the rest of her life—for her new parents, a kind, childless Christian Korean Survivor couple that had prayed to Jesus that Miriam would come to bless their home with happiness; she played make-believe for her new Survivor friends who were not at all like the

daughters and sons of her blue-collar parents' blue collar friends in the southeast quadrant; she played make-believe for her teachers, who for years told the Huhs that Miriam's antisocial behavior was getting in the way of her progress, that she was not living up to her potential; and, many years later, at Green City Community College, she legitimized playing make-believe by becoming an actress, and a damn good one according to her professors; and she would have gone on, moved to New York or London or Toronto except that one day she discovered she was pregnant.

She played make-believe when she said, I, MIRIAM HUH, TAKE YOU, JAMES TANAKA, TO BE MY LAWFULLY WEDDED HUSBAND. She played make-believe after Alex's funeral, when she and James and Paige came home, as she put Alex's ultrasound picture on the wall beside the Huh family's ancestral tablet, when, on the second day she alone returned to the gravesite and performed the *cholgokche* and put away all death paraphernalia so as to complete the mourning ritual, and when, on the third day, she visited the grave, made the traditional low bow, and placed food and drinks in front of the tombstone.

All this playing make-believe Miriam now calls Going Through the Motions, as it wasn't until one Monday in January, when Felicity's head emerged looking like apple skin withering wrinkled under the hot summer sun, glistening with rain, that suddenly all make-believe became So This Is Now My Life.

GO AWAY, JAMES.

Sophia, dreaded red hair and different colored eyes (one green, the other green with flecks of brown), was born in Nicaragua. Miriam sits up in her hospital bed when Paige and Sophia walk in holding hands, she leans back on her elbows, says HELLO and waits for an explanation.

—This is Sophia.

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL, SOPHIA.

—Thank you.

ARE YOU NATIVE TO GREEN CITY?

—My mother is, but my father was Nicaraguan. They met while my mother was with *Medicins Sans Frontieres*. I was born in Managua.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE THERE?

—I wouldn't remember. I came to Green City still on the breast.

Miriam buckles with sadness but says, HOW LOVELY.

—Mom, Paige says.

And this brings Miriam to her senses. YES?

—Sophia and I are lovers.

I KNOW.

—We want to tell Dad. What do you think he'll say?

HE'LL BE HAPPY FOR YOU, I THINK.

—My mother said we'll burn in hell, we sinners.

THERE IS NO SUCH PLACE AS HELL, SOPHIA.

—I like that, how you say my name. We thought you might have concerns, about our age difference.

PAIGE'S FATHER HAS THIRTEEN YEARS ON ME.

—Is that so?

HOW OLD ARE YOU, SOPHIA?

—Thirty-five.

HOW OLD ARE YOU, SOPHIA?

—Thirty-five.

Miriam looks at Paige.

Paige shrugs like a twenty-two-year-old teenager.

—When are you getting out of here? When are you going home?

SOON.

—Good. That'll make Dad happy. He's a wreck.

WHEN DID YOU GO HOME?

—We stopped by earlier, to tell, but then he told us you were here, and so now we're here, telling you, and I think it's time we took you home. Ready?

NOW?

—When else?

Sophia drives. Paige's left hand rests on Sophia's right leg. Miriam sits in the middle of the wide backseat, stares at Paige's hand the entire way.

The girls don't speak. They are on their way to church. They bask in their eager-for-holiness. Miriam hasn't been to church since Alex.

Now there is James to face, but is she ready? She has no idea.

—Here we are, Sophia says.

—Do you want us to come in with you?

I'LL MANAGE ON MY OWN. THANKS FOR THE RIDE.

—Mom?

PAIGE?

—Think we can take you and Dad out for dinner tomorrow night?

—We like this place called Rosalia. It's an experience. We've already made the reservations, but we can cancel. It's no problem, really.

WE'LL BE THERE. WHAT TIME?

—Seven.

Miriam closes the car door and counts her steps, one, two, three, and this sudden thinking in threes is worrying, for there is nothing more awful than knowing your limits, your two-ness, than wanting a baby, wanting to make a third, wanting to become trifoliate shamrock, triceratops' horns, Orion's belt, heads of Cerberus, good and right and true, as if variation heredity struggle for existence could combine and lead to we James we Miriam we unborn baby Tanaka.

Now *that* is hitting the spittoon squarely in the belly-hole!

James is drunk, has resurrected this old phrase of his that makes no damn sense except to him. Miriam would rather be in bed, at home, but she is out with James and Paige and Sophia, though James doesn't know yet that Paige and Sophia are lovers, and so they are all four at Rosalia, a swanky new outdoor restaurant in the southeast quadrant, where upon entry the hostess placed a garland of cabbage roses around each of their necks, where rosewater bubbles from cherubic ice sculptures' penises, where doves drenched in rosewater soar overhead and with every flap of wing spread the scent of love, where between courses pipes beneath dishes spritz their breastbones

with rosewater, and where, now, nets holding rose petals are let down and there are petals cascading down the walls like waterfalls.

It's a bit much, all these roses and rosy scents, at least for Miriam. The others seem delighted, though; either this or they're distracted by the fact that Paige and Sophia have invited the parents to Rosalia in order to make a special announcement but have yet to do so.

It is 8:56, they are three courses in (potato cream cheese soup, cedar plank salmon, roast duckling) and still the girls haven't said anything to James. Instead, Sophia seems to be flirting with James. But maybe Miriam's imagining it because she is more than sensitive to the fact that Sophia is closer to James's age than Miriam. Paige doesn't seem to notice. She looks happy, and Miriam thinks this is important, that Paige has never really looked happy before, and that her stepdaughter deserves to wear this look because her boyfriends have always made her unhappy.

—In the nineteenth century, they used to call this making love, Sophia says.

Did they now? James asks.

—Indeed, Sophia says.

Indeed, James says. Now that's a word you don't hear used a lot these days.

—Not in word but in deed, Sophia says.

James holds up a piece of his spring mix and says, Lettuce love.

—I'll radish you, Sophia says, a sidelong at Paige.

Now *that* is hitting the spittoon squarely in the belly-hole! James says, for the second time in as many minutes.

8:58

Sophia's laughter is like being struck by a lightning bolt right through the chest. It sizzles the skin as it passes; it pierces scorches destroys the heart.

—What a thing to say, Mr. Tanaka!

James! Call me James!

—What a thing to say, James!

That's better, isn't it?

8:59

IT'S LATE, Miriam says. I THINK IT'S TIME WE WENT HOME, JAMES.

IT'S LATE, Miriam says. I THINK IT'S TIME WE WENT HOME, JAMES.

The night is young, James says. Right Sophia?

IT'S LATE, Miriam says. I THINK IT'S TIME WE WENT HOME, JAMES.

The night is young, James says. Right Sophia?

—It is so young, Sophia says, it is but a fetus!

—It is so young, Sophia says, it is but a fetus!

9:00

Silence is Miriam's only solace. James's face goes white, and for a yellow man the effect is somewhat comical.

9:02

Paige's eyes are closed. When she opens them they seem to be sending messages of love Miriam's way.

9:05

It is up to Miriam to fix this moment, to pick up the pieces Sophia's mouth has irretrievably spewed, and so she gives it her best shot. She raises her glass. SOPHIA, PAIGE, ISN'T THERE SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO TELL US?

Here is the true story of how we met, the story James and Miriam are waiting for, our news to tell: Our first trip, spring break 2007, the RMS Saint Helena leaves Cape Town, berths in James Bay, and Napoleonic Paige disembarks, bends down, plucks a flirtatious purple flower that smells doesn't smell smells, turns on off on, thrills repels swamps assaults, and hands it to Sophia Josephine who sighs. We fell in love, the end.

—We are in love.

Dear God.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS GOD, JAMES.

—Of course there is a God.

PLEASE, PAIGE, SPARE ME, WILL YOU?

We are going home. Right *now*, Miriam.

—James.

Don't James me. It's Mr. Tanaka to you, dyke.

JAMES.

Shut up, Miriam.

—Actually, the bull dyke would be me. Sophia's the femme.

Miriam drains her glass. **NOW *THAT'S* HITTING THE SPITTOON SQUARELY IN THE BELLY-HOLE!**

Home, Miriam. Not later. *Now.*

There they go, rose petals scattering underfoot. It's all right. We expected as much, and so we chose Rosalia because at 9:00 Rosalia the restaurant becomes Aureole the dance club, and at 10:00 the Karaoke starts. At least we will be entertained. We will enjoy our evening out.

Flagrant, Miriam's undressing after dressy evenings out, the way she removes her dead mother's pearls from neck, her unattached lobes; the way she from the bottom up unbuttons cashmere cardigans, right thumb fingering buttonholes; slips camisole straps from shoulders, lets fall to unabashed hips; then unzips skirt and pulls over breasts around uplifted arms and blatant arched back raised chin head; savors the camisole's brash slither against silk stockings, static barely audible beneath James's slit-eyed bedtime gaze.

An hour, three bottles of chardonnay and a Rosalia-turned-Aureole later, these are our thoughts, the words we're slipping slurring sliding into each other's ears on the dance floor.

—Coupled we are.

—We absolutely are.

—We breaths.

—We twenty-three-forty thousand times a day.

—We in, we out.

—We frantic gulping Paige.

—We Sophia fucking sigh.

Sophia we call Josephine and adorn with violets. Heart's-Ease Western Dog Sand Hidden Hairy Banded Yellow Prairie Pinto Rock Early Blue Goosefoot Banded Striped Sheathed Wrinkled Threepart Russian Redwood Olympic Pioneer Gauadalupe Spreading Glade Dwarf Marsh Violets...violets...violets.

—Your mother.

—Mom?

Are you ready for this, ladies?

—Miriam!

We're in for a rare treat, bitches.

—Mom!

—On the dance floor, Miriam, over here!

—Mom!

We have a winner! Cue music...

Miriam undresses, watched by all in Aureole as she imagines carrying herself to bed in James's big house all alone, thinking, as James is thinking, but not about Paige bull-dyking Sophia, for Miriam's thoughts are on the dead the way they often are when she's onstage.

YOUAREDEAD SIMONE TANAKA JAMES'S FIRSTWIFE MOTHEROFPAIGE I HAVE NOTHINGTOSAYTOYOU DEADWOMAN YOUAREDEAD

—What the hell is she doing?

YOUAREDEAD JEFFERSONGARGERY DEADLIKE DRY GUTTERED LEAVES ANDMY MEMORIESOFYOU YOUARENOT MYFATHER YOUAREDEAD

—Jesus God, tell them to turn off the fucking music!

—Paige!

YOUAREDEAD LEEGARGERY BECAUSEOFHIM BECAUSE HE SHOT YOU
THENHIMSELF ICAN NEVERFORGIVEYOU MOMMY BECAUSE
YOUAREDEADNOW

—Mom! What are you doing here? Where's Dad?

YOUAREDEAD ALEX BUTYOUWERENEVERALIVE HOWSAD
THISMADEYOURFATHER HOWHEGRIEVED HOWHEFORGETS

—Will somebody fucking help me? Get her other arm, Soph! Look at me, Mom! Open your eyes, open your eyes, open your Mom! Good, look at me, keep looking at me. Nod if you can hear me.

ANDNOW FELICITY MYUNBORNDAUGHTER YOUAREDEADTOO

—Jesus fucking. Will somebody turn off the goddamn music?

ANDTHIS

—Mom! Look at me!

—Paige?

IS UNFORGETTABLE

Molly Gaudry is the author of *We Take Me Apart* (Mud Luscious Press, 2009). Find her online at



<http://mollygaudry.blogspot.com>

Alex Toft

fiction

FLOWERS

Ollie gnawed through nine pencils that day, stopping only because he could find no more rolling around in his cluttered cab. The splinters he swallowed amounted to almost a complete pencil floating around the slowly dissolving ham sandwich that was his lunch. Ollie hadn't spoken much that day, unusual for him. He would often venture some small talk to his passengers, only to be silenced by the quiet whirring of the window separating the backseat and cab. However today, he was too busy reducing pencils to tiny yellow mulch while driving businessmen to lunch and wives to grocery stores. He clocked out at three, tired, anxious, clutching his cap in his fat fist. The bill was stained and sticky with perspiration. His air conditioner was busted.

Ollie marched silently down the street towards his apartment. He didn't own a car. There was a small flower stand on one of the corners on his way to his three-room apartment below the street. Ollie passed by it every day. As he trudged along he would steal a glance at all of the beautiful flowers arranged into bouquets. He envied those flowers. Lately he had paused longer

and longer, desperately wanting to buy some. It would be so easy, he would think, so easy, but he wouldn't stop. He would just walk the remaining blocks to his apartment staring down at the sidewalk, counting the cigarette butts crushed into the drab concrete.

Today, however, he looked for a long time at the flowers. Beautiful roses, tulips and daisies, exquisite, unblinking eyes. Ollie could smell them. He could feel their velvet petals between his thick fingers with their chipped dirty nails. What if he bought them? Would she like them?

