



A JOURNAL OF
LITERATURE
AND ART
STYLUS







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EDITOR'S NOTE

This year we strove to maintain the standards we set last semester while keeping this volume interesting. To that end, there is an octopus on the cover.

This was also the year of the submission database, with all its conveniences and its many, many inconveniences. I had an unbelievably flexible staff wrestling with this beast, and a great technical support team to fix problems when they arose. Most of all I have to thank the submitters for their patience while we transition to this new system. The fact that we had so many more submissions this year than in past years makes me confident that the literary and arts community at Maryland is thriving.

And the submissions! We have such a wonderful variety of work this year, in poetry, prose and art. I'm thrilled with the range of pieces in theme, form, medium, and style.

It's my hope that you get as much enjoyment out of reading *Stylus* as I did in reading the submissions and helping to create the journal. I hope it's something you can return to not just for the novelty, but for the quality of work inside. I hope these poems, stories and art pieces speak to you in a way that sticks with you, because they've certainly stuck with me.

—Steven Yenzler, Editor-in-Chief







POETRY







ANNE PRICE

SELF-PORTRAIT

The head stands out first, of course,
we always want to look at the face.
The head is big and too round,
no room for hair, just smooth wood
to show where skin must have stretched
blue-splotched over the skull, too soft
like an elderly man's. The face—
vague and unfinished, parts grow out
of the grain dumbly, a nose, a brow.
I picture his hands fumbling
with the foreign blade, flaying
this version of his own face, thumbing in
first one eye socket, then another.
Once we are satisfied with the globular head
nosing itself out, we look down to the chest
coming out of the log—but *coming out*
is wrong; a hollow, a hole can't
come out of anything, it can only be
scooped or scraped out by hands,
as his hands must have done
for this concavity, or some other force;
he must have ached over it, back arched,
with the knife, like someone scouring
the inside of a bathtub or a pumpkin.
When he whittled away a second torso,
did it hasten his own hollowing?

PRICE 11





There is something in the wood,
some element of the polish, of the grain
that feels like flesh harmed, grating against
life or air or a hospital cell painted
with colors too neutral, that look too much
like a schoolroom where a child sits
on a wooden seat that is curved
so as to supposedly conform to the body
in one smooth movement, like our bodies
should fit into one another's in sleep.





STONE SOUP, OR ON YOUTHFUL ENTHUSIASM

1.

A mother bends over a stove, her head
is filled with less than voices. Memory is a mouth
gnawing on rock. Her architecture
is bent and humbled with age; she fills
the emptiness with her own voice
in mutters. In the boiling water, soup stones
clank together angrily.

2.

In a flagstone courtyard, a child's face
perched on a third-story windowsill
like a flowerpot: he watches the crowd below,
grey bodies beating against one another
like wings heavy with dust. Call it combat
or sex. He doesn't understand
but feels a cathedral blooming in his spine.

3.

She remembers her childhood,
before she pounded off for a city
with one pair of shoes, when buildings
were low and wooden. She thinks
it must have been better, there were rocks
in the dirt. Her child's eyes
only reflect high apartments now.

PRICE 13





LYONS GEORGE
I KNEW A GIRL

but then I broke her,
and what a refreshing,
godly thing it was,

to watch as I
slowly pressed her love
back into her, teaching

by pressures the pain
of too much. Last
night, while everyone

laughed, I scarred the
skin of my arm
with a cigarette's orange,

pretending as I burned
that I was her, thinking
(as she does) not of

the moment itself, two
bodies melting into
a makeshift union, but

instead of the anticipation,
the hours spent drinking in
fear or waiting for





a call, nothing to do
but start feeling ashamed
for the mark on my shoulder,

the stain on her
dress, the part of her
that has suddenly been

shoved into me.
The same part that
ruled over her all those

months, the part
that simmered in her beautiful,
starving body; the same

part that rules over me
now, always holding fire to
my flesh,

mouthed quietly through it
all my slipshod infant prayer,
fuck me fuck me fuck me.





ADAM PELLEGRINI
THE ARGUMENT

You say there's an old man living in me
and I feel it. Every day he's stronger,
so I'm less. Meaning these are his greys
fogging my scalp. His mouth
grating molars all night. He's here
in my stomach playing my bowels.

But you're wrong.
They're not my father's sighs
sounding nosehair and cilia.
Not his name slam
danced into sound.

No, the old man you say grips
my face as a telescope,
who turns your love away
to finish his page, is something
other. You're right. I'm nauseous
in traffic. My dreams sweat in bedsheets.
I sometimes forget.





LARISA HOHENBOKEN
HOW TO WAIT

I.
Sit on the edge of your chair,
close to falling.
Let the light pool around
your fingertips.

Hold a shard
of chocolate, rich
and black like fertile ground
on the tip of your tongue.
Let it dissolve
with sips of tea.

Bite the skin
around your nails.
Ingest your own debris.

II.
Know the phone will ring,
and you will answer.
Slide it open like the soft
and yielding clams
your grandmother would serve,
steaming, in the singing summer
evenings of your youth.

HOHENBOKEN 17





Hold it close to your mouth.
Your lover will be there
inside, an invisible homunculus
dancing in the wires.





LARISA HOHENBOKEN
PAPER CRANES

A girl like a small bird
hovers at the edge
of sight, ephemeral and
familiar as sparrows.

Outside, a sudden cry
of geese. I picture them lifting, heavy
while the ground still holds them,
think on this new obsession
with wings—the silhouette
of a bird in flight, starkly
puncturing the sky.

Copying Magritte's *L'entrée
en Scène* in a yellow
sixth-grade classroom,
my pigeon is knobby
robin's-egg clouds of blue
against a spray of stars.
The endless pricking drizzle
is thrumming at the windowpanes.

Your work is successful,
he said, *but you don't take*
risks. I render stark angles
of paper cranes, methodical,





*meticulous. I've seen you draw;
it's more like science than art.
You don't set yourself problems
large enough to fall.*

She leans over, bringing life
to drifting koi. Overgrown bangs
about the eyes, hands small,
like mine, but delicate.
A skeleton made perhaps
of glass, the way her fingers
taper lightly.

Shapely fish form beneath
her fingertips, repeating
in white-dappled-orange,
red-black, gold.





GABRIELLE DUNKLEY
UNTIL THE HIGHER STOPS

Gravel is failure
flavored.

He sits and
eats it alone—

watching the
pavement-impaired

feast on air.

Painted jungle gyms
and copper

swing sets squeal along
with them

dropping children here
and there—

until the *higher*
stops. Mothers watch

their watches
as children's sirens die out.

DUNKLEY 21





Their open fists
turn limp

after remembering what
comes after *higher*.

Clusters of palms open
like 4 o'clock flowers

catching the fallers
trying to fly.

He sits and waits for
the thump of a new friend.





STEVEN YENZER
STAGING

I.

His chest is a warehouse full of yellow beetles that hid away in a shipment from Taiwan. In the past few months they have burrowed out of their brown boxes and laid eggs everywhere—in the night it's too dark to see but you can hear them clicking their mouths as they sleep.

II.

This is the kind of thing you talk around. You think her skin is too thin to hold her. You think that something is building cities inside her body. You have learned where it is best to hide these things: behind your ribs, above your lungs, tucked into your shoulder blade and just out of sight of the x-rays.

III.

You have already constructed the bridges and byways necessary for this loss. Your neurons are waiting like sad men inside grey cars. Do not give them false hope—they will return to their homes, dizzy with freedom. They will think that they are no longer needed. They will be making coffee and playing ping-pong when you call them back. They will be unhappy and may lose their way.

IV.

The police find you drowned in your mid-90s sedan, clown-faced against the driver's side window. When they open the door, a wave of briney water soaks them up to their shaking knees. As they kick sopping tissues from their shoes, the sure-footed young detective bends to touch his finger to the liquid, then to his tongue. "Hmm," he says, and nods.





STEVEN YENZER

LEISURE WORLD

Inside the highest room in Leisure World,
my grandma taps the ashes from her Kool.
They form a snowy pile on the floor.
Below her, active adults water lace-
leaf maples, prune hydrangeas. Fifty-five
or better, they appreciate the peace
afforded them by isolation—by
the gates and guards. My grandma knows the peace.
The peace is in her condominium.
It stalks the foyer, waits for footsteps in the hall
to lock the door and muffle the knock.
Or is it gentler? Rattling the pipes
at night to play the poltergeist, to bring
to mind her husband, buried years ago.
Or is the peace a thing at all? A room
lit with a television set. A bed
of stale sheets. A window built to stay shut.
Nylon flowers dewed with glue-gun droplets.





STEVEN YENZER

94 BONES

“When you’re born you have 300 bones, but by adulthood you have only 206. The 94 bones that ‘disappear’ actually fuse with other bones, such as the separate pieces of skullcap that combine to become the skull.”

—*The Little Giant Book of Science Facts*

24. The boy finds a dead bird in his driveway. Its stomach is swollen and wrapped in blue veins. He digs a grave with a hand spade and buries it under the back porch.

68. The older boys tease him when he drops his pants to the floor to pee at the urinal.

56. His parents won’t answer their phones. For three hours he calls, over and over. He cries with his forehead against the sliding-glass door—he thinks they are dead.

52. At a sleepover, his friend tells him that sometimes the cat will nuzzle up to sleeping guests. After his friend falls asleep, the boy waits. He makes soft clicks with his mouth to draw the cat.

34. In a hotel bed above an arcade, he throws up into a trash can. His mother wraps herself around his shaking body, cold beneath many covers. All night, a man with a megaphone tells the people on the boardwalk rides to hold on tight.

77. An older girl offers palm readings for a nickel at daycare. The boy hides his erection under a pillow.





83. He tries to get in a fight with another boy who is heavy and red-lipped. He pushes his hands into the other boy's stomach and chest, but the other boy won't fight back—he only cries.

71. He eats dinner at the house of a friend, where each family member's name begins with B. The friend's father asks the boy not to say "Jesus!" so much. The boy decides that he definitely doesn't believe in God.

60. The boy's friend breaks her leg in a hole in his backyard. At school she walks with crutches and the teachers are nice to her. Her classmates sign her cast. When his parents leave, the boy sprints across the hole over and over, hoping for an accident.

21. While their house is being remodeled, the family stays with the boy's grandparents. The room he sleeps in was his father's, and he searches the empty drawers, looking for stuffed animals or toys.

28. His father holds the boy's hand while they cross a creek. His father knew this creek as a child. On the other side, the ground slopes up to train tracks, and beyond that, a clearing with tall grass. Here they find the bones of a stag, its horns pale and bare, its skull strangely jagged, its ribcage like a container for some absent thing.





SAVANNAH O'TOOLE RENEHAN
VINIFICATION

The car is quiet, stifling. My aunt Connie doesn't believe in music, only listens to recorded homilies from old Pray-O-thons; I do not believe in prayer. She looks at me to baptize; sizing me up to see how much water it would take to purify.

Outside acres of dying trees line the highway and strip dance for our car passing at sixty miles per hour. They toss leaves from nearly bare limbs like lingerie, littering the tar; Constance sees Christ.

I am stronger outside, nailed to those brown-kissed sentinels who shimmy sexily. They say, in Oklahoma, the barley whispers, caressing long stalks, interlocking spines. My fornicating fields of grain are her Eucharist.

Before it blends with hops, barley slow dances to the red setting sun, the breeze keeping harmony between sways. Connie thinks alcohol is sinful and from the back seat of her car my head begins to flower.

RENEHAN 27







PROSE







DAVID HATTON | SPIT ON A STRANGER

If you were walking behind him in a hallway and you yelled his name he couldn't hear you. Because if you have ever tried to make music with earplugs in it just doesn't sound the same. And from behind his hair looked like broken old guitar strings that scraped at his shoulders.¹ Some of his hair grew out of the words on his shirt and connected to his head. In black sharpie he had written "life is what you want it to be, so..." and if you wanted his attention you would yell "...don't get tangled up trying to be free and don't worry what the other people see it's nothing" and he would turn around, and when you are seventeen those words mean everything to you.²

I learned in chemistry, where he sat next to me, that when you are a smoker the most comforting³ thing in the world is the smell of your own fingers.

Kim's pink hair was catching all the particles from the spotlights and projecting them on to the back wall of the school's auditorium. It was just her, a piano, and an angry pink splotch hovering behind her. She was trying to say that wild horses couldn't tear⁴ her away, but she was sobbing the whole time. I knew what she meant.

The night before, he and Kim danced next to his car in an empty parking garage.⁵ She told me it was like the movies and the song was "Kill Yr Idols" because it was something they could feel.

Chris sat in the back corner of the church⁶ with his head resting on the pew in front of him. When the school's counselor sat down next to him he loudly told her to go fuck herself.

They played "Stairway to Heaven" over the loudspeaker during 4th period the next day. I wanted to spit in the face of the kid next to me.⁷ These people weren't worthy of this story.

The night after the funeral Chris carved the name⁸ in four-foot letters on his bedroom wall, he took shrooms for the first time and stared at the name on his wall. Chris broke every piece of glass in the house. His family had to hide in a bedroom and call the police.⁹ When the police came they found him rolling in broken glass, rubbing the wreckage all over his body, and covered in his own blood.





-
- ¹ It was probably a shotgun and he probably got the shotgun from his dad's closet.
- ² And when you are eighteen you ask what happened to that shirt. Kim tells you that they threw it away because he was wearing it when he shot himself.
- ³ His brother and his best friend found him.
- ⁴ Sometimes I wonder about the mess, about what his head might have looked like.
- ⁵ I like to hope not that it was painless, but that it was instantaneous.
- ⁶ His funeral was a mockery of his life. It was in a Catholic church. He had a Led Zeppelin casket cover. The priest talked about how he loved books and Chris wanted to run up, throw open the casket, punch him in the face, take a piss on his body, fucking something, but not this. He would have loved it.
- ⁷ I'm using him now.
- ⁸ I won't use his name, it will make it better.
- ⁹ I should stop now.





DAVID HATTON | **GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

I.

Grandpa Kent called most women Samantha. He had trouble with names, so that woman that lived down the street was “some Samantha.” Grandpa Kent approaches most things in life the way he does Samanthas. He piloted a landing craft on Omaha beach at Normandy when he was my age. He delivered a lot of “poor fucking Johnnies to machine guns.” When he came back he was restless. “Useless as tits on a boar hog.” So, he went up to Alaska and became a bush pilot for a while. At some point he met some Samantha and decided to settle down. He didn’t want to work, but decided he better paint houses in the summer so he could support his five kids.

This Samantha had her Masters in English from someplace in Indiana. This allowed her to sit on the couch, watch soap operas, and tell her kids that they shouldn’t end their sentences with prepositions. This also allowed her to sit in a folding chair in the back-yard, chain smoke, throw her butts over the fence into the neighbor’s hibiscuses, and tell her kids that ain’t still isn’t a word.

II.

When Portuguese and English traders that didn’t speak the same languages got together they had to find a way to communicate. They invented their own language that was halfway between the two. One of the first phrases to come of this was “tief tief tief, God laugh.”

III.

Through the window in Grandma Kent’s family room we can see Mt. Diablo erupt. The sky slowly turns grey and falls down to the ground in little flecks. “Where is Grandpa at?” The last thing I hear is that I shouldn’t end my sentences with prepositions. Filled with ash and words my grandma’s mouth is forever correcting. My ears are forever being corrected. One hundred years from now, someone will excavate





the ash from around our bodies and make plaster casts of everything. Small children will sneak into the dig late at night and steal perfectly preserved small scraps of paper. One of them will ask the other “what does ‘useless as tits on a boar hog’ mean?” When a thief steals from a thief, God laughs.