She probably wouldn't even take them. She might smile, try to be polite as she found some excuse not to take them. She might ignore them, him, entirely, and flit back behind the counter to tell the other waitresses. There they would stand in a circle, their backs to him snickering at the paunchy cab driver with the flowers as he sank into a puddle of embarrassment and shame and hid his face behind his pudgy hands.

But what if she did accept them? Would she smile and thank him, and then walk off, forgetting him as she took the orders of the man at the table next to him? Maybe they would get tossed into the dumpster on her way out the door, or dropped casually to the pavement with one hand like a gum wrapper as she counted her tips from the night.

She might take them home. It really wasn't too much to hope for. They might end up in the glass vase on the little square Formica table in her kitchen in the apartment that Ollie imagined she lived in. She might look at them the next morning with her coffee and think of the nervous, round little man who was there every Tuesday and always left her a nice tip. Then she might wonder about him. She might wonder if maybe they could get a cup of coffee together some afternoon after his shift got finished, or catch a movie some night, or something. Maybe she'd notice him. Maybe he could bring her into his little life.

Maybe if Ollie had someone with him, maybe if he had something beautiful of his very own, maybe he wouldn't feel so bad anymore. Maybe having something beautiful would make him beautiful, too.

If he had something beautiful, maybe things wouldn't be so bad. Maybe he wouldn't need to chew pencils. Maybe he wouldn't mind driving in a cab with people who didn't want to talk to him, or stare down at the sidewalk, counting crushed cigarette butts—

“Hey, Buddy,” said a voice, rousing him from his daydreams. The florist looked at him from over his reading glasses, one eyebrow raised quizzically. Ollie had no idea how long he had stood there. Time had parted around him.

“Hey, buddy,” repeated the florist, “do you want something?”

Alex Toft is a student at the University of Northern Iowa, where he spends most of his time working towards a generally useless degree. When not at school, he works for the South Dakota State Parks system. His interests include reading, writing fiction, cycling, and bear wrestling [citation needed]. This is his first publication.



J. A. Tyler

fiction

(how we stood on this precipice)

Around a bend he has never gone around before is a well, a hole, a deep cavity that is neither filled nor open, full of black abysmal space. He punches a word down in it, letting out a piece of his history, watching an image of himself and his mother and father tumble down the darkness. It is his father watching tv. It is his mother baking. It is the nuclear family. His dog, the parakeet in a cage in a corner in a sounding wall where it chirps and tweets tiny rays of unused sunshine. His eyes dilate. They dilate randomly now and he can feel it when it happens because the sun here is so close and the world is spinning out of its axis, bubbling on wobbly newborn legs. The world as an infant, unshaved and sick with rubble disease. Down a hole the words of his father. Down a hole the eyes of his mother. Their smiles, the arms of them caressing across his shoulders, fingernails on his back, loving. Down a hole, down into the center. This is a well that doesn't contain water. A space thick with decay, the puncture wounds of this ground. His mumbles bounce off the rim, diving into night, his history gone down a hole. Behind his closed eyes there is this same darkness, the like retching stumble of his universe, the absolute of falling. His mother and father do not call back from the bottom. His mother and father are not. They sleep without

sleep here, when he shuts his eyes and the space devours him, a dream of having everything back, the reality of this emptiness, the momentum of everything that has disappeared. This boy, losing his words down in it. Undefined. Lost.

J. A. Tyler is the author of *INCONCEIVABLE WILSON* (scrambler books, 2009), *IN LOVE WITH A GHOST* (willows wept press, 2010), *A MAN OF GLASS & ALL THE WAYS WE HAVE FAILED* (fugue state press, 2011), and *THE ZOO, A GOING* (dzanc books, 2013). His work has appeared recently with *Diagram*, *Sleepingfish*, *Caketrain*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *elimae*, and *Action, Yes* among others. He is also founding editor of *mud luscious / ml press*. To read more, visit: www.mudlusciouspress.com.



Illustration by Matthew Savoca

Joe Weil

four fictions

GOAT DANCE

I was given a goat by Pablo Neruda—a wooden goat with an emerald in its left eye and a ruby in its right. The jewels were real and so, when the art society arrived, they plucked the eyes from the goat and used the proceeds to benefit drum circles in the Middle West. If they had only known how long middle westerners had been waiting to beat on sheepskins! There were Norwegian Methodists playing Max Roach solos in the rose arbors. There were German Mennonites wailing naked and unashamed on enormous congas. This all goes to prove that good can come from evil, or maybe... white people might develop rhythm if only they are given the proper instruments.

But is a drum a proper instrument?

And if there is no melody, but only the sound of things yielding and only partially yielding to things, is that music?

When I partially yield to you, and you to me, Oh my beloved, and we have the illusion of being semi-permeable substances, does that mean a tree has fallen in the forest of our lives, and

the sky is begging us to make a drum from it so that some small part of that tree can still rise up and kiss the sky?

And what do you hear when you put your hand to my cheek? You wrote the entire book of the dead on your hand, then rested it on my thigh, and, that night, I dreamed I was an Ibis.

The Ibis sat on a rock in the middle of a harbor. On this same rock the man who carved my goat sat, working his adzes, and miters, and saws, and various carving implements. He was old and nut brown, and his teeth were blackened from chewing narcotic leaves.

He was old and nut brown and his fingers were permanently shaped to the body of his chisel.

When Pablo Neruda arrived, the old nut-brown man knew he had met a poet and handed Pablo a wooden goat (this is not as uncommon an event as one might suppose). Neruda took it in stride. He knew how to be in the middle of the story. He sat, and sang his odes to turtles, and socks, and various rock formations. The Ibis, being greatly moved and fluent in Spanish, shed two tears for Neruda's poems. One became an emerald and the other a ruby. Neruda placed them in the eyes of the goat and there they remained until the art society came to steal them.

So what can I say? It is early morning in the heartland of North America.

Above the vast wheat fields of North Dakota, and the cornfields of Nebraska, comes a sound of mighty drumming. The women have left their campers and gone into the mountains to dance. Something is up. I can hear their voices rising, even above the drums. Let us pray.

PRAYER

So this little kid was crying rivers and public monuments, his shoulder blades heaving, wracked with sobs because he'd lost his baseball, the one autographed by Johnny Bench.

And I had just lost my mother and couldn't cry, and I hated the little prick, the way you hate lovers when you don't have one, or money when it manages to forget your name.

I told God: I know You're a heartless fuck. You gave my mom mouth cancer because, as the dumbass priest says, it was Your will. I know You are a hardass, but You know I would fight You, anyway. I would put my hands up and take what You got, even if it killed my sorry ass. I don't want nothing from You except I want to cry. I'm not asking You for love or mercy or to save me, just some tears. My mother was better than You. She would have never given You mouth cancer.

And the Lord didn't answer, as usual, and that little kid kept crying until I said: "Shut up, shit face, and I'll find your fucking ball. And I searched in the high grass beside the railroad tracks, found the kid a rail spike, and a condom, and a rain sodden Playboy magazine...he was not consoled, so I said: God, be good for something, and with that my toe practically rubbed the B off Bench. I reached down in the high wet grass and came up holding the ball, which the kid took from me right away, without saying thanks, and shoved into his mitt which was wedged under his bike seat. And he rode away.

It was magnificent. There was no gratitude, just a quick grab, and the even quicker getaway. Meanwhile, my funeral clothes were a mess, my pants covered in mud, itchy balls all over my suit jacket. I heard my father calling my name. I remembered my mom playing Rummy 500, how

happy she'd look when she'd go out, leaving an opponent stuck with points in his hand. I'd begged God to cure her. Fuck God and all his faggot angels.

And I said, fuck God, fuck God, and I didn't know I was down on my knees in the grass, bent over, kneeling in the mud, weeping, my shoulders heaving, crying rivers and public monuments, until my father came, and, putting his arms around me, said, "Let's go."

DEMOLITION

John DeMaestro, retired now, had been good at demolition and, sometimes, as of late, when he fell asleep watching the Mets and woke up with the channel selector on his slippers, he dreamed of imploding whole cities. His daughter, Connie Demaestro had once had a promising career as a card dealer down in Atlantic city, but she'd met her Irish husband, Peter Garrity, and Garrity had swept her off her feet and right into a trailer park outside Carteret, where they now lived, and that was the end of that. Perhaps she, too, had a knack for demolition. John Demaestro considered his little joke. Yes. She'd married the mick. She had a talent for fucking up her own life.

John laughed, alone, in the half dark of his finished basement, a time warp of a seventies den room, complete with bowling trophies, mini-bar, fake wood paneling, and an avocado phone on which he took "business" calls. There were pictures of him, standing with Mayors, and priests, and third degree knights (destroying things could put you in some high places), and, there was the

prize photo taken in the mid 1970's, of John Demaestro standing with Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood. Demaestro, one drunken and disconsolate night, not long after Natalie had drowned, had drawn a penis in bic pen dangling from Wagner's mouth. Robert Wagner, he learned, had been a half fairy, and he'd stepped out on Natalie with men. To John Demaestro, who'd been in love with Natalie Wood since he was a teen ager, this was a travesty beyond all travesties and proved that most things in life fully deserved to be blown up, and compacted . "Fuckin candy ass,' John Demaestro, had said, 'the best women always go to the half fairies... fuckin life don't make no sense."

John's wife, Connie 1 (Everyone called her Connie 1) used to dress up like Natalie Wood when they'd fuck on Saturday nights, but sometime after Connie 1's sixtieth birthday, and twenty years after Natalie had died, John took one look at his wife of forty years dressed in Natalie drag,, and burst into tears. It was hopeless, absolutely hopeless. He'd gotten a prescription for Viagra soon after that, and closed his eyes, and pretended Connie 1 was the Ecuadorian waitress at the Tick-Tock dinner who, for some reason, never failed to give him an erection when she called him Papi. Armed with the Ecuadorian fantasy, he'd fucked Connie like he hadn't in years, and she was happy, blissfully ignorant that her husband was laying it on the Ecuadorian waitress at the Tick Tock, at least when his eyes were closed. John Demaestro would never cheat on his wife for real because he was a good Catholic, but was this cheating? 'Yes," said the parish priest, his good pal, father Jim.

For some reason, this information angered John. The church had no real mercy. Time had no mercy. When John Demaestro tore down a building, and he had torn down many historic buildings, and houses where old ladies stood a few yards removed from the wrecking ball and wept , he had done so quickly, efficiently, with great dispatch because, sometimes, the only mercy

that existed, was the speed with which you destroyed something, but life and the Catholic church wanted to torture you for years, and years, and tell you to love your wife when she was almost as fat and as ugly as you, and you remembered her when all you wanted to do was rest your face on her ass cheeks because they were that perfect, and, though you are now no prize yourself, the sap still rises, and desire is fierce, and what does anyone really know about the heart? Who could judge him? He'd never once cheated on Connie, and, when he was in his thirties and forties, he had plenty of opportunity. Fuck the priests. He was determined to keep closing his eyes and fucking the Ecuadorian waitress, but, the next time, he and Connie 1 went to bed, and he gave the closed eyed waitress thing a shot, it didn't work. Connie said: 'What's the matter lover?' And he said: 'It's no good.' 'What's no good, babe?' 'My fuckin cock for one thing,' And then he'd escaped to the bathroom.

The priests had fucked him over. John Demaestro quit being an usher and he stopped going to communion breakfasts. Father Jim, who often ate at the Demaestros, and attended Mets games with him, phoned. John refused to answer. Connie was baffled. After the third time he'd told her to tell father Jim he wasn't home, Connie said: 'Here. You tell him. I don't want to lie to a goddamned priest.'

Jim was good at seeming concerned. he knew how to bullshit the balls off a brass monkey. He was one of those fund raiser kind of priests. He asked John what was wrong. John found himself saying: 'I'm lonely.' Father Jim said: 'Well, if you're lonely, why have you pushed everyone away?' 'Because you all just make me want to slit my fucking wrists.' It was the truth. People didn't like the truth as much as they said they did. It just came out of John Demaestro's mouth without his bidding. Father Jim said John was depressed. Father Jim had the name of a therapist, another priest. Then father Jim made the mistake of telling John Demaestro everyone goes through stuff

like this. 'Fuck you and your everyone!' John had shouted into his avocado phone. 'You tell us we're all unique, all individuals... that God don't ever repeat himself, then you use that everyone crap. Well which is it? You can't have it both ways. You don't let me have it both ways! With all due respect father, you talk out both sides of your ass, and I aint hearing nothing I can use!' John Demaestro slammed the phone back on the receiver so hard he cracked it, but black electrician's tape worked fine, and he sat in his finished basement for an hour, staring at the offending phone, refusing to talk to his wife. "You're full of pride, John. Who taught you to talk to a priest like that? I swear I don't know you no more."

"Well if you don't know me, stop nagging me!"

John Demaestro had not been to mass since. Connie said she wasn't sure she could remain married to such a miserable man. Connie 2 brought the grandkids by to see him, but John Demaestro felt little except annoyance. His grand kids looked indifferent and evil to him. They looked the way babies did after they became glutted on breast milk-- totally bored and satiated, and above it all. They made him sad. His oldest grandson, twenty year old "Johnny boy" was dating a girl with a pierced eye lid. 'Listen honey,' John Maestro said. "You're some rich kid from long island.. you ain't no tribal woman. Stop insulting tribal women. Cut the shit!" Connie 1 and Connie 2 joined forces and forced him to see a shrink. John complied, was given pills, pretended to take them, and spit them out in the potted plants. It was his sadness; he had a right to it.

Two more weeks then, and he'd turn 70. John had contemplated running away from home. He'd read up on that Tolstoy guy, and how he died at a train station, while on the run. That wasn't a bad way to go. Maestro had a good 80 thousand in his private bank account, the one he'd been hiding all these years in the garage. He could take off, and stay in motels, and drink, and drink

until either he or the money ran out.. It was a plan. He could rig his car to blow up, but Connie 1 wouldn't get the insurance money. He loved her even though she annoyed him, albeit in a different, more vital way than the rest. Everyone else had turned into shades, but she still existed. She hadn't begun to flicker out.

John sat in his recliner, his scotch in its accustomed rocks glass, the glass firmly entrenched in the chair's cup holder. It was dark as usual, and he was playing Sinatra's Angel Eyes. His favorite line in the song was "Excuse me while I disappear." When the song ended, he played it again for the tenth time. His wife had stopped complaining about his need to replay songs. Now he turned on the Mets game. They were losing. Their third baseman was for shit. The Mets had had only one good hot corner man in almost fifty years: Howard Johnson. John didn't really watch the games the way he used to. He kept them on as a sort of comforting noise, a ritual for sleep. His wife was at the five o'clock Saturday mass. There was nothing to stop him from running away right now, except who'd pick her after mass? There was a man on second and third and two out when John Maestro fell asleep. He dreamed of demolishing fifty story buildings and doing a fast, smooth job of it. He dreamed Natalie Wood knelt before him, holding a jar of precious perfume. She kissed his feet, and dried them with her hair. She poured the precious perfume upon them. Robert Wager was Judas. He complained the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. He took out a gun and was about to shoot Natalie in the head, but John Maestro raised his mighty hand and the gun melted, its barrel drooping like a wilted flower. John cupped Natalie's beautiful face in his hands: "We are not 70," he said. " kiss me." Just as she was about to comply, John was awakened by his wife shaking his shoulder. He'd over slept and her friend Sylphia gave her a ride home from church. She had attempted to call him again and again. She'd been worried he'd had a heart attack. HE looked up at her, still half asleep. He said: "Woman,

why do you weep?" She said: 'You're out of your fucking mind.' HE took her face in his hands as she leaned over him, and pulled her toward him onto the chair with all his strength. She protested, but he covered her face in kisses. He said: "I'm sorry." She said: 'Not as sorry as you ought to be.' He said: 'Shut you big stupid yap,' and then he kissed her eyes, and her nose, and cupped her fat ass in his hands and she loosened up a bit, and they sat like that for a long time, in the dark of the finished basement, until the avocado phone rang, and it was Sylphia, wanting to know if he was dead.

THREE OLIVES

He already missed her, even though she told him he stank when he first got into her car, even though he hadn't showered and he knew she was right, and her rightness made her words sting all the more. He'd laughed and called her "miss sensitive," and she crinkled her nose, and touched his leg, lightly, parenthetically, just to let him know it was almost alright that he stank-- almost. He still should have showered, but she loved him, She was glad he'd hopped into her car.

They would cruise around for a couple hours listening to Tom Waits or John Lee Hooker, or, on this particular trip, Joni Mitchell. He would make a decision not to touch her, and almost stick to it. She'd make the same decision. They would agree to roll back the wave to just before they'd ever touched, when it was all walking, shoulders gently colliding from time to time, discussing Nabokov, or the sound of thunder just before it rained. They'd finally go to the diner. She had hazel eyes that were sometimes the exact color of Spanish Olives-- the really expensive

kind. He'd had a dream one night that he'd pulled pimentos from her eyes. The Spanish olives did not have pimentos. They were the olives he'd craved as a kid, the three cheap green, grocery store olives his mother always gave him off the miniature spears in her martini glass.

He wanted to taste her, the salt and the sour of her. He wanted her skin to smell vaguely of an extra dry martini. She made him want to wear a tux and sing 'Let's Face The Music and Dance' in a whiskey baritone to a couple of high rollers. He'd never been this in love where the feeling was absolutely mutual. Unrequited love might be a bore, but he was comfortable with it. This was somewhat terrifying.

"We say we love each other because we can't do anything about it." She offered this up as an astute observation. He was hoping she just liked the sound of it, rather than believing it.

"I think I'd love you even if we could."

"Could what?" She said, raising her "olives" without raising her head, what they called "the look."

"Could do something about it."

"Oh." She folded the napkin into ever-smaller squares, a sign of frustration, of boredom.

"Are you bored with saying I love you?"

"I was bored with saying it the first time we ever said it."

She let her fingernails click against the Formica table top, abandoning the napkin. The one time they'd kissed, she'd scratched the back of his neck with one of those nails. He'd bit her lip. They'd made out for three hours, until his lips were numb, and swollen. The next day, he could smell her on his hands, on his shirt. He was sad when the odor faded.

"I wish we could be together."

"Stop wishing. Let's get out of here."

"Car lights strobed occasionally across their faces. They were sitting in the last booth of the

Spark diner. He looked at her, trying to convey some sort of intensity. It was hard to be intense over a plate of disco fries. She'd gobbled down her Spanish omelet, then ate his pickle. Nothing, not even thwarted longing, ruined the girl's appetite. She was indestructible. Ted was sixty; she was twenty-seven. This was insane. When he was 27, no girl like Francesca would have given him half a look. Her father must be missing in action, but no, she had a good relationship with her father. Ted ruled out every possible neurosis, and came to the conclusion that she truly liked his company, even found him attractive. Yet he would not act. That one time in the car, the violence of their kissing, the absolute joy and terror he'd taken in it... that was enough. He'd ended up with blue balls. He'd forgotten how painful they were. He was elated. She'd come down with strep throat the very next day. That was a sign. What sort of relationship could they possibly have? He was six years older than her father.

She picked up the check, insisted she pay for the meal. He would walk her to her car, but she said no. This time the "let's not see each other again" seemed permanent. It had seemed permanent on three other occasions. She had wanted to have full sex with him and he said no. He watched her walk to the door of the diner. He watched her through the picture window as she headed towards her car. He sat there, with his unfinished fries. He was in tears. Even this was delicious. Even this was better than almost anything on earth, even to be left, to be part of such finality. It was more than he could ever have imagined would happen to him at his age. When the waitress came over to see about freshening his coffee (refills were free), he'd offered her a five to bring him three olives. She'd smiled, and teased him by asking if he was pregnant. He said: "Yes. I'm expecting." When she brought the olives, he took each one slowly off the little sword. He held it in his mouth a long while before swallowing. He chewed them until they were practically dissolved. She was gone for good. No more wasting her time or his. He cried, just enough to feel

the tears welling up at the corner of his eyes, then, loving the sour and the salt of the olives, he swallowed.

Joe Weil teaches workshops in poetry and fiction at Binghamton University. His poetry, short stories, and essays have appeared in numerous literary magazines, among them: Poet Lore, Paterson Literary Review, Rattle, Onthebus, New Renaissance, Journal of New Jersey Poets, and Louisiana Literature. Weil's work is published in the New York Times and has been featured on Bill Moyer's PBS special, "Fooling With Words." In October 2008, NJPBS series "State of The Arts" televised a profile of his Joe Weil's life both as a poet and former union activist. His latest book is *The Plumber's Apprentice* (New York Quarterly Press, 2009). He lives in Vestal, New York.



Francis Raven

fiction

LIQUIDATION SALE

You really look great in that and there are no lumps. Well, wait a minute, maybe we could size it down. Somehow your ass looks a little not so flattering, a little large, and what's that lump? Is that part of the dress? I'll have to check. I don't think it's cancer, must be part of the dress. Have you been examined for cancer? When was the last time you visited the doctor? Someone really should pinch that; that's sort of like a biopsy, but less advanced. Western medicine just doesn't understand the pinch. It's far too focused on sickness, like we have sick care instead of health care, if you want to go in a political direction. The pinch, it should be noted, is usually not wrong and doesn't cost much money at all. Would you like me to pinch it? No, maybe later then.

Although, I have to say my mother's breasts were pinched, not in a sexual way of course, but she still succumbed to some bumps, bumps that weren't part of her wardrobe. I know I'm probably telling you too much, but I'm interested in you and thought you would be interested in me, in my life, in what I have to offer. I'm still getting over my mother's death three years ago. So many

unresolved issues with a mother. It's nice though that you don't have cancer, nice that it's just the dress. Of course, I'm not a doctor so I can't really diagnose you, but I don't think you have cancer and that lump is definitely just part of the dress. It's just something you put over yourself to hide other things. Let me get you a smaller size. Liv Wexler's fashions are a little odd. She likes to place buttons in what most people would call, the wrong place, but she thinks of these locations as transit points for the discourses of critical theory. That is, she, like most of us, thinks that she is right. She thinks the placement of buttons and zippers is but one of the many ways we can come to know ourselves, but sometimes the way she thinks we ought to know ourselves gives other people the impression that we're just that much lumpier than we really are. All I'm saying is that you probably need to size down. Some designers size their garments up so that their clients will feel slimmer than they actually are; on the other hand, some designers have sized their clothing down so that it will be more of a challenge and achievement to fit into the two or the four. In essence, what these later designers want to do is to make some of their customers feel that they have joined an elite club when they can fit into their clothes. Wexler, of course, is a member of the former design category: her garments are sized up so that you feel special all around. I know that the cost is prohibitive, but don't let that prohibit you. I won't let that prohibit you.

My mother never bought any clothes really on her own. Everything was given to her or bought out of need, and I really don't think she developed as a person because of it. It's clear that she didn't really believe in fashion. She always vaguely disapproved when I showed her the newest. But the lesson of fashion, the moral I guess, is that things change and people are different. I

guess my mother must have thought that all times were the same; that all people were the same, a strange brand of leveling equality, I guess.

You could be different too. It's all really up to you. I know there are advertisements encouraging you to look a certain way, to brush your hair a certain way, and all that, but you can get beyond that can't you? What I'm saying is that if you think this delicious Wexler is you, we should just get you a smaller size, that's all, no need to worry, or question why this is the same as the smaller size and not the same as that ugly blouse. We're not trying to learn much here, just to make you look like you. That's good enough for me, is it good enough for you? Here, I have the smaller size right here. So when you're slipping the dress over your head maybe you should cover your nose. You'd be surprised how many people believe in germs, but, on the other hand, you'd be surprised how many sweaty, relatively nasty, people try on items of clothes before they are actually purchased. I noticed your nose was running a bit, are you getting sick? Just cover it like this, with your left hand, push your index finger into your right nostril and your thumb into your left nostril. If your thumb won't fit into your nostril then you can just put your left middle finger in your right nostril and your left index finger in your left nostril. I think that should work.

I'm not picking on you, per se; I'm just sort of attached to the clothes. Whenever anyone tries them on they stretch them just a little bit, leave little molecules of themselves all over these gems, and with each stretch the clothing disintegrates a little bit more. With each extra month on the shelf each piece disappears just a little more. I'd like you to walk out of here with one of these

creations before they completely cease to exist; I just want you to enjoy clothes the way they were meant to be enjoyed.

There, there, that's much better, the lump on your ass has almost disappeared. What a great find. I'm relieved that it's not cancer, but it could still be a boil accentuated by the fabric. Sometimes Wexler likes to point things out about society with the very fabric she's using, like the boil on capitalism's ass. That might be what she's doing here, but at times, I have to say, she's a little too literal for people's delicate tastes. She could be an aberration from the general fashion scene; I don't want you to run away from clothes because of one bad experience, because of one crazy designer.

Besides, I know that people are different. I'm trying to understand how you're different. I know that you're different. Kindergarten was hard, wasn't it? People picked on you, gave you black eyes and a black nose and a broken arm and some of them stomped on your legs. It was sad, wasn't it? But you were smart, or were you not so smart? No, you probably weren't so smart with a body like that. You probably were dumb and mean, because of the way they treated you, but you were beautiful; dumb and mean and beautiful, that's what I'm saying. It's nice of you to listen to me, so many times I'm left in this room with people who won't listen. They have just so little time for fashion, so little time to show people how they're different, to show people what they are on the inside, by buying things that cover them up. I know you must be going, but there's just so much to say.