MEGAN STETZ | **NADIA ON HER KNEES**

Nadia was on her knees. Her sister's head leaned back against the tree in their backyard. I wish she would put her legs away. I didn't want to see them anymore.

It was August, two months after my birthday. I turned 17. Amy and Nadia lived next door to me. Amy's legs were cut open. She fell off the deck onto a thorn bush. Amy was one year younger than me. Her legs were one year younger than me, but her legs looked like my mothers. They were swollen and had spider veins that slid across her thighs like tights.

I had a pair of opaque, tights in my backpack. My mom bought them for me at Target when my sister came over. My sister's face had aged terribly. In the aisle, my sister told me that these tights covered all the right places. She squeezed my stomach, pressed her palms against my lower ribs. She told me I didn't need the tights. I didn't need the tights and I offered them to Amy.

"Here." I tossed the tights into her lap.

"I don't wear size 1," Amy said.

"What the fuck, Anna, why do you always call us fat?" Nadia spat at the ground.

Amy's hands were shaking. She rubbed her palms against her legs. She smeared the blood on her hands across the grass.

"Nadia, go to the garage and get me a cigarette."

"Anna, go to the house and get us a big bowl of fried chicken. I don't think I'll have enough energy to make it to the garage without it." Nadia didn't look at me when she said that.

I left and Nadia remained on her knees. I walked behind their fence and looked at them through the crack. Nadia put her lips to Amy's knee.

"I want to get really sick. I don't like it here anymore." Nadia pressed her tongue into Amy's knee.

"I want to get really sick."

I walked back to my house and opened the sliding glass door. My





mom was asleep on the couch watching Judge Judy. She heard me walk in, inhaled slowly and closed her eyes again. Upstairs I sat at my desk and woke the monitor up. There was an instant message flashing on my screen, but I was uninterested, so I logged onto Neopets and played a game for forty minutes. After I submitted three high scores I decided to check my message. It was Brittany asking me to come over.

I went outside and walked the block to her house. Her dad decided to pin up a French flag over the doorway to impress some exotic teacher. Someone wrote “FRENCH FAGS” on her mailbox. It was all pretty funny. I knocked and she immediately opened the door. She had a rubber play ball stuffed under her shirt and an unlit cigarette in her mouth. Her shirt was ripped just enough for her midriff to hang out and her cut offs stretched against her thighs.

“What do you think? Trashy enough to make Darren cream himself?” She let me in and I took off my shoes.

“Darren likes it kinky you know.”

She said this in such a way that it sounded almost like a slogan for some pathetic sex company. Honestly, Brittany made me feel bad and her life made me depressed. Now that she found the joys of mutual masturbation and oral sex, I have really become nothing more than a living diary for her to recount all her sexy encounters with people I found boring and ugly.

“We like to role play.”

In all actuality I thought her role-playing redneck was too close to reality to even be considered role-playing. She talked with this southern drawl and wore too much mascara to be native to the northeast. I was feeling restless and rubbed my feet against the carpet.

“I wish I was pregnant.” I said. “It’s such a good look.”

I sat down on the floor. Brittany came over and let me rub her pretend stomach.

Amy and Nadia knocked on the door and Brittany let them in. Amy had cleaned up her legs and Nadia looked the same. Amy was thinner than Nadia and her hair wasn’t as oily. They were too fat to be considered attractive to boys in high school, but I thought Amy had a pretty face. Fuck Nadia.

“Brittany! It’s like looking into the future!” Amy laughed when she looked at Brittany. Amy wasn’t known to have incredible wit, but I thought this was pretty funny and I laughed a little bit and shifted my position on the floor. I was laying on my stomach now.





“You’re just jealous that I’m going to have a thick dick in me in an hour and you won’t have that for ten years because no one will fuck you.”

Brittany went to the kitchen and got three sodas. She didn’t get one for Nadia. She was only a year older than Nadia but she thought Nadia was little and boring and often didn’t include her in a lot of things.

“I don’t want a freckled dick in me anyway.” Amy said to Brittany. She popped a few chocolate candies in her mouth. They got caught in her teeth and I saw them when she smiled at me.

“At least I’m getting fucked.”

Brittany used this as a validation for her life, but I found her really boring and unattractive. No one really cared, except maybe Nadia who idolized her in a way. Amy started to crack her fingers and hummed some popular song. I didn’t want to hang out with them any more. I was getting restless and began to slap my hands against my knees. Also, Brittany’s house smelled like garbage and perfume from the fragrance section of a Kmart and it was making me dizzy. Nadia fumbled with some body glitter roller she found under the coffee table she was sitting on. It was blueberry scented.

“Hey, give that to me.”

Nadia gave the roller to Brittany and she rubbed it on her chest and arms. Then she rubbed some on her legs and her neck.

“Damn. I look fucking good as shit.”

“Yeah, good as shit.” I said and rolled over on my back.

“I’m going to taste like fucking blueberries for him. Sometimes he puts this flavor jelly on his dick and it tastes like watermelons.”

“I hate watermelon flavoring. It tastes like shit.” I rubbed my arms and legs.

“I’m good as shit.” Amy said.

“Blueberry is better anyway. I hope he kisses my neck so he can taste it. Maybe I’ll have him fuck my tits so his dick will be covered in the blueberry glitter and then I will suck him off.” Brittany lifted her shirt and rubbed glitter between her breasts and under her bra. The rubber ball fell on the floor.

“Good as shit.” Amy said again.

“You know the glitter is scented not flavored.”

“Shut up, Anna.” Nadia and Brittany said this together.

“Shut up, Nadia.” Brittany said.

I smiled at Amy who began to rub her toenails with her thumb. I picked up the rubber ball and stuffed it under my shirt then looked in the mirror.

“Beautiful as shit.”





ADAM FISHBEIN | AS A CHILD

They learned about the shapes and after that Seung-Hui Cho pictured everything in terms of them. The classroom was a cube. He was inside that cube. The teacher stood at front, also inside that cube. The teacher's body was a rectangle and his head a sphere. Seung sat in a chair. The chair he sat on was blue. Other chairs were other colors. This he knew.

"And Seung what shape is this?" the teacher asked, pointing to a triangular prism on the chart. "The shape right here, next to the cube. Notice what other shapes it's made up of."

The teacher, Mr. Blush, walked up to Seung, who had not answered. Seung stared, unblinking, his mouth pursed tightly.

At his work table sat three other kids, a boy and a girl who were passing a figurine between them, twisting the arms and legs back and around in directions they were not supposed to go, and another boy who doodled a frog with a tongue that hung like a deflated balloon.

The teacher leaned over, whispered at Seung's ear: "You know the answer Seung, why don't you answer." Seung pulled away from him, his eyes rotating to remained fixed on the wall ahead. With his elbow, Seung slid a piece of paper to the teacher on which the answer was written. Blush looked at the paper and crumbled it in his closed palm. "I can see that you wrote it," Blush said. "I want you to say it."

Blush hung beside him, his eyes wide open and friendly, but Seung did not speak. The class grew impatient.

"It's a triangular prism," a girl shouted.

Blush ducked away from Seung. "That is co-rect" he announced with the cadence and pinched falsetto of a game show host, "Raise your hand next time Sarah... But that is co-rect."

He tap-danced across the room and continued in character: "Now for a sticker, a sticker of the animal of the day, somebody tell me, *what* is the capital of Tennessee..."

All the kids, even those who did not know the answer, threw up their hands, offering *ooo* and *I know it*.

But Blush continued: "...Seung?"





Seung's face curled back, his cheek muscles tightening. A pink tip of tongue peaked out of his mouth.

Blush repeated: "Seung..."

Seung caught sight of the frog drawn by the boy across of him. The boy had given it slanted eyes. "Seung, I know you want that sticker ..." The teacher displayed the sticker stuck onto his index finger. Seung squinted to see it, a frog, green and serene. "Animal of the day ... you know you want it." The kids were jumping in their seats, pouting to be picked, airing guttural sounds of frustration.