Did you feel that tremor at all? I noticed that the hanger just shook, sort of a clanging. It was pleasant, though, sort of like church bells. Yes, the department store is a little like a church. They're all going out of business though. The Internet has, as they say, changed everything. Business isn't what it used to be, but then again, nothing is. First class really isn't what it used to be. Clothes just aren't what they used to be. First of all they don't last and second of all people don't really want them to last. They want new things. It's the same with religion. There are just so many new things you can put together with the Internet, so many new beliefs. Unfortunately, the church isn't doing that well. Everyone, well not everyone, but everyone in a position of authority is accused of abusing everyone who is not in a position of authority. It wasn't the Internet that changed that. You can't blame computers for everything. There will always be people who take advantage of other people. So, it's really sort of ironic that the hangars are emulating church bells, given the times in which we live. I do like the ringing bells, saying it's time for something, hurry the hell up, hurry up. But I must confess that I absolutely hate it when they practice. They should really have a computer program for monks to practice ringing their bells, but that might make them want to watch TV all day so maybe that isn't such a good idea, but I really do hate it when the bells go dingdingdongding in no particular order. You'd think they could get a little rhythm. The monks should practice in private, that's all I'm saying, sort of like we're doing here, practicing what we're going to look like in private before we go out in public. When you're called from this barren ground by a bell it's such a nice feeling. Do you see anything in these dark times? I'm sorry to be so melodramatic. It just brought back things, like the weather from other years. I did have to go to religious school and I want to say from the beginning I wasn't abused, except for the whole power structure of the church which is made just

so you'll bow do in awe at someone else's feet, but nobody touched my privates as they were called back then. It wasn't rally that interesting except for when I gulped down the whole glass of metaphoric blood. Thank God I'm sober now. I've since left the church, of course. I don't think you can work in this industry and be a fully faithful member of the church. My library has become kingdom enough for me, an entire bathtub full of magazines with their silly little subscription papers flying about the bathroom. I sit there, wet, in the tub, praying, I know you do too. I can tell by the rest of your outfit and your wrinkled fingers; the fact that you wear no ring. Don't let me bore you; I'm just saying that you look great.

I know you came here thinking you'd just buy one blouse and I've caught you and am trying to make you buy so much more, but don't you understand it's not selling you things that I'm interested in. I really want you to see the world. There are so many things worth looking at. For instance, a Matisse, I love his Red Studio; I feel I could have built it myself. I put in a request with the manager so that I could help you, help you specifically. I know that he didn't get the request form since he's one of the ones who's been laid off (actually, I think he was fired, something to do with some of the younger male employees) but I did request you. I want you to know that I am pure in my intention to find you something fabulous to wear. I knew, from the first time I saw you, that I could help you, that lumpiness that I saw is just an example. Well, an example of the fact that you could be great. You know that you're not, but you definitely could be. Greatness is meaning made through work. That's what I'm saying: we could work here. We could sit and stand in this dressing room and we could figure it all out. Did you hear that shake again? The bells toll avaricely, augustly. Yes, it's quite an institution. Pity that Macy's is buying all of them. There will be no local stores left and I did love those minty candies that you could

only find here, Frango's. Now you'll be able to get them anywhere. But, don't you understand, I don't want to be able to get anything anywhere. I just want to make a life here with you. Soon there will be no institutions, just a mass, something disgusting. I can't wrap my mind around it and yet, this does make it pleasurable. Enormous corporations just don't do it for me. I can't reach the sublime through them. Unfortunately, it seems that I'm behind the times, since I can't reach any kind of enjoyment by contemplating the Internet. I've just never been able to fathom someone purchasing a gown with a mere press of a button. Don't they miss the feeling of all the different fabrics against their skin?

How about sizes? Don't you think they have an obligation to fit you? Sometimes designers don't seem to care about standards at all. They don't care about institutions or traditions. For them, our traditions have been evaporated by waves of globalization. The only thing they seem to be interested in is making money, hand over fist, click over clickbox. The only reason they have to keep sizes the same from year to year, from item to item, is so that you'll buy them. But they know that you'll buy them anyway. I mean, who do you think you are? So, sizes change all over the map, one day you're a six and the next you're a two (and on certain strange days you're a ten); one day you're a small and the next you're a medium. Sometimes, I've even seen the managers shifting clothing tags just to mess with customers; so the shirt that was a two on Tuesday will be a six on Thursday. These brash shifts make you feel sick with self-doubt one day and gleeful the next, when the item finally fits you. We need congress to pass legislation that would make it a felony for department store employees to shift clothing tags. But we need more than that; we need a special board that would oversee sizing standards in the entire clothing industry. I know you can get that done. If standards are good enough for both the food and the pharmaceutical

industries they're good enough for the clothing industry. We shouldn't be ghettoized to a land with no metrics, with no way for customers to know anything about what they're purchasing. Consumers should be able to get a fair deal at a fair price: enough with the information wars, we need a level playing field. And I know for a fact that congress has the authority, under the commerce clause, to regulate "commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes." Since clothing crosses state lines (or potentially could) congress should be able to regulate them and their many sizes. I really think that's an argument you can take back to your committee.

Yes, you can try anything on in that pile. I gathered it for you over my lunch break. I usually go over to DiBruglio's to buy a lump of cheese, some slices of bread, and some greenery, but the habit, unfortunately, has gotten too expensive as they first cut our salaries and then laid many of us off. I'm here of my own free will now, not bound by the awful strictures of capitalism. Free at last to really speak with you about your life, how you're doing, and really try to find something great for your wardrobe. Yes, it's all closed. You'll learn more soon. This is all here for you because I'm free, really free. In Plato's Republic, and in Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto, freedom is viewed not as an end in itself, but as a means to a particular society. Both Plato and Marx thought the society which freedom leads to, and is an expression of, would be corrupt. They thought that freedom (in certain forms) would lead to the downfall of society. In modern America the economic and political threads of freedom have intermingled. Plato uses 'freedom' in Books 1, 3, 8, and 9 of Benjamin Jowett's translation of Republic for a grand total of 17 times. For one of the longer treatises on how societies should be arranged this is an astoundingly small number. For Plato, freedom was political freedom; economic freedom was constrained by it.

This means that whomever had political freedom also had the freedom to decide how goods were produced and distributed. Plato's critique of freedom consists of three major points, that it will make the individual succumb to unnecessary desires, that it will destroy social obligatory relations, and that it will lead to the downfall of democracy and into tyranny. On the other hand, in Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto, the word 'freedom' is used 12 times. For Marx political freedom was entailed by economic freedom; just the reverse of Plato. However, neither Plato nor Marx saw freedom as an end in itself but as a means for society to reach some other end. Plato saw freedom as an expression of democracy entailing that people be chained to unnecessary desires, that the old system of social relationships be broken down, and that it ultimately lead to tyranny. Marx, on the other hand, saw freedom as an expression of a capitalist society necessitating that the old system of social relationships be broken down. This old regime proclaimed that the only expression of freedom be through property. This, in turn, would mean that there would be an unequal distribution of freedom. And how uncool would that be? Further, what does this say about modern America's conception of freedom? It leaves it with many questions. Are we chained to unnecessary desires? Is property freedom's only expression? And, if this is so, is everyone in America free? How I'm answering these questions, though, is that I'm an American and I'm free now because my bosses have been laid off with everyone else, because the company where I worked has just been bought and will now be dissolved. I am free because I am more than just my economic status. I am a multi-faceted person who is able to exercise these faculties in the new life I've been given. And what a gift it has been; being fired is just about the best thing that can happen to you, mark my words. There is no sweeter time than the week just after you have lost your job. This is when you can start to garden or cook or try a new hairstyle or buy a few new CDs that will make you feel again that music can change your life. Unfortunately, my freedom hasn't been without its own costs, which why I've started trying to avoid lunch, to avoid

remembering lunch. At different times and in different cultures they must have eaten different numbers of meals (this is so hard to remember, that something so basic as the number of times one eats could be so culturally mediated, I'm forgetting even as I'm speaking). Perhaps, in times of food shortage people ate only two meals; maybe in decadent times (at least those decadent times when people didn't work) they ate seven meals, one for each of the deadly sins; on the other hand, I'm sure that the slaves who built the pyramids must have eaten nine meals a day, all the hard work. Can you guess how many calories they must have burnt? More than you could ever burn on the stairmaster or the elliptical. I really like the elliptical because it burns a lot of calories without harming your joints. Most of my hard work goes on without burning calories these days, which is sort of a shame since I'm really trying to slim down to fit into something else. We can of course order food in to the dressing room. Pizza is perhaps too greasy, but I'm sure one of the nearby grocery stores will oblige us with several napkins, some carrots, and several heads of lettuce. Would you like something? There is no water, save for what we may end up buying in bottles, so we will need everything to be prewashed. But we won't go hungry, that's for sure.

Do you like it? We can go as soon as you like it. But I can tell by the expression on your face that you don't really like it. Don't even try to lie. I've watched you react to so many pieces of clothing and art, there is just no way you could fool me. I watched you in front of that Picasso that ended up doing nothing for you, but about which you said, and I quote, "I love it, I really love it." I've watched you dutifully eat your mother's lemon crème pie, which you claimed to love

but actually detested. So, don't lie, I know you don't really like those pants. I know that if I let you you'd never wear them again. It's unfortunate; they look good on you. They make you look just a little more intelligent than I think you are.

I gathered you a pile from each of the department. We're going to learn so much about each other. I really just need to know how you make decisions. What goes into the final call when you say to yourself I have somebody else's fate in my hands. My vote matters. If I cast it one way there probably will be a horrible dictator in power for decades more. He might kill all of his people, you never know. He could commit genocide or get nuclear weapons. It's all unknown. But if I cast my vote the other way we could be at war for a decade, killing innocents, when that same money could be used for universal health care or a working wage for every American. I think we just have to find you some clothes and then I'll understand you better, the things you do, decisions you've made. If you can make me understand via the things you put on your body, whether they be no-name jeans, flippant Betsey Johnson dresses, or a leather mini-skirt then perhaps we'll know enough to be able to wave goodbye to each other. But it's going to take time, patience and time, to do it, to do it right child. First, I've laid out several styles of denim. I'm not a specialist, but all a denim specialist can do is save you time and since we have all the time in the world we can do all the specialist could do just by trying on every single pair of jeans in the store. I know that you won't have heard of some of the labels; don't let that worry you. You're out of touch, your responsibilities of voting, compiling, learning, making speeches, and grabbing money for the next campaign has limited your ability to fulfill your responsibilities as a consumer. That's okay, we're going to learn a lot here. I'm not going to pull any punches, though, this is going to be tough: the brand names of jeans are notoriously fickle. They continuously fold, switch, and

maneuver against each other just to keep the price of jeans high. This leads to an extremely complicated brand landscape, brandscape if you will. It's important to be able to navigate such a brandscape because once you know the brand that works for you, you can cut to the quick and subscribe to the complete lifestyle that brand signifies. Second, there are some pots and pans. Don't you ever cook? I suppose you have someone do that for you, not good, not good for your soul. Everyone eats, all of your constituents. If you knew what fed their bellies, how much it cost, how it was made, then you might know what they need a leader to provide. You do want to be a leader, don't you? You need to want not just to follow the people who voted for you, but also guide them, to raise them up. Anyway, the cookware would go with your shirts. The dress that made you lumpy; I'll take it away. Here is a better size of another thing. It's amazing how well we all fit into the same clothes when we're not the same people. It's amazing that we make the same expressions. I guess that's how we start to go together. I've never had a serious boyfriend, although I've attempted to make the same expressions as everyone else. See, look, look, this is my smile and this is something close to an orgasm, see how my lips jut and my teeth gleam (they were just cleaned) look, look, and this is something akin to sadness for later. The one I have really down is the church face. See, look, look as I church. There are the bells again and the floor it is so unsteady, wobbling us as it seem to be doing. I do hope everything is all right.

Are you on your lunch break too? I know you often come here when others in your office are working or finishing their second martini. Often, you buy nothing. Today we will send you home with something. You're not really so timid are you? We'll let your personality out a bit, pull your hair down (hopefully not out). I guess we might want to be just a little more delicate. Hard to know sometimes who you believe. The real truth is that everyone has a need to confess,

to justify each and everything they have done, anything that might haunt them. Sometimes that need supercedes the truth. That's why each of us must delicately tread, tread in delicate clothes, for we have each sinned. Fortunately, our sins are not equal, though the clothes fit each of us equally well. If you can weigh that much you can slip into it, it doesn't matter what you've done or what kind of person you are; clothes will slip over anything. Although, sometimes the arms of one designer don't match the arms of another. You have to find your designer and your store. That's not exactly advice, just sort of a prerequisite for subscribing to any moral theory, just something I've picked up from trying to help all these important people find clothes through the years.

Yes, yes, I know most of the clothes in that pile are cut up. I did that. I was thinking we could sit here and create something new. I brought the sewing machine. See, here it is. We could make our own clothes. Or, we could make one big shirt, either way it's up to you. I have the scissors. I have the thread. Or, I know you're hungry we could order in some food, but later, later, after we at least have a plan for what we want to do with all these clothes. We could make some uniforms for poor school children, something hip and fashionable or we could make rainjackets for peasants in wet countries with peasants, but whatever we do we need to make sure that we leave a lot of cloth for you, for whatever you want to wear. I know our body types are different, but I'd really prefer if we just made two identical pieces of clothing that fit us both. They'd be for you, but they'd also be for the you in me. I'm trying to aim for an ideal. You're the ideal. That's what my mother always told me to do, hitch yourself to a rising star. The other ones have burnt me, but I think you seem like you're going to make it out of this whole quagmire in the Middle East. You seem like you're going to make some policies that help the common person, the

passerby, the shopgirl like me. So, if it's not too embarrassing I want us to leave the store with the same clothes. I'll try not to talk about myself again and then just when we're leaving I'll just have what you have; what you assume I'll assume because I'll be wearing those assumptions on my sleeve, literally. That's what I want, I'm tired of all these metaphoric guessing games; I just want somebody to be straight with me. I want somebody to say something that means what it means and not something else. I think you have the potential for this kind of virtuous talk but only if you're straight with yourself. I know you've failed, failed yourself, failed me, failed so many people in your life, but we're going to get you on your own straight and narrow. We're going to have you laying your own floorboards in no time. But if you have a house that you've made yourself with your own shaking hands and I'm left out in the rain then what good will any of this have been? Meaningless is all and I can't stand for meaninglessness. That's why it's so important to me that we can be the same in our clothes, so we'll each have a house. I'll live in yours and I'll sweep it for you and nobody else has to see our structural blemishes. With those strange shakes of the hangars and the floor kind of tilting a little too much for comfort and the dust shaking from every surface onto every other surface you must feel a little weird getting naked, like getting naked in a church just before someone is reborn. But I assure you that God loves your body, each and every strange and subtle part.

Before we can try anything on, we have to create it. That's the kind of dedication to your self-growth that I think would be really beneficial to you. Let's see, we should sort the piles into types of strips. I probably should have done that when I was cutting them, but the glee, the glee of cutting, prevented organization, you understand, or I hope you will. When we've made the perfect outfit, that's when it will be time to leave. Only then will I know who you really are. Only

then will I let you leave...You're being a little too creative with the buttons. That button buttons to that hole not that one. Let's just watch what we're doing a little closer. Be cognizant, that's all I'm saying. But if we want to make our own rules, that's fine, I just think we need to be cognizant of that move so that when it comes time we can explain to others via the press. So, I say, let's just widen that hole.

Tell me what kind of outfits you usually like. Maybe that will serve as kind of benchmark that we can work from. You like elegance with flair. Yeah, so do I. How could you not? But, what will we do with the timelessness factor? Timeless or not-so-timeless? I, of course, say not-so-timeless, but you knew that. Elegance is, I guess, a timeless factor and the flair, in this case, is the not-so-timeless factor. Each item needs both. I like to emphasize the later, but this is just because most people's tastes are so very conservative and jump at any chance to level people to the ground, to negate greatness from the clothes on inward. You might think that I'm pushing the not-so-timeless because I'm selling you things. You'll just have to come back next year for more. But I'm not; you'll not pay for a single item today. I swear with my life. If you think you have been given a gift you will be happy whereas if you feel that you must give a gift you will be unhappy. Sometimes gifts have nothing to do with you but instead bring you in touch with yourself. That's what I'm aiming for. I'm just trying to make you understand that all is gift: happiness and teaching, but also pain and suffering. Still, you might have another answer. Of course, if you cut everything up in your wardrobe and then sew it all back together that's another way to make the not-so-timeless into the timeless, change it up; we can recycle in the fashion world as well. This is a great message to send to the voters.

I know you're a Representative, someone who is supposed to represent others, why do you think you're here? I'm not just selling clothes to anyone; I'm offering clothes to someone who can change the rules. Let's get some laws made. That's what I'm talking about. I think we should do what they do in Argentina: require every store to carry plus sizes of every item in the store. It's a fat girl's paradise. And we surely don't want the state to be seen as condoning anorexia or bulimia. The only way we can do this is through extensive state intervention. On the other hand, we need to prohibit the citizens of this nation from wearing two left shoes. I urge you to raise this issue on the floor after we find you a delicious outfit from which you can best emit your voice. The distinction between private interest, special interest, and public interest needs to be more clearly drawn for the public. Many Americans, possibly all Americans, have an opinion about what policies our government should enact, what laws should be ruled unconstitutional, and how laws should be enforced. However, most of these opinions are based primarily upon a person's individual self interest. That is, most of the public bases its opinion of what the government should do according to their individual self-interests. If a person is wealthy and will gain from a tax-break she will wish the government to give her a tax-break; if a person likes to smoke marijuana he will attempt to get the government to legalize it; and if a person is disgusted by various sex acts she will urge the government to make them illegal. When people get together who have the same individual interests they constitute a special interest in opposition to the common good and to the public interest. But if politics merely consisted of various special interests attempting to control the government then politics would be chaotic and there would be nothing nobler about a democracy than about many other forms of government. As James Madison wrote in Federalist No. 51, "In a society under the forms of which the stronger faction

[special interest] can readily unite and oppress the weaker anarchy may as truly be said to reign as in a state of nature." Of course, you will be punished for your new political stance. You will stand in the cold, away from your party; they will shun you to a certain extent. That's to be expected because you haven't grabbed the norms with your raw fingers, because you're not will to let your nails bleed for them.

You remember those people who greeted you, the ones who said I hope you're having a nice day, can I help you with anything, did you find everything you were looking for, yes those people, the ones clinking and clanking at the registers. Those ones, yes, the ones with glorious hair, the token ethnicities, yes, all of them, you remember them poorly, but perhaps a face caught your attention; perhaps you recognized one of them from another shopping experience, from grander days. What if I were to have killed them all? I'm not, of course, saying that I did this, but what if? Or, what if they all decided to go home? It would just be you and me in this shell, but then again you don't know that it's a shell until I tell you. Listen, it's a shell of other things; it's closed, really. What if I had hired everyone to play a part? Those parts add up into a store, but a store is just a façade where things are sold, just a transit point, not something really ready for politics. But, of course, those are real people who had real jobs, and who are all laid off, what's not political about that? Okay, I didn't kill them, it would have been more romantic if I did, but I just wanted to see what you'd think. I know it shocked you, but hopefully you understand now how serious I am about finding you something to wear. There's really nothing more important to me. We can go through every size, every single item in the store, how many items to you think that is? Maybe 100,000. We'll be here a while, but we won't neglect the duty to care for the self. I won't let us neglect them because they are prior to any political theory that you might cook up.

I still don't really get it, did you really think they had weapons of mass destruction. How could you have voted for the war when they so clearly didn't have any such weapons? I just don't get it. You're a democrat right and now you don't have any idea what to do, clothing will help, I can tell you that, but before long you're going to really be forced to answer the question of what role idealism can have in foreign policy today.

Aren't you a principal in that war? You can change things, right? What I don't understand is how people come to believe in something so specific like that Jesus saved the world or that there were definitely weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; like there's a guy, this one guy, that's just so specific. And it's even harder to understand how you could come to believe this later in life. I mean, I can kind of understand if you were indoctrinated, or a nice version of indoctrinated, like if your parents told you every night that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and then what choice would you have but to believe them. We start with belief, right? We start with agreement otherwise we could never really disagree, right? I understand all of that, how a little kid believes in God and Santa Claus and weapons of mass destruction, what I don't understand is how a member of the educated class, a member of the United States House of Representatives comes to believe such weird and specific things about the world so late in life. It's not like you always thought that there were WMD in Iraq, right? It's not like your parents told you that every night before you went to sleep. So, how did it happen, I've heard about sexy evidence, but what about what the experts said, Hans Blix said, "The commission has not at any time during the inspections in Iraq found evidence of the continuation or resumption of programs of weapons of

mass destruction...” You used to be such a nice regular democrat and sometimes you had relatively crackpot ideas about what was possible, that is, about the scope of politics, about how we could change human nature, but these are all themes in the democratic platform of human nature, these latent ideas about change and possibility hang on every candidate like a perfume you can’t quite smell, but must wear to inhale. But now it just seems like you don’t believe those things anymore. We’re all colored by our experience of terrorism, of course, but has human nature really changed for the worse during this awful and embarrassing episode of history? I think that’s what they want you to think. I think that your strange beliefs about this strange ancient fellow have made you see the world incorrectly. Yes, your belief in Jesus the savior made you see weapons of mass destruction where there obviously were none. What would Jesus see? Yes. that’s right, he was hallucinating. It’s nothing I can really comprehend. I was hoping we could try to make you come back to your original beliefs. That is, I want to run an experiment that would uncover whether people could regain their naiveté. You will be the subject, the one true N.

But you’re telling me that you can’t really change things, that even if I find you the perfect outfit and even if I convince you, if that’s possible, that Jesus isn’t so magic, in the words of that famous comedian, who was making fun of your faith, Sarah Silverman, that even then there isn’t much you could do. The main action you could commit to, it sounds like, is to just talk for a really long time on the floor, to prevent a vote from being taken, just to prevent anything from being done. And maybe that’s the best course of action we can hope for, maybe the government needs to be even more inefficient than it already is, maybe this is the only real way to preserve our freedom, but still, doesn’t it seem a little pathetic? Just to talk, it’s definitely not great by anyone’s

standards, I want a sword that's mightier than your mouth, but if that sword doesn't exist and can't exist in contemporary America than I'll take your mouth anytime. Ohh, I see you wince a little. I'm not a lesbian and even if I were, that lump, seemingly apparent in every dress you try on, is not very appetizing. It's not a sensuous lump, such as a breast, but is instead more jagged and uneven. It's really the unevenness of the thing that really makes it unappetizing. If you could round it off a little I'm sure you'd get laid more, once you get out of here and have a fabulous outfit. That said, I do think, as I said before, that Wexler's creations probably aren't for you. They're more for a body without lumps. If there are any even pre-lumps Wexler's designs will pick them up and amplify them just to make the points that she's trying to make about global capitalism and advertising (although, of course, she's co-opted anti-advertising as well and is thus forced to make a statement against that and so on until the arms race of anti-anti-anti-advertising is too out of control for words).

It hurts my feelings to no end to know that you're not the powerful person I once thought you were. I even thought you were part of a power couple. If that's not flattering then I don't know what is. I admired you. I thought if you pulled a lever that opened a trapdoor everyone in the country would fall in and be at your mercy. It sounds kind of silly now, but that's what I thought. If you had power then it would matter if you believed something different about human nature; I thought that if you changed your mind then our situation would change. Either we would say that this is somebody else's problem or we would say that this is our problem because this is a problem of human nature. It would just depend on who got their hands on you first. I guess I'm just going to have to pretend that you have power. You know it's like when you're depressed they tell you to put on a happy face, smile and wave at people, and then the theory goes that then you

actually become happy. You become what you are on the outside. I guess what I'm saying is that other people also become what you think they are. So, from now on, I think you're powerful. I think that Congressmen (and women like you) control the fate of America. They hold the world's goodwill (not to mention the world's finances) in their hands. That's what I'm saying I believe. It's unfortunate that I was forced to believe the opposite of this not too long ago, but hopefully my mind is not too dumb to change. I can be molded. I guess what I'm saying is that I can be molded by myself. That's what I am forced to believe now that I'm in this mess, now that we're in this mess together. So, we're finding you clothes and these clothes are going to work magic on the fate of America. But I need a back up plan, what if my nagging suspicions are right? What if you're not that powerful after all? What we need then, what you need to enact, is a plan to find every Iraqi clothes that express his or her outlook on life. This could take several rounds of a game of mix and match. First, they will undoubtedly choose clothes that their former dictator would have chosen for them. The psychological motivation behind such a choice is obvious, it's a variation on Stockholm Syndrome: you identify with your captor's clothes. Second, they will choose the clothes that they think Americans would wear. In this round of the game, America will represent freedom and democracy and any shriveled idea they have of being cool. This is the inverse of the variation on the Stockholm Syndrome. Third, they will choose clothes they think that Americans (and particularly the power centers of America, such as you) will hate. In this round of the game they will associate America with the invasion, greed, corruption, hegemony, oil-mongering, and the loss of the traditional values that they held dear. In the fourth round of the clothing mix and match the Iraqis will finally choose clothes that express their personal outlooks on the world, their visions of the good, their plurality. I know it will take a lot of clothes and a lot of time but I think, first of all, that many designers will donate clothes to such a good cause, and second, that such a plan will ensure the self-determination of Iraq for centuries to

come. It is only in this way that Iraqis will be able to learn to make reasonable decisions. And by reasonable I mean decisions that take into account the fact that different people have different conceptions of the good and that it's okay to have these different conceptions. That's what I'm saying, I want Iraqis to be wearing all sorts of clothing, wild dresses, preppy shoes, indie-rock tees, Manolo Blahniks, designer jeans and jeans from Kmart; I want Iraqis to know the full spectrum of the things you can buy, of the ways you can express yourself.