"Seung..."

Seung's fingers tapped like daggers at his desk. He blinked hard.

"We're waiting on you... Don't answer and I'll assume you don't know it."

He blinked hard again, his stomach and ribs shaking as Blush said "Alright then," and on the chalkboard began to write the letter N. Finished. Then, continued to the letter A.

Seung spit his tongue fully out of his mouth, a tensed sliver of pink.

"Guess... you... don't... know... it."

Seung lifted his teeth from the blade of his tongue. A spit bubble developed as he did so. He pulled his legs to his chest, the heels of his square, white foreign-looking shoes coming to rest on the chair. He stuck out his head, and in a throaty voice uttered, "Ri—bit... Nashville... Riiii-biiit."

Blush's eyes ballooned at the words. He twisted away from the chalkboard to see Seung.

"Correct," Blush said softly. "Correct." The class began to laugh. Blush closed his fist to hide the frog sticker.

The class mimicked: *ribbit ... ribbit ... ribbit*.

"Alright don't laugh, don't laugh."

The kids laughed harder. *Ribbit ... ribbit ... ribbit*.

Seung squeezed all parts of his body tight, and did not move as everyone laughed and the boy across from him offered his hand for a high-five. Held it up. Seung looked away, his tongue remaining protracted as though paralyzed mid-lash. Mr. Blush made a sound like a loud sneeze and hurried out of the room, having broken into laughter.

The class surrounded Seung and asked him to say it again, say it again. They tugged on his sleeves and one girl even tried to hug him.

But Seung looked away and did not move and thought to himself, *I was laughed at. I was laughed at. I was laughed at.*





SAVANNAH O'TOOLE RENEHAN | **SEX AND THE LETTER B**

It all started in Mrs. Peterson's kindergarten classroom, sitting on the alphabet rug; I peed my pants. She was reading a story about The Little River That Could; I doubt she meant the one running down my legs. The letter B would never be the same.

The first lie I remember telling was to my first grade teacher. She wanted to invite parents with interesting careers to come talk to the class. I told her my daddy was a firefighter; imagine her surprise when my father started talking about the joys of being a locksmith.

By fourth grade I was nicknamed Brillo Head for the untamable sponge of curls and frizz my mother called hair. Like the pencils, pieces of paper, and occasional wad of gum kids threw at my Cau-fro, the nickname stuck. In yearbook pictures my hair permeated the assigned inch by two-inch square; I burned the proofs.

I used to write short stories about all the kids that hated me. I wrote that Jeremy Davis had an uncontrollable case of diarrhea, made all of Sarah Connor's hair fall out because of an allergic reaction to being a bitch, and pushed Kathleen Turner into an abyss, nobody went looking for her.

For almost a week my little sister was convinced that I was a guardian angel sent by God to watch over her. I had her waiting on me, hand and foot, before my mother caught on. I had to write I will not tell lies 500 times on pages of loose leaf.

In Mr. Brady's seventh grade science lab my biology textbook caught on fire. I watched a cell's nucleus burn red-orange before thick smoke swallowed the illustration. The ends of my hair sizzled.

Note to self: I regret not being braver, not brushing my hair out to full cotton candy status and walking through school like I was the shit.

Melodramatic. My mother used to call me Eeyore, told me I should try to be more Tiggerific like little my sister. I explained to her that someone who relies on Disney characters to make a point must have Pooh for brains.





When I switched schools in the eighth grade, I told my new classmates I had moved to Maryland from Los Angeles and that I was part of the witness protection program. I later elaborated that I had witnessed a crime and gang members had been harassing me before we moved. I am not sure anyone believed me.

I was grounded for a week when I told my mother about seeing Samantha McPherson give Joey Holdback a “blow job” on the back of the bus to King’s Dominion. Supposedly, going to the bathroom and accidentally witnessing a sin, made me a sinner. I had been a tomboy up until that point, but after seeing the male anatomy up close I was never more grateful to be a girl.

My parents forced me to go to an all-girls Catholic high school; there were nuns, enough said. Except that it’s true what they say about Catholic schoolgirls, bunch of ho-bags. The girls at lunch taught me how to fake an orgasm, which sex toys were the best, and how to round the bases without the guy thinking you’re a slut. The archdiocese’s approved Christian Sexuality curriculum included how to get and keep a husband, table etiquette, and how condoms and birth control equaled one-way tickets to hell.

My first psuedo-boyfriend was a liar. His name was Ben. We dated for two months before he introduced me to his girlfriend of a little over a year. Sometime later he joined the military but was dishonorably discharged because of his new-found passion for shrooms. Gotta love karma.

Senior year I applied for a passport and bought a one-way ticket to Malaysia as a graduation present to myself. The only thing I knew about Malaysia was that it didn’t start with the letter B; I had become somewhat superstitious, stupid alphabet rug. In any case, I couldn’t get a ride to the airport and spent my departure time playing Sega. The ticket’s been taped to my computer monitor for years.

I haven’t been able to lie with a straight face since high school. My sister thinks it has something to do with the hair of the dog that bit me. Something about how my subconscious is unwilling to do unto others what had screwed it over in the first place. I think she is giving Ben the Bastard too much credit, who knows.

My cousin died in Afghanistan during my first year of college. My overactive imagination made for some interesting nightmares, which were clearly segments from the movies Saving Private Ryan and Glory. I watched him die night after night in Hollywood’s rendition of war; my hand clasped over a makeshift helmet, my feet twisting in the ground. I





begged the earth to swallow me the way waves at the beach bury children's feet beneath wet sand. When I close my eyes I can still hear him laughing.

My first kiss happened under a jungle gym in a playground off campus, I was 20, we were drunk, he slobbered.

The twin towers came down while I was on the shitter at a friend's house. When I came out of the bathroom, everyone's faces looked horrified. I spun around checking for God knows what and sniffing in confusion before I noticed the television.

I took a job bartending, the uniforms were skimpy but my pockets were full. I blew most of it drinking after hours at other bars around town. Tequila became a stalker ex-boyfriend, always wrecking havoc in unexpected moments, like pancake brunch with my grandmother. If left unchecked the persuasive bastard was known to convince me to make out with rubber chickens, traverse two story parking garages, or plie on table tops.

I lost my virginity in the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday. I put on a Carbon Leaf CD and tried not to watch. A couple minutes later we got dressed to meet my mom for lunch at the Union. Eating at Burger King is still an awkward experience.

On days when the sky is really blue, like a crayon color, and cloudless, my insides feel hollow. An aching from the pit of some organ or another swallows upward. I grab a cheeseburger, fries, and a milkshake hoping the trans fat will stifle the feeling.

My college graduation party consisted of me, *The Notebook* and a bottle of Jose. That night, in my best Rachel McAdam's impersonation, I informed the police officer that I was a bird, flapping my arms neurotically. He informed me that anything I said could and would be held against me.

I met my third boyfriend in jail. He was a reporter held in contempt of court, I was drunk. Fucking tequila. Our sex always felt editorial.

The last fight my parents had before the divorce was at a family friend's Halloween party. My father was dressed as a nerd, wearing suspenders, pants pulled up to his chest that left his ankles bare, knee-high socks, horn-rimmed glasses, a pocket protector, and he had greased his hair and combed it over to the side. My mother was a flapper. My father's face turned beet red as he berated my mother in the woods off the front of the house. Meanwhile my mom's co-worker made side comments like "It's revenge of the nerds" and "Snap his suspenders, flapper girl" from the front porch.

My brother came out to the family and my parents disowned him.





I offered him co-presidency of The Disappointments and Dysfunctionals Association. We took bets on how long it would take for the rest of the family to become members.

We all have our secrets.

Sometimes, the world starts to fold in on itself. Like right out of an Indiana Jones movie, invisible walls start closing in, squeezing my chest against my lungs until I can't breathe. I paid out of pocket to see a doctor about what I thought might be asthma, he said my lungs looked fine.