It's not just a question of who knew what when, but of why you didn't know that then. I guess it's the problem of the negative, and for the time being I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, doubt being my middle name when it comes to matters of faith. However, I've heard from some of my most spiritual friends, the ones who look the most spiritual at least, that doubt is the sign of a mature faith. I no longer need to prove my faith to anyone and so it rests within me. What do I believe? I know you're asking yourself, because you know it can't be anything about Jesus or God, but I believe in things. I believe things about human nature, not incredibly specific things, but I believe we can change and that there are natural rights that need to be respected for any of us to be able to change, that's what I'm trying to get you to see. If you don't put on the right clothes, you won't believe the right things, and then where will we be? Nowhere that's where and fast. My faith is fortunately time released as some food punches you in the gut hours after you have eaten and thus, you can't pinpoint the source of the sickness or of the faith that I'm talking about. After you knew that the weapons were not there you must have been embarrassed and this embarrassment must have made you want to hide, but what we need you to do is to make decisions, and to make sure that those decisions have consequences, that they change the course of human history. I know, I know, you keep saying that your power is limited, but as I said I have

chosen to believe that your power is not so limited, not that it's boundless, but that you can make changes, you can realize change. What's that saying? Be the change you want to see. I think that by actualizing on the House floor we have a real shot at forcing people to believe what I believe about human nature and that's really what I want when it comes down to it, agreement. Agreement, in the final analysis, is understanding. If we don't agree then we obviously don't understand each other; if they don't agree with you then they're just not trying hard enough. That's what I'm saying, limited power is still some power. You're not Superman, you're a politician, I never dreamt otherwise, besides Superman was a man and you're obviously a woman so there's really no chance that you could be Superman and no chance that anyone could even begin to think that you were Superman. I'm sorry that confusion is just not happening, not today, not ever.

If only you had been wearing clothes that would have enabled you to know that there were no weapons of mass destruction your integrity would not have such oozing blemishes all over its surfaces, such blemishes that will cause you to be able to talk of nothing else for at least a decade, if only you'd come to me sooner. Now it will be even more difficult for you to run for President, but I still think that having a woman in the Whitehouse is one of the more important things that we can hope for in the coming years. That's why your image must be even more tightly controlled than it has been. There can be no more missteps. What you know must align with what will be known. Your clothes must perfectly align with who you will be. That's what I'm saying in short. Here, today, we're putting your future on the line. So with the blouse, with the slacks, with your choices, with which skirt you choose, you're deciding whether you're for an escalation or an immediate withdrawal of troops. Thus, you can readily see that these fashion

decisions are more important than you ever dreamed they would be. Your wardrobe malfunctions have all indicated that your on the fence. You look horrible, that's what I'm saying. Fences stab those who sit nervously on their pointy tops. You will fall and that will be the end of that except for the fact that I have waged everything on your greatness.

I see you falling down again. Everything seems to be shaking so much more than before. Is that going to be a large bruise on your leg? Probably, let's put a nice steak on it. That's the kind of manners my mother always taught me to practice. I apologize for your recent fall, but do not take legal responsibility for your bruise's existence. I know that when this is all over your lawyers will say that you have lost X dollars of revenue because your leg is just that much uglier, but let me dissuade you from such a strategy. I will merely testify that your leg wasn't that pretty to begin with and this will really cause your revenue to fall. But I'm sorry things have started to fall off the shelves. Ohh look several beautiful arrangements are smashing to the ground. I'm sorry, but what are you going to do? We need to be here even if the whole world is falling down, falling down, London Bridge is falling down. Hopefully our piles of clothes haven't gotten that messed up in that last shake. I really don't like reorganizing things. It's like if I've organized something once, why do I want to do it again? Remind me, why would I want to do that?

You ought to wear this football helmet in case the building keeps shaking. We can't have you getting knocked unconscious. At the end, you'll need to talk to the press; to tell them what we've accomplished here today. The football helmet will enable you to do so. Don't worry, I've not planned on dying; so, it's not in cards. See, it goes for me too, I just believe that I'm a powerful

person and then I am one. I know that I'm not going to die here. I know that you're not going to die here. Sure, look, the walls are going to shake a lot, some of the walls are going to break, some of the windows are going to break, and we're going to get plaster all over our clothes. Plaster is something that mends, that connects us, brings us together; remember that as we're getting through this mess. It's going to be loud, probably too loud for our concentration, which is why I'm going to turn up the music really loud right now, what station do you like? I have some CDs. A little light indie-rock. Some Death Cab for Cutie. Some Prince. I think that song Seven is one of the best shopping songs of all time. But we'll have to fit you for a shopping song, but all things in due course, all things in due course. Of course, since the music's going to be so loud we're going to have to start communicating in writing, is that okay with you? I thought you'd like that. My voice is getting tired, but we can always turn the music down if it turns out we don't like writing down all we want to say to each other and there's a lot. I'm sure there's so much. I thought you'd like passing notes to me. I guess not. I guess writing is perhaps too cumbersome and sometimes when you see a piece of writing you don't know who the author is so you can't question her, but that's not really the case here except for the fact that we couldn't really question each other with the loud music. Anyway, I'm glad we found you at least a shopping band if not a shopping song. Belle and Sebastian's a great choice if a little twee for me. Hopefully the next time we listen to music you can get a little more specific and choose a particular song that would make you want to buy things. And I'm not saying that you have to buy things because, or course, everything's free. I just think it would be fun for you to choose such a song.

I promise you you're going to go home and you're going to know how to vote. You're going to see a method through the Middle East. The lens of cloth will not be easily forgotten by your skin. That's what I'm saying. You can talk a lot on the floor if they want more money or troops. A troop was a brother. No, no, it's not so clichéd as that, not my brother, but obviously somebody's brother, the brother of mankind. I don't know, was he Cain or Abel? That's sort of what I'm asking here, the essence of it. The essence of what mark he bore (and you bear) that is, what kind of clothes he wore. So, I'm asking you: are you a brother's keeper? Not your brother's but a brother's. I'm not talking about black people who sometimes affectionately refer to each other as brothers. I'm talking about the entire gigantic human race, that thing we're swarmed in, what we make up. Believe me, you'll make up with me. It won't be hard because it will say something about what you believe, about the brotherhood of man. Sure, it's sexist, but we can get past it can't we? We got past the race thing, didn't we? We can get past the sex thing. That's all I'm saying, try to get past it. I'm just thinking about what it will be like when this day is over. We'll be fine. We'll get coffee. We could get some Thai take-ins; it'll be nice. But it's not over yet. No, we're still waiting, waiting for cloth to mean us. Well, as I said before I want the cloth to mean you and then I want to mean you as well. It's a form of flattery. Don't be scared.

Do you like it?

Yes.

Do you really like it?

Yes.

Francis Raven is a graduate student in philosophy at Temple University. His books include *5-Haifun: Of Being Divisible* (Blue Lion Books, 2008), *Shifting the Question More Complicated* (Otoliths, 2007), *Taste: Gastronomic Poems* (Blazevox 2005) and the novel, *Inverted Curvatures* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2005). Poems of his have been published in *Mudlark*, *Conundrum*, *Chain*, *Big Bridge*, *Bird Dog*, *Caffeine Destiny*, and *Spindrift* among others. His critical work can be found in *Jacket*, *Logos*, *Clamor*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *The Electronic Book Review*, *The Emergency Almanac*, *The Morning News*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Media and Culture*, *In These Times*, *The Fulcrum Annual*, *Rain Taxi*, and *Flak*. Francis lives in Washington DC; you can check out more of his work at his website:

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Joshua Ellis

fiction

CAT SCRATCH FEVER

Reena came over with Sara and Jesse and they had two bottles of wine that wouldn't drink themselves, now would they?

Just a minute, I said before I let them up to the sixth floor. I had been drinking already. I have to, uh, tidy up the living room.

Your boyfriend is such a gentleman, I heard one say before I pulled my finger off the button and raced over to the closet.

At the theater, I put my hand in hers, and the claw marks brushed her fingers.

What the—?

Shhhh, said the old woman behind us.

It's her, I said.

Please, said the old woman. You're ruining the story.

The girl dies at the end, I told the old woman. I had no idea if this was true.

Hurrumph, she said, but that shut her up.

Does she do it often?

Nah, I said, stroking her hand. Only when she senses competition.

I picked her out at the Humane Society on East 59th Street, mostly for the beautiful black coat. It was two years ago, and I had wanted some company.

Ma, I said. It's not her fault. She freaks out when I don't come home right away because she's worried about being left. It happened once to her, and you don't get over that stuff. Really, I bet you don't.

For God sakes, that's not normal. You're thirty-seven. You need somebody normal.

Such a thing may not exist, I half-joked.

She's not normal.

Honestly, Ma, I said. Then tell me what is. Tell me what's normal. I could hear her breathing into the receiver. Hell, Ma, are you normal?

I'm normal. She's not.

You and dad have been out to eat once in the last five years, I said. That's not normal.

I'm normal, she said. She's not.

I was pressing myself into as tight a spot as the space would permit. There was too much flesh and not enough air. That was the problem with yoga, I thought. Why contort when the room was full of room to breathe?

You're not doing it right.

What am I supposed to do?

It's called downward dog for a reason, Reena said. Do it like a dog.

I can't, I said. I'm a cat person.

Later, in bed, and not for the last time, she set her fingernails to my skin.

There, she said. You like that? You said, grunt, that you were, grunt, a cat person.

That's, ouch, not what, grunt, I meant.

I'm, grunt, claiming you, she said.

Ouch, I said.

We went at it for a bit longer but had to stop when the angry meowing started and the claws sank into the door, rattling it unnervingly. Plus this was during the summer when the heating system was at a loss and the room was rank with sweat and sex and cat shit. Mostly cat shit.

That's the problem here, she said, gagging.

Well, I said. One of them, anyway.

I met her at a spring book fair for singles. I guess you could say we'd been on the same page.

People gathered. A man in a Russian hat and skinny jeans, holding a ukulele, decided right then and there to compose a song about it in the vein of the Edmund Fitzgerald. Reena didn't stick around to help.

The first time we went out, I took her to a Chinese restaurant in Park Slope. I told her it was the best Chinese in Brooklyn. She believed me. Then I put my chopsticks into my nose and played walrus. She laughed. Then I offered to open her fortune cookie and fed her a false fortune.

It doesn't say that, Reena playfully protested.

Sure it does, I said. The Chinese never lie.

Do you live near here? She asked coyly.

Do you have any allergies?

Here, Sara said. She passed me the bottle. Your turn.

Thanks, I said. Then a cat flew at her hair.

I think I would like you to meet my parents.

My gosh. Do you really mean that?

No, I said after a moment's consideration. Not exactly.

What? Well why, then, did you bring it up?

Because my mother's irritating as hell, I said, but she's in Connecticut. See, this is a purely pragmatic maneuver. It's only a matter of weeks before they drop in unannounced and force themselves on you. Might as well head them off at the pass.

That's a real chivalrous reason, all right.

Look on the bright side, I said. The leaves up there are beautiful in the fall and you'll get some charred brisket out of it.

They won't take us out?

Ha.

Well if she's such a bad cook, why not just tell them to take us out?

My parents don't really ever listen to what I'm trying to tell them, I explained. Sometimes it's like herding cats.

It's after ten.

Do you know where your children are?

It's not funny. I was expecting you earlier.

I know. I'm sorry.

Where were you?

Work, why?

You swear?

What?

Do you swear?

Yes, yes, I said. I swear. I swear on Jesus and Mary and Joseph and all the Hindu and Buddhist books, too.

Then, she said, why don't I believe you?

The truth is, I liked her more than I let on.

Get the broom! Jesse yelled.

There was a black cat on her head and it would not stop gouging her scalp.

Get this thing off me!

Then Reena came in with a broom and thwacked the cat off of Sara's head, taking some of her hair along with her.

When I left the office, I would go there before I went anywhere. Just me, nobody else. She wasn't mean then. She fell asleep in my lap. It was wonderful. I stroked her fur in all the right spots. She didn't have to tell me what to do, because I knew what to do already.

You guys really should get out more, I said.

Thinks he knows everything, my mother said to my father.

This brisket is delicious, Reena said.

Wonderful, my mother said through thin lips. How nice that you like it.

How's that job? My father asked.

Wonderful, I said, haltingly. Reena looked at me. Long hours, I quickly added.

Attaboy, my father said.

Are those...are those gashes on you? My mother suddenly exclaimed.

We were in my apartment. I was there because it was where I lived. She was there because she'd broken in, and now Molly was going apeshit and clawing everything in sight.

You need to do something about all this, she said, arms folded.

About you breaking and entering? I asked.

Things can't stay this way, she said, tears streaking.

Do you think I need a stronger deadbolt? I asked.

Sometimes I think you love her more than me, she said, choking back sobs. The cat groaned and slashed at my pant leg.

Maybe you should try balancing your chi, or something, I offered.

You lie about where you are, she said more firmly. You said you were at the office and you weren't. You were here, with her. It can't stay this way. I'm as loyal as...as, well, a puppydog, and I can't handle you lying to me. If you lie again, I'll leave you.

Just what the hell do you expect me to do about this?

You know what.

You can't be serious.

I am.

And if I refuse?

Ha, she said bitterly. You can't take anything seriously enough to refuse it.

The woman at the Humane Society laughed, then scowled.

Take it back? You already took her away. Now you want to give her back? You're an Indian giver.

That's mildly offensive to the Indians, I said.

Nevertheless, the woman said.

It's not like I wanted to do this anyway, I said. Extenuating circumstances.

The Humane Society doesn't care about extenuating circumstances, she said.

So that's that, huh?

Yup, she said. That's that. We don't regift pets. A pet is a very personal thing. The relationship you have with your pet is a very personal thing. Have you ever had a close personal relationship? What if, for instance, you found out that your wife had been left once at the altar? I suspect it would jar you to know that. It would take you right out of your element, like what you're doing to your cat this very minute.

I'm not married, I said.

Nevertheless, she said.

People regift each other all the time, I said. It's called dating.

That's not the same, she said.

Isn't donating a pet the same as regifting it, anyway?

It isn't, she said.

This is the least humane society I've ever encountered, I said.

With a sense of humor like that, she said snottily as I walked out the door with Molly in my arms, I'm surprised a catch like you isn't spoken for already.

So you see, there was no other choice but to keep the lie going. I would hide her in the closet when I had Reena over. There were towels to muffle the whining and scratching. I guess when you have a little too much to drink, you forget to shut the door completely.

You need somebody normal.

Jesus, Ma, I said. Again?

Listen to me, please.

Sometimes, I admitted, I feel like I'm being torn in two.

Is she there now?

Which one? I asked.

Oh God, My mother said.

Reena chased Molly with the broom, round and round, through the living room and the bedroom into the kitchen where Molly found the open window.

Stop! I must have yelled. Reena didn't stop.

I have nothing to say to you, she said after it had happened and we'd had a moment to process it. Sara was crying and lamenting her lost hair and Jesse was consoling her and mourning the loss of Sara's hair and both of them were putting on their coats, but Reena had nothing to say.

My mother says I chase women out of my life, but I don't do much chasing, if you want the truth. Some evading, yes, but no chasing. Strictly verbal gymnastics. Foxhounds chase, and I'm no hound dog.

Joshua Ellis is pursuing an MFA at the University of Maryland. His work has yet to appear anywhere else. When he isn't writing, Joshua is managing his fantasy baseball team or brewing beer. He lives in Washington, D.C. with five roommates, two cats and a dog.



Zev Gottdiener

fiction

INSOMNIA

The television speaks forgotten movies in a static voice while headlights project rolling reels of rain soaked windowpanes across walls. In a way, this is worse than jail. In jail I slept. Here in my filthy room, rest is a distant memory gone fuzzy with time like old new years. I imagine a two-week hourglass flipping, the lethargic sand shifting down through the pinhole aperture, a picture of longing gone precise and manic through insomnia's lens. The fan blades barely blur, they waltz, swinging in the smoky air like 1920's speakeasy patrons, stumbling drunk from prolonged exertion. I can feel my bowels move, the grueling routine peristalsis of a body without food. I abandon focus for near sighted uniformity and try to imagine my love's face, her body, her smile and the way it curls inward just before emerging. The door to my room breathes with the changing pressure of the receding storm.

PROLOGUE

Deborah Harobed spilled her NYC story on the room, forcing bilious narratives to congeal while bathing the vile scene in occasional tangential broad-spectrum lighting for effect like – She brought these shady kids from Newburg...I don't know how to describe it...they're overly aggressive with weed. Now don't get it twisted, she was brilliant stuff, but the room was embroiled in the type of chaotic tension that can only exist in upstate New York in winter and all parties involved save our spotlight were deeply concentrated on other things besides Deb's Calligulaic meanderings through the bowels of Manhattan's cherishable nightlife.

Amber kicked the stereo to let Buck 65, the proletariat emcee, scratch through another opus. Frak struck a match and obliterated the whole thing. Language sharks and shards of glass side by side in the nervous drumming. Frak blew smoke around the apartment's perimeter while Amber and Eligh stared at each other circle-head-jerking toward him. The inchoate stress of the afternoon had snowballed to gender nuclear proportions – so small, so large – Rassler sat on the red satin cat piss couch furiously whittling an ax handle out of a larger ax handle. The spray of chips arced over Amber, intermittently struck Fraks passing legs. It occurred to Eligh to be like Foucault's Pendulum proving the room's rotation and if he could've just gotten Frak's attention, curbed the impulsive pace and set a correct velocity to his circumferential gyre all would lay naked and accessible. That's what Eligh wanted now more than ever, access.

Eligh, like Mme. A'Fronte was concerned with access to information about people. Some concerned themselves with being better listeners, public speakers, formulators of ideas and other such linguistic hoops. Some wanted the easy road, the secret road behind our presented identities.

Unlike the Frog, Eligh pined after this information because he was incapable of identifying emotionally with the people around him. Sociopath, maybe – maybe not, but this ugly little aspect of his development had reeked havoc on his personal life. A serial monogamist, Eligh got dumped every two years or so and like his inevitable return, the explanation was always the same.

Mme. got called shit-girl when she was in the fat kid universe. Ressler ate scabs. These were all things binding and forlorn, like killing animals is the 1st sign your child is psychotic. There were popcorn balls and laxative chocolates, underground scientology drug cults and the automation of information economy. There were heinous ivory towers under which time-cube disciples strike spears with constipated recluses on relief missions from the temple of the necrophiliacs inhabiting your father's dream movies. These were wages of the pit, binding and forlorn.

Frak stopped pacing, turned to Ressler and lunged, his boot stomping for his sternum and Rass leaned back in surprise, would have been more than a lean had the couch-back not been there in all its comfortable yet unforgiving glory. He just leaned back and no, not the knife but the axhandle got raised because you know at least one of his paws would have raised with the boot-leg apparatus, even in the momentous relinquishing of control to the reptilian brain's instinctual motor function.

It stands to anti reason that a conversation took place between Rassler's hands. One hand, the hand with the gun, I amen, mean knife, was caught in a Tibbles and Tail or Frog and Scorpion problem while the hand holding the axhandle was complacent, sitting on a dynamite diamond mine; a holy bum who won a slice of ice nine in a poker game against a man with a United State for a last name like William Virginia. Knife hand said to the other Do it. Simple right? So the hand did. Not much of a conversation.

Now. Let me tell you from experience, seeing an ax handle go into-and-through someone's leg is crazy and I don't mean twenty-something slang in the new millennium crazy. Seeing something like this is absolutely one of the most intense things you will ever experience, emotionally, psychologically whatever. Now. Taking this into consideration, notice that Frak was still standing.

“Holy Fuck. Fuck...What!?”

Yes Eligh was stunned. (Good enough).

“Frak?”

Amber wasn't really speaking this more than saying it because she wasn't rightly starrng at anything.

“Fraa? Someone...”

“Aarr”

Not pirate but not zombie, think grandma-lawn mower.

“Aahhaarr,”

Frak began the long decent down the cliffs of his own trigonometry and consciousness. You can see how his t-shirt’s Wu Tang symbol flipped as it can. People think the void of shock is pillowy, doughy and edible in the sense of bedtime. This is not true. Shock is television static and original babble language hospital calls in the wee hours of the am. Blood.

“Don’t take it out.”

Rassler’s words reverberated like ping-pong balls inside a public sculpture, inside the freshly emptied minds of those who just witnessed an axe handle go into-and-through someone’s leg. He said it with a nonplus naturalness that only comes from years of dedicated high-ness, a deadening of reality. Silence. Are these characters so devoid of emotion that they will not say anything?

“Get me some broom sticks. Broom sticks and duct tape. Now. And towels. And water.”

“What?”

Deborah’s face stuck as if an over eager plastic surgeon tugged at her skin from behind.

“We need to splint him up and get him into the car.”

Rassler set his teeth like a break-beat, cast grim on the room and got up hands on knees.

“Everyone now. There’s no time. Go. Eligh, go start my van.”

“Fucking MacGyver, you don’t have a van.”

“Right. Go start a car.”

“Amber, your keys. My word, you’re pale.”

Elihu didn't know why he was speaking like an eighteenth century anthracite maid. Perhaps, in such times of crisis xrisis he was reverting to a divine humor of sorts, or appealing to the divine humors of the body in peril.

“Amber? Are you there?”

She was not there. She did not speak. She was not afraid that it might have sounded noisy to you. She knew the person you are is a product of your birth culture. Her hands, two autonomous parasites wringing each other's flailing necks, were your mother's worrying hands speaking to the wrinkles around her worrying mouth.

“We gotta go.”

Elihu's voice hollowed out his own heart so fully that he forced bile back to the put from whence it wickedly came.

They left her there. Shaking.

Epilogue

Virtual space. You think what you “see” is real, viz. advertisements. Your mind is in touch with virtual pathways. You don't actually see what is going on in the outside world. Society as and is spectacle. People form identity on models that aren't even close to real. Desensitized,

decentralized, etc. Able to see the Internet as real enough to mimic it in the quickly decomposing bowels of physical reality. In practice personality is salient. You act your whole life out. Individuality is a spectral media trail wanking slowly in the twilight megalopolis.

My old roommate had a sketch comedy show and every time I talked to him, he was acting. He wore child predator glasses.

See the internalization and swallowing acceptance of corporate cultures, mass media, cultural pluralism, dissemination, archival history of movements, unspoken shifts in perception of change in identity. Technological determinism. We affect linguistic Stockholm syndrome.

They talked about Amber with such love.

“She showed up looking like she’d just fought something bigger than her. Blood roses across her cheekbones cradling.”

Or

“Have you ever seen her eat an orange? It’s frightening.”

They loved Amber. She loved one once, but that seems like a long time ago and he’s gone now anyways.

Like Eligh, Amber suffered from a lack of connectivity. They, we (humans) are self-aggrandizing and spurn βίοςκέντρον in favor of more indulgent flavors of environmental awareness. Habitation, built space, constructed places weave through symbolic memory tubes. This is where we sat. These were things binding.

Zev Gottdiener was born in Southern California in a log cabin he built with his own two hands out of smaller hotels and apartment complexes. Hailed as “I really enjoy your work” by a marginalized miscreant constituency the world over, Zev’s style has been described by Dr. Jumpin’ Gene Halton, author of *The Great Brain Suck*, as “slaughtering the sacred cow, with good taste.” Working in tandem with the Metaverse, Zev seeks to quell the overwhelming nostalgia for a perceived golden age by rejecting the Ophelia act and subconsciously coercing audiences to feast on their shells along side him. In what precious time remains Zev wanders the confines of scholarship.



Sean Thomas Dougherty

Novella excerpt

THE BLUE CITY

In the blue city, in the dawn-scraped awakening, Tomas the fish-monger is already stacking the day's catch in the fish stalls of the great Cathedral-skied market. Tomas wears a shawl of the blue city. If you were to ask someone what is it like to work all day and sleep at night in the city of blue arches and passageways, Tomas could tell you with a child's eyes. He could tell you with the eyes of a broken lover. He could tell you with the lips of a long married man. He could tell you with the weeping of a man who has lost his mother in the wards where they send the destitute, down into The Dark City beneath the city that is blue. Tomas was born in the blue city with his sister, that placenta-sized other who never opened her blue coin-small mouth.

Tomas, in each fish you lift is a story. In each coin and call you offer to the morning is a song. Tomas can tell you the name of so many we pass on the street. There, Tomas says, do you see him in the black bowler hat? You would think he is a banker. But he belongs to the Black city, the city of night-song and insomnia. Why do we see him here in the Blue City sometimes? He never sleeps. He strolls from one city to the other, comes in here in his English-tailored suit, his hand-carved stick. How do I know this? Did I not tell you that my brother is from the Black City? My sister from the City of Broken Roses? My other brother from the Yellow City? Or my mother

who is from the Oldest City, that city even older than us 'The First?' That is another song.

See how he walks, how gentle he passes the stoop-shouldered widows with their hemp-weaved bags, how he dips and choreographs his hat, clicks his black-shoed heels. He is one of the few who asks for a bag, though once he appeared with a saxophone case lined with wax paper, and filled it with winter-salmon, with pomegranates shipped in from China, winter oranges shipped in from the Anadalousian groves, Sicilian blood red oranges, just baked Challah bread, gorgonzola from France, Feta from the Thracian Hills so rich you could hear the bones of Orpheus snap with every slice. How jealous we all were, tied to our stalls—us who are jealous of nothing, we of the Blue Marble sky, the twilight's dim longing, the opening of all eyes. But the feast they must have had, those from the city which precedes ours, which ends the journey of all cities above ground. How it must have been for them—musicians, bartenders, artists, thick-framed intellectuals, to be in the yellow sun, to shift cities and eat oranges, slices of morning, before closing their eyes, wine spilled and shirts untucked, legs slung over couches, asleep on floors.

Tomas stacks the fish and offers me a cigarette. In all the cities everyone smokes, slim fireflies that glance the mouths of girls, men, workers, shop-keepers, subway patrol officers. A city of lights along the lips. Even here in the dusk-scraped dawn, the ships unload their cargo along the river. The crates from North Africa, India, America.