I dumped Eric, the reporter, whose real name was Bryan or Bobby or something. I told him I didn't date men whose names started with the letter B and that renaming him wouldn't break the curse, but men don't listen to logic. I took his advice and started writing a book of memoirs. I wasn't a geisha but I figured people would read anything with Sex in the title. I titled my semi autobiography *Sex and the No Good, Stupid, Fucking Letter B* (which later got edited and censored).

Bringing in 2009 felt like counting down my life, 3-2-1, confetti.





TRICIA SMITH | TAKE CARE OF YOU

“Gracie?”

The voice was familiar, but I couldn’t place it right away. He said my name gently, tentatively, like he wasn’t sure if it was really me or not. That wasn’t the case; I was sure he recognized me, he just didn’t know if I hated him or not.

“Hi Dan.”

I twitched the corners of mouth up into a tiny smile, and he looked relieved. Maybe I should have said ‘hello’ instead, I didn’t want to sound too friendly. It didn’t matter, Dan and I weren’t really friends. Once he had decided that I wasn’t holding anything against him he would leave it at that—the difference between me being completely okay with him or barely okay with him didn’t mean anything, just as long as I didn’t hate him. Dan is the kind of person who has no problem admitting that he cares what people think of him. You can tell just from the way he looks. His hair is somewhere between crew-cut short and rock-star shaggy, an indeterminate shade of dark blonde or light brown. He wears nice sneakers—not gym shoes, but nothing overly trendy, either. He had on jeans and a grey t-shirt; Dan never wears t-shirts with anything printed on them, you could never know right away what his sports team was, or which concerts he’d been to. It was a very inoffensive look. The only thing imposing about Dan was his height; he was just over six feet, but he always looked like he was sorry about it.

While I was thinking about Dan’s bland look, he had been talking about the weather. He said it had been “hot, but not too hot.” He put his hands in his pockets and took them out again. Once, twice, three times. I looked up at him expectantly. He was going to ask.

“So how’s Andrea been?”

There it is.

“She’s fine. I’m actually on my way over there right now, we’re supposed to have lunch.”

I shouldn’t have said fine. Fine implied that she was previously dev-





astated and had now progressed to being fine. It was a stupid, half-assed adjective that people used when they were lying about how they really felt. I should have said, “Great” or, even better, “Doing well.” “She’s doing well” conjured up images of a productive, happy Andrea, without the obvious stretch that ‘great’ presented. Hell, even I wasn’t doing great. But the lunch lie was a good one, not that I was worried about Dan figuring out that I was making all this up.

The truth was that I had already eaten lunch at work, and Andrea was far from fine. The more I thought about the lunch lie, the more ironic I realized it was. Andrea hadn’t eaten anything resembling an actual meal in weeks, let alone in a restaurant with other human beings. Sure, there were cracker crumbs and grilled cheese fragments littering her apartment, from the days I’d tried to intervene and make her eat something—anything. Sure, I often pretended that a sleeve of Saltines counted as lunch, but that’s just because working the customer service phone line at cable company doesn’t really afford me the opportunity to order in very much. The people in the cubicles around me would go out to a café across the street and bring back big salads in purple containers. They never asked me to go with them, but I probably would have said no if they did.

Dan was saying something about lunch now. A girl had materialized and was standing beside him, a little behind. Quite close. I raised my eyebrows in her direction and she smiled. Dan looked a little uncomfortable, but not as much as I would have liked.

“Oh, sorry. Gracie this is Leah.”

Not ‘my friend Leah’. Not ‘this is Leah, we work together’. Certainly not ‘Leah, my cousin from Jersey’. She was cute, and in a way you couldn’t hate her for. She wasn’t skinny-sexy-blonde, in fact, Andrea was closer to all three of those things than this girl would ever be. She was short, with brown hair and brown eyes. She had a pretty large chest, and if she was wearing some low-cut pink sweater, I could have hated her for that. But she was wearing a green Pretenders t-shirt and a faded denim jacket. I needed to leave.

“Nice to meet you. It was good seeing you Dan, but I’ve really got to run if I’m not going to be late meeting Andrea.”

I left them standing there on the street and started walking toward my car. I hoped Leah didn’t know who Andrea was, and that she would





ask. Dan would say, “You know, some girl I used to date,” and she would press him to tell her more. The new girlfriend always wants to know about the old girlfriend. I hoped that she would see him as some kind of monster—anyone who could leave a person so destroyed surely had to be some type of villain. Only he wasn’t. He would tell his new girlfriend that he and Andrea broke up because of “mutual differences” and that he hasn’t seen or spoken with her since, but he thinks she’s doing fine. And all that would be true. I wanted some reason to hate him, to find out that he had been involved in negotiations with Leah before he broke it off with Andrea, or that he had been maligning Andrea to his friends for the past month. I wanted to somehow be justified in keying his car or spreading some ugly rumor about thumb sucking or erectile dysfunction. Instead, because he hadn’t done anything wrong, I was stuck watching my friend wallow in her own quiet desperation while Dan went on dates and had no idea how filthy Andrea’s apartment had gotten.

When I got to her door, I didn’t even bother knocking, just let myself in. There were more keys to Andrea’s apartment floating around than I even wanted to think about. The day she moved in to the tiny one-bedroom, we celebrated with cheap pink champagne in red plastic cups. I was so excited for her, and just a little jealous. I had never had my own apartment. Even now, I don’t know what that feels like. I rent a tiny room in a house owned by a lady with three shrill parrots and a symphony of groaning pipes. I’m pretty sure the man who lives across the hall from me is a serial killer. So when Andrea gave me a copy of her key, I felt honored, the way you do when someone tells you a secret and says, “You’re the only person who knows this, but...”

That honor dissolved once I became one of many key holders. Both of Andrea’s parents had a copy, even her father, who lived 1,000 miles away in Illinois. Her brother, who never came to visit her anyway, had one. Dan, of course. When she’d had a puppy last year she gave a key to her neighbor across the hall, so he could feed the dog when she went out of town once. She took that un-house trainable dog to the humane society after four weeks, but never bothered to get her key back. At one point, there had been one under her doormat, but I convinced her that she had crossed the line from being welcoming to inviting rapist criminals into her home. If she ever lost her key, I told her, she had more than enough people she could call.





I walked inside and the difference in smell was staggering. Outside in the hallway the air smelled like carpet shampoo and the little puffs of floral air freshener that got squirted out by a hanging plastic device every nine minutes. Inside, Andrea's apartment smelled like a garbage heap that someone had doused in vinegar and lit on fire.

"Andrea?" I called back towards her bedroom, "where are you? And why does it smell like sh—holy God, ugh!" I passed her tiny bathroom and the smell crawled full force up my nostrils. I turned, already disgusted, and saw that she had thrown up. Her bathroom was so small that the shower, sink and toilet took up almost every inch of available space, but she had somehow managed to miss these completely and vomit all over the two square feet of tile floor.

Right after she and Dan split up she had started drinking pretty heavily. I thought it was a good sign—she would get plastered that weekend, skip work for a couple of days to nurse her hangover and eat mint chocolate chip in her pajamas, and then she'd be back in working order. But that wasn't how it had worked out. Even after four years of boozy college parties, I had never seen Andrea drink as much as she did that first night. She had never had any problems handling herself before when she was drinking, even that infamous nine-margarita night over spring break. After watching Andrea stop crying only long enough so that she could throw up, I decided that moving her straight into the ice cream phase would be a good idea. I had carted all the alcohol out of the apartment weeks ago. I felt like I could use a drink right about then.