Maraqueesh. The great crane workers, hard muscled, knot-armed men in tight sweaters and tiny wool hats. The dock workers are all Sufis, Tomas says. They stayed when the Pope drove out the Turks, hiding in the Dark City, working—Tomas kneels to whisper—as fishermen. It was rumored they left for four hundred years, sailing smaller ships down to the Aegean and across the straits. After the revolution, and the great trade, they sailed back, one by one, in tiny boats so

small in comparison to the great freighters, they looked like paper boats made by god. One by one, two by two, six by six, they appeared to haul the great cargo, pull out their prayer mats and pray three times each day.

Why are they part of the Blue City?

Because god, Tomas said, is part of the Blue City.

It was then I thought of the old women in the morning, scarves wrapped around their heads as they wove through the ghost mist rising off the blue river, this city of broken bones and shattered songs, where during the war They took the children down to cut their throats and toss them into the river. These women with their rosaries and their mourning, their slow-stepped shuffle, caning down to the cathedrals, where the oldest who can barely walk still kneel to pray. Mornings when we rise to pray, City of Ablutions. Ablutions. Blue City. How sometimes the mist will rise off the street and there they will be, in muted colors, and a slow trumpet will be heard and the smell of frankincense, jasmine, myrrh, the last yellow taxi pulling down the street. Here they can hear the Holy Father, donning the black cossack and preparing the bread for its blessing.

What is it that makes the Blue City the Blue City?

It is the light, the light which rises, Tomas tells me, from the eyes of the dead.

Do the eyes of the dead exist in the Blue City? Is the Blue City the City of the Dead?

The light from the dead rises from below The Blue City. The dead walk in the slow mist off the

river, under the Bridge of Broken Sighs they come. They come like moonlight across black water, like a thought almost found and forgotten. They come quiet as a sound you thought you heard and turned to in the rain, in the quiet of a deep summer night they come. But once the sun rises, they return to the Catacombs the Romans carved from Stone, down to the deep Aqueducts some say you can follow all the way to the center of the world.

Is this where Orpheus walked?

That was somewhere near but far away. The broken songs are part of another, behind the Blue City. Do not be fooled. In the Blue City the broken sunlight is like first light through stained glass. We in the Blue City are the ones—balanced between the Black and Yellow Light of the Cities we are between.

It's the joy of the work song, the joy and the sorrow of men on their way to lift and tug, women donning Babushkas to walk to the Cathedrals, morning prayers at Synagogues, the long walk returning from the factories to eat bread and sleep. The harp-weaver's spell, the flute-seller's morning song. Sea birds opening their eyes and rustling their wings before the sun rises and they fill the sky with calls. Joy of dew on wild grass. Of the radiator that works. Of roots reaching their joy into the earth. The simple joy of sitting on the bed. The choreography of garbage men. The choreography of showing up on time. Joy of arriving late and the clock is broken and the boss has disappeared. Joy of holding the iron handle and swaying on the first trams. The joy of buttoning your shirt, ironing your smock, the smell of coffee and the mist rising off the river.

The joy of being mute.

The thumbful of ocean sand that spills on the child's desk: that is another city. The man slumped hard-fisted into his drink: that is another city. The woman sewn in the inside of his eyelids, that is another city. The dead live in another place.

But Tomas says, It will be a slow day with the cold so deep. The dead are walking slowly today.

~

Every city has its City of the Dead. Tomas says, This is what, to most of us, is most unknown.

Sean Thomas Dougherty is the author of eleven books including *Nightshift Belonging to Lorca*, a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize and *Except by Falling* winner of the 2000 Pinyon Press Poetry Prize from Mesa State College. His latest book is the forthcoming *Sasha Sings the Laundry on the Line* (2010 BOA Editions). He is currently traveling the world in search of the White City.



Jan Becker

non-fiction

THE STRING OF 10,000 FIRECRACKERS

It is a string of 10,000 firecrackers. The gunpowder inside is wrapped in paper decorated with chrysanthemums. Some firecrackers come wrapped in blue paper, but these are all wrapped in red. They are tied in an intricate series of knots, binding them together. Tomorrow, there will be millions of them in the rain-gutters. My brother and I will search through all of the gutters on the base and rifle through the spent firecrackers looking for the few survivors that did not explode. Twice a year, on New Year's Day and the Fifth of July, we know that the circular driveways all over the base will be fringed in red, white and blue papers.

We will blow up Barbie dolls and GI Joe men with the firecrackers we find. I will hoist Danny, my little brother, into a coconut tree. He will toss ripe coconuts at me from the top. He aims at my head, but my feet are fast and I always manage to dodge them. We will spend hours trying to blow up the coconut after we strip it of its brown husk. Other kids only look for quarter sticks and M-80s to blow up geckos and fat bullfrogs, but Danny and I don't like to hurt animals.

We like the exhilaration of making a tin can shoot up into the air and fall back to the ground smoking. We like the tinny pluck the can makes on the pavement when it falls and the burning

smell of gunpowder and paper. We study the nuances with which the sensitive grass reacts to an explosion- the waves of closing leaves flattening and exposing the thorns along its stems.

Dad is drinking a tequila sunrise on the patio. I made it for him. He taught me to be the bartender, so that none of the Marines in his squadron has to get up to mix their own drinks. Sometimes we go camping and I sit by the fire with him and the other Marines while they drink Jack Daniel's and tell jokes. He tells the other Marines, "Look at her fellas. She can take a shot of Jack and not twitch a freckle."

I never twitch a freckle when I take a shot.

We are at a party. All of the other kids are too young to play with me, but my brother is having a good time with them. He is running around, pretending to be a monkey. Dad will carry Danny to his bed tonight after the party. Danny's body will droop in his arms, completely relaxed in his sleep. He will wake up, not remembering how he got to bed, but before breakfast, Danny will remember the millions of firecrackers in the gutters and will wake me up to take him out looking.

My mother is having back pains. Anytime now, she will have to go to the Pink Army hospital on the other side of the island to give birth. I am hoping for a little sister. I believe that my mother is pregnant with a girl based solely on the color of the hospital. When she is born, we will call my sister Mongoose after the little brown critters that run through the woods looking for snakes to eat.

At school, our mascot is the Mokapu Mongoose. My class all stands for the pledge of allegiance, a prayer, and then we sing the school anthem:

On the windward side Oahu, Kaneohe Bay
stands our dear school in Hawai'i,
where we work and play

M-O-K-A-P-U

Mokapu, we sing our praises to
Proud and loyal, we'll remember
Imua, Mokapu School.

When we spell out the name of the school, we stress the P-U at the end. This makes my teacher very angry. She says we have no pride.

My teacher at school is an angry Samoan woman named Ms. Smith. She is usually angry with me because I ask her everyday when Ms. Watanabe will be back. Ms. Watanabe was a beautiful Japanese teacher with a face like the dolls my dad brings back from Okinawa, when he goes there for training missions. Ms. Watanabe had to leave school early for maternity leave. One day, Ms. Smith tells me, "You not been nice one day. Everyday you ask, 'Where Ms. Watanabe?' How you think I feel, hear you ask that? Mebbe Ms. Watanabe is mo'oo. Mebbe one day you see her walking home. She turn into big lizard. Eat you, you not be nice."

School is full of legends. There is the legend of Kane who landed in Kane'ohe first and married the three river sisters who formed the Kane'ohe watershed. Children whisper that

ancient Hawai'ian bones have washed up on the playground during the rainy season. Our teachers all tell us the Menehune will turn us into stones if we are bad and misbehave. When we take a field trip, Ms. Smith tells us that the ancient Hawaiians would test their royal children by throwing them from the windy cliffs at a summit off the Pali Highway "Wind blow you back, you prince or princess," she says. "Wind no bring you back, you pau. No royal."

On the playground, I have a special song I sing to Ms. Smith:

Glory Glory Hallelujah, teacher hit me with a ruler,
shot her in the butt, with a rotten coconut,
and she ain't my teacher no more.

It is Ms. Smith who told me that a string of 10,000 firecrackers can scare away all of the evil spirits.

The Marine who handed me the string of firecrackers also handed me a lighter. He points at my dad who is dancing to the tune of 'Disco Duck.' He tells me to light the firecrackers and throw them at his feet. This Marine takes him to the enlisted club on Friday nights, where he drinks with Checkers and Pogo, my heroes. Checkers and Pogo have a television show that airs right before Deputy Dawg. I went to a taping in their television studio and was chosen from the audience to fill a party hat with pennies. Dad watches the show I was on with me, and then goes to the base club after dinner for drinks with Checkers and Pogo. "Good job filling the party hat." he says.

He is having a good time on the patio. He is only wearing flip-flops on his feet. On workdays he has to cram his feet into tight laced combat boots. His feet are not right. In Viet Nam, he jumped from a crashing helicopter and landed feet flat. The impact crushed the bones in his feet. The surgeon was not able to put them back together properly. Dad is a tough Marine. He stills runs his physical fitness tests and tries not to whine too much.

When my mother and I go to visit, he lets me wear special headphones that block the sounds of Phantom jet engines on the landing strip and in the hangar. He lets me help

him work on the engines of the planes with him and the other Marines. At home, I help him change spark plugs on the old Chrysler. I hold the spark plugs as he starts the engine and I am electrocuted. The shock throws me backwards into the elephant ears. He laughs.

We don't visit him at work very often.

When we do visit, my mother always cleans his coffee pot because he doesn't believe in emptying the coffee grounds from the filter. There is always a layer of green mold in the grounds. "It adds flavor." he says. We steal his Marine Corps coffee mug on our visits and bleach out the black slime at the bottom in our sink at home. Dad whines when we do this, because he says we have wrecked the flavor.

In my memory of the moment I threw the 10,000 firecrackers, he is posed like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever, even though he hates disco music. He is wearing a vest with fringes and bright silver buckles that shine in the moonlight. His lips are pursed like a disco duck; he is dancing on his aching feet. His feet are free of the confines of combat boots and black work

socks. His polyester leisure shirt is half unbuttoned. In his hand is the tequila sunrise I made for him. On his arm is the tattoo of his nickname from Viet Nam. Lucky. He is lucky to have survived Viet Nam.

The Marine lights the lighter for me. I am afraid of the firecrackers. I have never seen a strip of 10,000 explode. As soon as the fuse begins to spark, I toss the string in an arc that falls at my dad's feet. In my memory, the music goes quiet. There is no sound. The firecrackers are silent. And then the explosion begins and each single pop sounds like machine gun bullets tearing through the patio.

Dad begins to crouch and curls himself into a ball. He is remembering his school classes as a child and the nuclear blast drills. "Duck and Cover" his teacher tells him. He is remembering being shot down twice in Viet Nam. He is remembering the snakes in the jungles of Viet Nam and how they slithered around him in the dark both times when he was stranded far away from the rescue pilots searching for him in dense clouds of Napalm and Agent Orange. He is on the big island of Hawai'i with his friends hunting boar for a luau. He is alone on the hunt, and the boar is silently waiting to gore him.

Once I was at the roller skating rink. The Disc jockey was spinning an album by Kool and the Gang. It was getting late. I left to take my sweaty feet out of the skates and relax them in the cool lawn. It was a hot Hawaiian summer night.

While I was waiting for my ride, I saw a trash can smoking. I went to put out the fire and my eyes were filled with the sting of an activated tear gas canister that some prankster threw in

the trashcan as a joke. The gas blinded me and made me gasp for air. It felt like 10,000 needles were stabbing into my eyes. A lady came to investigate the smoke and began screaming from the pain of the tear gas, "I can't see. I'm blind. Oh God, someone, help me." Her shrieks made me cower. But I did not scream. I was silent. A nice young Marine lifted me off the grass and carried me to his barracks, where he rinsed my eyes out and wiped my face. But, I did not cry out in the pain.

Then someone yells, "Oh shit!" It is the Martine with the lighter. He is remembering that Dad was in Viet Nam. It seems like a long time, but the string of 10,000 firecrackers has only just begun to ignite. There is nothing we can do to stop them from exploding. Dad's feet are broken and bloody. The precision of my toss

placed the fireworks right under his feet as he was dancing. He continues to dance in an odd mutilated two-step, his body torn between the tendency to duck and cover and to tap dance over the landmine under his feet. Where the music was silent, the air is filled with shrieks.

10,000 evil spirits have been loosed and are tormenting him.

In the morning when my brother wakes me, I will tell him to go look for unspent firecrackers without me. I will never light another fuse as long as I live. Decades later, I will associate the popping of firecrackers with gunfire, with Viet Nam, with Hawai'i, and I will duck and cover wherever I am, filled with memories of war and fear. Forever, I will be haunted by the spirits from the string of firecrackers. They will never be pau with me.

Reverend Jan Becker was born in Carbondale, PA. home of one of the longest continually burning coal mine fires in the United States. She grew up on military bases all over the country. After making a concerted effort to do everything in the world but write, Jan returned to college and earned her BA in English, Creative Writing, and Global Issues from Binghamton University in 2008. She is the recipient of the Andrew Bergman Creative Writing Scholarship, The Academy of American Poets College Prize, and is the first place winner of the Bendixen Award for her creative nonfiction thesis “Haole.” Jan was twice Binghamton University's selection for the AWP Intro Journals Contest, once in poetry, once in nonfiction. She is currently working on her MFA in creative non-fiction at Florida International University.



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