I walked into her tiny bedroom and saw her sprawled on her bed. Her head was at the end where her feet should have been, her hair wet and tangled. She was only wearing one sock, and her bare foot was resting on her pillow, the dark blue nail polish half chipped off. None of the walls in Andrea's apartment were painted, but the walls in her bedroom were a dizzying technicolor from all the pictures she had taped up. Pictures of the two of us, grinning in matching blue sweatshirts at a UConn basketball game. Andrea and her brother on the beach at a family reunion, sunburned and smiling. And Dan and Andrea. Dozens of pictures of the two of them; dressed up for Andrea's birthday dinner, wearing wet cutoffs while washing Dan's car, standing in front of a roller coaster at an amusement park holding blue cotton candy. There were at least four pictures of

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them kissing, all taken by Andrea. Each one had some awkward fragment of her arm, or cut out part of her face because of how Andrea had reached out her arm to take the picture. I had very few pictures of myself with ex-boyfriends at all, never mind pictures like these. On special occasions—my graduation, or the time my ex won the tennis championship—I had asked a safe-looking stranger to take a picture us, but I couldn't imagine stretching out my arm to take a picture of us kissing. Even more tawdry than telling someone to say cheese—telling your boyfriend, "Here, kiss me for this picture."

Andrea had been staring at these pictures for weeks, no doubt collapsing into a fit of fresh sobs every time. I placed my hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. I was afraid that shaking her even a little might cause her to find another inconvenient place to throw up. "Andrea," I said a little louder than a whisper.

She groaned and pried her eyes open. She was so used to having me in her apartment that she didn't show any alarm at having someone in her room that she had clearly not invited. "What did you drink last night?" I asked.

"Nothing," she croaked, turning her head toward the wall.

"Alright, well I'm going to go find you something to fix the hangover you don't have."

I walked into the kitchen and found it right away, sitting next to an ancient orange growing mold that looked like the felt on a pool table. Sprite is the perfect hangover cure; there is something about the bubbles, and the taste—it feels cleaner than water. I picked up the half-empty two-liter and twisted the cap off. No fizz, not even a weak hiss of bubbles. I drank some straight from the bottle and it was beyond flat—it was stagnant. I filled a relatively clean glass with tap water and carried it into Andrea's bedroom, along with the primordial Sprite.

"How long has this been out there? If you have milk this old in the fridge, we might need to call in a hazmat team." She raised her eyebrows at the Sprite and I set the glass of water down beside her. She was sitting up in bed now, leaning against the wall as if it were the only thing keeping her from collapsing. She stubbed out a cigarette in the black plastic ashtray on her windowsill and pulled another from the crushed soft pack. Andrea smoked American Spirits, the same as Dan. Soon after they had they started dating, she had switched. She used to smoke Parliament Lights, the same as me. I walked over and opened her window to let some of the





smoke out; the smell of it mixing with the already stale air in her apartment was making me a little sick.

“You shouldn’t smoke in here, you’re going to set off the sprinklers,” I warned her. “But maybe that would save me the trouble of having to clean up that disaster in your bathroom.” Andrea gave me a wounded look as she took another drag of her cigarette. I sighed.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll go see if you have anything in here that could possibly be used for cleaning anything else. Just . . . wait here.”

That last part was irrelevant. The likelihood of her getting out of that bed to help me clean was nonexistent. I was beginning to liken my visits to her apartment to making rounds in a coma ward. Like on all those hospital shows when they have to turn the coma patients so they don’t lay on one side too long. I was keeping Andrea from getting bed sores. I found a roll of paper towels and some kind of chemical-smelling spray under the kitchen sink. When I walked back towards the bathroom, I saw that the puddle had started to dry and crust on the floor.

I scraped at it with a spatula from her kitchen, spraying the cleaner in a heavy mist to try and cover up the smell. I wet the last of the paper towels and wiped the floor so it wasn’t just devoid of vomit, it was actually sanitary. The rest of the bathroom was still looking a little devastated. The grout in the shower was stained permanently red from the time Andrea had helped me dye my hair “Feisty Auburn,” a big mistake. There was toothpaste caked on the edge of the sink and her pink plastic trashcan was overflowing; a not-so-small pile of garbage had tumbled over the edge and was beginning to radiate outwards. Countless tissues, some of them smeared with mascara. The more recent ones on top had no cosmetic residue—Andrea had stopped wearing makeup ever since she became a recluse, but she hadn’t stopped crying. I went back into the kitchen and grabbed a big black trash bag. I scooped in some of the tissues and started pouring in the contents of the tiny trashcan. Empty toilet paper rolls, cotton balls soaked in nail polish remover, Q-tips, an apple core, a purple cardboard carton. From a pregnancy test.

I dropped the trash bag and held the carton in my hands. When I turned it over, the instructions that had been stuffed inside fluttered out, and the plastic stick clattered to the floor, landing facedown on the newly sparkling tile. I flipped it over carefully, using just the tips of my two fingers, because I was just as nervous as if the results had been my own. Two

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blue lines were staring me in the face; I scanned the instructions frantically, looking for some sort of answer key.

If two lines appear in the results window, this indicates a positive test. That was it. No further instructions, like what to do when you find your best friend's positive pregnancy test in the garbage and her ex-boyfriend was seeing someone else. No advice on how to broach the subject with this friend, who was currently hungover and puffing on her last cigarette in the next room.

So I just walked in, holding the stick out in front of me and expecting it to ask all the questions. Andrea's expression was a mixture of fear and relief. And for the hundredth time that month, she started to cry. Big boo-hoos accompanied by snotty, gasping sobs. I sat next to her and she buried her face in my shoulder, wiping her runny nose on my white shirt. I stroked her tangled hair and made what I thought were comforting sounds.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked her gently. She just sniffled loudly and shook her head. "Why didn't you tell me this is why he left? Why would you try to protect him? He's the bad guy, Andrea. I can't believe he would do this." And I couldn't believe it. That Dan—innocuous, responsible, well-mannered Dan—could be capable of this. Andrea was shaking her head. "No. He doesn't know," she whispered into my shoulder.

And I was more shocked than before. Dan leaving her because she got pregnant would be hard to believe, but I could have reasoned that he was scared or, even more likely, just another disappointing guy. But Andrea couldn't get a hangnail without whining to me about it. I knew every minute, inconsequential problem that she'd had with Dan. She shared everything—every thought, every feeling, every house key. How was it that she had kept this a secret? The first thing she decides to suffer though on her own, and it's this. In a way, it showed maturity, but mostly it was childish. I was sure that she genuinely believed that ignoring this would make it go away. That if she just stayed inside and didn't tell anyone, she would wake up one morning and those two blue lines would be gone.

But I couldn't believe that she didn't even tell me. She told me everything, and she always thought that I would have the answer. That's why I had been coming to her apartment these past few weeks, because she needed me to help her when no one else would. Maybe everyone had a key to her apartment, but I was the only one who was going to come clean it up.

"You know," I said, "sometimes they're wrong. A false positive." An-





drea looked up at me expectantly, her eyelashes were wet and sticking together. “You can take another test, just to be sure.”

I knew I was giving her false hope, but it was the only thing I could think to do. It was the only thing keeping me from losing it. “I’m going to go to the drug store right now and buy you another test,” I said as I plucked her blue UConn sweatshirt off the floor and pulled it on to cover the wet mark on my shoulder. “Don’t worry,” I told her. “You know I’ll take care of you.”





STEVEN YENZER | THE VALUE OF EVERYTHING

It is the night before our yard sale, two weeks before the move, and Kevin and Holly are here to buy my father's pool table. Holly is lagging—doing something with her cell phone by the car. Kevin is shaking my hand, introducing himself. My mom found Kevin on the internet—he sells things on eBay. Soon, he will be selling our things. People will buy them and set them in prominent places.

Kevin's cell phone, worn on his belt, beeps twice because its battery is running low. He flips it open, holds down the power button until it plays a sad little song and turns off. He adjusts his baseball hat while Holly picks at the embroidered flowers on her jeans. We are waiting for my mother to find a yard stick because Kevin says he wants to measure things. It is somewhere in the office.

"Just don't seem like you want to be here," says Kevin, as if they're continuing an earlier conversation. Holly just shrugs.

Kevin is ready to start looking. There's nothing in the foyer but he leans back, trying to see around a corner. He peers into the dark living room, where there are two flowery couches and a coffee table. These are promised to my father's nephew, who is furnishing his new apartment.

"Aha!" announces my mother, like she's in a movie. We all let out a little breath. We hear her footsteps in the hall and then at the top of the stairs. The yard stick makes a rasping sound as she drags it along the wall on her way down.

"Where do you think it was?" she asks me when she reaches the bottom.

"The closet."

"Nope."

I don't feel like guessing. "I don't know."

"It was in your room!"

Kevin and Holly laugh, and my mother hands Kevin the yardstick. He





leads the way, letting the stick drop and tap the ground every few feet like he's blind. I don't know if he's making a joke, but Holly thinks it's funny. He half-chases her down the stairs.

Until we sold the house, the basement kept all of our extra things. My father had a corner he used as his workshop, with a couple of tables he'd built himself and my grandfather's old desk and metal shelving. The drawers are full of unused things—hammers, wrenches, a corded drill, a rusted jigsaw. In my grandfather's house there was a small room where he kept his tools. When he died, my father put them in boxes and brought them home. He put them away.

In another corner is a bathroom with walls made of plywood. It's just a toilet with a sink my father never installed laying sideways on the floor. He hung a curtain for a door and left a roll of toilet paper on top of the toilet. When we first started building the house, it was just a basement. You crossed above ground on an I-beam, although my father never let me. When you needed to use the bathroom, you asked the neighbors. If they weren't home, you sat down and hoped no one looked over the edge.

No one has used it since we moved in, almost six years ago. A plastic skeleton slouches on the toilet, as a joke.

Kevin is making his way through the basement. We've cleared out a lot of things, but it's still cluttered. There are three piles in different corners of the room. One is for throwing away. One is for keeping. One is for yard sale. Kevin won't be confined to the yard sale pile, though. He pokes at a stack of table leaves in the keep pile.

“What's that?”

My mother explains that we're keeping the table leaves, but Kevin has already moved on.

He picks up a white ceramic bottle with a stopper.

“Did you see this, Holly?”

“Yeah, I saw it.”

“Looks cool.” When he uncorks it it plays a soft, low note.

“What about that desk thing, Holly? You like that?”

She shrugs again.

“What? What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” She won't look at him.

“Doesn't seem like you want to be here.”

“I do.”





Holly seems tired. I imagine nights filled with visits to strangers' houses, nights spent evaluating the value of other peoples' things. I imagine a house furnished with second-hand things: a creaking sofa, a rusted bed frame. A television with the picture purplish at the edges.

My mother and I are watching each other from opposite sides of the room. Kevin seems to be finishing up. He reads a list of things—three paintings, brass bookends, a sled. I recognize one of the paintings; a bird's eye view of Washington, D.C. It used to hang above a couch in the living room of our old house. I remember sitting on my knees on the couch, face up against the glass, looking for tiny details among the brushstrokes. The bookends had been in the office, on a shelf too high to reach, closing in my father's set of Stephen King hardbacks.

A week before I took a box of my father's records to a shop down the street. It was near closing time, and the clerk shook his head when I dropped the heavy box on the counter. It was one of seventeen that had sat in our basement since we'd moved in. My father had kept his favorites upstairs, in the living room. These were alphabetized. This box was Cars-Cohen.

I wandered the store while the clerk sifted through the box. He slid each record out carefully, pinching each edge between his middle fingers and turning it in the light. I thought of my father pulling an album from the shelf, removing it with care, placing it gently on the player. Lifting the needle to the edge and dropping it, where it bounced once, then caught, and music began to play.

The clerk at the store was done a half hour after closing. He slid a large stack toward me and said there were only a few they wanted. He offered me \$20 for the rest. I took it, dropped the others back into the box, and drove home.

Kevin pulls out his wallet and turns to my mother.

"How about ... \$20?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

He hands her a twenty and tucks his wallet back into his pocket, wiping the sweat from his forehead. The pool table is next. He puts his hands on the rail and blows out a breath.

The pool table is almost 100 years old—a Brunswick-Balke-Colender 8-foot billiards table. Its new green felt is bright under the fluorescent lights my father hung. Before he set it up, my father used to bring me downstairs to plan where to place it. He had me slice a black plastic trash





bag open longways and measure it. I cut it to the size of the table and we laid it on the floor and walked around it. He said that a pool table needed five feet all around. That you had to be sure there was room to lay out for the long shots.

I don't know what Kevin knows about pool tables.

"All this stuff too?" he asks, pointing with his yard stick at an egg crate full of accessories. There are some brushes, a couple of leather bottles and dice for special types of billiards. They're all old. They might be worth something.

"Yep," says my mother.

Kevin squats and looks closer at the legs. I wonder if he knows they didn't start out white. I wonder if he notices the holes left by the nails my father and I pulled out so that we could peel off the veneers. My father said they weren't original—that someone had probably nailed them on because the original wood was getting old. The nails popped out hot from the friction, and they covered the floor when we were done.

Kevin stands up again and takes a deep breath through his nose. He raps the edge of the table with his knuckle, like he's listening for something. He rolls the yellow-and-white nine ball around with the flat of his palm, gazing at nothing. With a jerk he spins it into a bunch of balls at the other side of the table and they explode with a crack. One of them drifts into a corner pocket.

"So, what'd we say before?"

"A thousand," says my mother.

Kevin leans on the table again. He looks at Holly, who is watching something out the window.

"Holly?"

"Whatever you want."

"Would you take nine hundred?"

My mother looks at me. I think of what the pool table might look like in Kevin's basement. I see it surrounded by wood paneling and neon beer signs.

"How about nine fifty?" Kevin says.

Kevin can sense our hesitation. He knows to wait it out, that the silence will muffle our reluctance. He has done the calculations—he knows the cost of transport, the price he will attach to the rail with duct tape. He knows how far he will come down in bargaining. Kevin knows the value of everything. At the end of the night, he knows how many bills he will count out in his hand.





“Yeah, okay. Yeah, that’s fine.” My mother laughs a little, oddly. I smile at her.

Kevin pulls out his wallet again and counts out ten hundred-dollar bills. I wonder how many others he has in there. My mother gives him back his twenty along with another and a ten. Kevin starts collecting the cues.

I have hidden two of them in my room—my favorites—and a third one my father called the “money cue.” I have taken the set of balls he said were the most valuable. Everything is in the corner of my closet.

When I was younger, we had a yard sale. My mother asked me if there was anything I didn’t want. She said that she would give me half of however much we made. I filled a small box with toys, and together my mother and I labeled each of them with individual prices. The next morning I sold lemonade and brownies at the edge of our driveway, under the tree I had never been able to climb. Neighbors walked over holding their children’s hands. Mothers in minivans followed the flyers my father had nailed to stop signs in the surrounding streets. I collected dollar bills and counted out change carefully, handing customers paper cups of lemonade or brownies wrapped in plastic.

I watched children I didn’t know leave with toys that used to be mine. At the end of the day, my mother pulled a ten-dollar bill from a white envelope and handed it to me. I cried. My mother thought I wanted more.

Kevin uses a roll of blue painting tape to wrap the cues together, and my mother hands Holly a box with the rest of their things. We go upstairs.

“Sorry we couldn’t take more off your hands,” Kevin says at the door. “My guy’ll come out to pick it up sometime next week. I’ll call you.”

We thank them and shake hands.





VIRGILIO PIÑERA | LA CAÍDA

Habíamos escalado ya la montaña de tres mil pies de altura. No para enterrar en su cima la botella ni tampoco para plantar la bandera de los alpinistas denodados. Pasados unos minutos comenzamos el descenso. Como es costumbre en esos casos, mi compañero me seguía atado a la misma cuerda que rodeaba mi cintura. Yo había contado exactamente treinta metros de descenso cuando mi compañero, pegando con su zapato armado de púas metálicas un rebote a una piedra, perdió el equilibrio y, dando una voltereta, vino a quedar situado delante de mí. De modo que la cuerda enredada entre mis dos piernas tiraba con bastante violencia obligándome, a fin de no rodar al abismo, a encorvar las espaldas. Él, a su vez, tomó impulso y movió su cuerpo en dirección al terreno que yo, a mi vez, dejaba a mis espaldas. Su resolución no era descabellada o absurda; antes bien, respondía a un profundo conocimiento de esas situaciones que todavía no están anotadas en los manuales. El ardor puesto en el movimiento fue causa de una ligera alteración: de pronto advertí que mi compañero pasaba como un bólido por entre mis dos piernas y que, acto seguido, el tirón dado por la cuerda amarrada como he dicho a su espalda, me volvía de espaldas a mi primitiva posición de descenso. Por su parte, él, obedeciendo sin duda a iguales leyes físicas que yo, una vez recorrida la distancia que la cuerda le permitía, fue vuelto de espaldas a la dirección seguida por su cuerpo, lo que, lógicamente, nos hizo encontrarnos frente a frente. No nos dijimos palabra, pero sabíamos que el despeñamiento sería inevitable. En efecto, pasado un tiempo indefinible, comenzamos a rodar. Como mi única preocupación era no perder los ojos, puse todo mi empeño en preservarlos de los terribles efectos de la caída. En cuanto a mi compañero, su única angustia era que su hermosa barba, de un gris admirable de vitral gótico, no llegase a la llanura ni siquiera ligeramente empolvada. Entonces yo puse todo mi empeño en cubrir con mis manos aquella parte de su cara cubierta por su barba; y él, a su vez, aplicó las suyas a mis ojos. La velocidad crecía por momentos, como es obligado en estos casos

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de los cuerpos que caen en el vacío. De pronto miré a través del ligerísimo intersticio que dejaban los dedos de mi compañero y advertí que en ese momento un afilado picacho le llevaba la cabeza, pero de pronto hube de volver la mía para comprobar que mis piernas quedaban separadas de mi tronco a causa de una roca, de origen posiblemente calcáreo, cuya forma dentada cercenaba lo que se ponía a su alcance con la misma perfección de una sierra para planchas de transatlánticos. Con algún esfuerzo, justo es reconocerlo, íbamos salvando, mi compañero su hermosa barba, y yo, mis ojos. Es verdad que a trechos, que yo liberalmente calculo de unos cincuenta pies, una parte de nuestro cuerpo se separaba de nosotros; por ejemplo, en cinco trechos perdimos: mi compañero, la oreja izquierda, el codo derecho, una pierna (no recuerdo cuál), los testículos y la nariz; yo, por mi parte, la parte superior del tórax, la columna vertebral, la ceja izquierda, la oreja izquierda y la yugular. Pero no es nada en comparación con lo que vino después. Calculo que a mil pies de la llanura, ya sólo nos quedaba, respectivamente, lo que sigue: a mi compañero, las dos manos (pero sólo hasta su carpo) y su hermosa barba gris; a mí, las dos manos (igualmente sólo hasta su carpo) y los ojos. Una ligera angustia comenzó a poseernos. ¿Y si nuestras manos eran arrancadas por algún pedrusco? Seguimos descendiendo. Aproximadamente a unos diez pies de la llanura la pértiga abandonada de un Labrador enganchó graciosamente las manos de mi compañero, pero yo, viendo a mis ojos huérfanos de todo amparo, debo confesar que para eterna, memorable vergüenza mía, retiré mis manos de su hermosa barba gris a fin de protegerlos de todo impacto. No pude cubrirlos, pues otra pértiga colocada en sentido contrario a la ya mencionada, enganchó igualmente mis dos manos, razón por la cual quedamos por primera vez alejados uno del otro en todo el descenso. Pero no pude hacer lamentaciones, pues ya mis ojos llegaban sanos y salvos al césped de la llanura y podían ver, un poco más allá, la hermosa barba gris de mi compañero que resplandecía en toda su gloria.

— Circa 1944.

From the collection Cuentos fríos.

Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Lectorum, 2006. pp. 13-14





VIRGILIO PIÑERA | THE FALL

We already had scaled the three-thousand-foot-high mountain. Not to bury a bottle in its summit nor to plant the flag of the indefatigable alpinist. After a few minutes passed we began our descent. As is the custom in these situations, my partner followed me, tied to the same cord that was wrapped around my waist. I had counted that we had descended exactly thirty meters when my partner, with his barbed shoes, slipping on a stone, lost his equilibrium and, doing a somersault, he ended up landing in front of me. The rope that was tangled between my legs pulled somewhat violently, forcing me, in order not to tumble into the abyss, to arch my back. He, for his part, impulsively moved his body in the direction of the terrain that I, for my part, was keeping behind me. His solution wasn't ridiculous or absurd; rightly so, he responded with a profound knowledge of those situations which still are not noted in the manuals. The zeal with which he moved was the cause of a slight alteration: suddenly I realized that my partner was flying between my legs and that, in the next instant, the tug from the cord that was tied, like I have said, to his back spun me around so that my back was now facing toward my original position. For his part, he, undoubtedly obeying the same laws of physics as I, once the slack allowed by the cord ran out, was spun around in the direction that his body was moving, which, logically, left us staring face-to-face. We didn't say anything to one another, but we knew that falling off the mountain would be inevitable. In effect, after an indeterminable amount of time, we tumbled off the edge. Since my only concern was not losing my eyes, I put all my effort into preserving them from the terrible effects of the fall. As far as my partner was concerned, his only anguish was that his handsome beard, an admirable grey like that of a gothic, stained-glass window, did not end up on the plain with even the slightest traces of dust. So I put all my effort into covering with my hands the part of his face that was covered by his beard; and he put his hands over my eyes. Our speed increased with every minute, as is obligatory in these cases of free-falling bodies. Suddenly I

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looked through the very tiny interstices between my partner's fingers and I realized that in that moment a razor-edged peak had cut off his head, but immediately I turned mine around to see that my legs had been separated from my torso because of a rock, possibly a calcareous one, whose jagged shape severed anything within its reach with the same perfection of a saw made for cutting the sheet metal for transatlantic ships. With some effort, if I do say so myself, we managed to save my partner's beard and my eyes. It's true that at some point, which I liberally calculate as being some fifty meters above the ground, parts of our bodies got separated from ourselves; for example, at five intervals we lost: my partner, his left ear, his right elbow, a leg (I don't recall which), his testicles and his nose; I, for my part, the upper part of my thorax, my backbone, my left eyebrow, my left ear and my jugular. But that is nothing in comparison with what came next. I calculate that at one thousand feet above the plain, the only thing that was left was, respectively, the following: for my partner, his two hands (but only up to his wrists) and his handsome grey beard; for me, my two hands (also only up to my wrists) and my eyes. We were taken over by a subtle anxiety. What if our hands get ripped off by some rock? We kept falling. Approximately ten feet above the plain, a pole abandoned by some worker humorously impaled my partner's hands, but I, seeing my eyes as orphaned by any potential help, I must confess that this is an eternal, memorable shame for me, I took my hands off of his beautiful grey beard with the intention of protecting my eyes from the impact. But I could not cover them, because another pole located a bit away from the one already mentioned, similarly impaled my hands, as a result, for the first time, we were separated from one another during the fall. But I could not lament what happened, because my eyes landed, healthy and safe, in the grass of the plain and I could see, a little bit away, the handsome grey beard of my partner which was shimmering in all of its glory.

— *Translated by Jason A. Bartles*





LINDSAY PORAMBO | THE WILL

It was three in the morning when I got the phone call. I'd picked up the receiver almost immediately—in a family riddled with heart disease, I had learned to prepare for the worst coming from the other end of the phone line in the wee hours of the morning. But when I coughed “Hello?” into the mouthpiece, it wasn't Alice's voice coming through the earpiece as I'd expected it to be, bringing news of some death in the family. It was Grandmother.

“Hello,” she said, not making any attempt to whisper. “Beth? Is that you?”

“Grandmother?” I'd asked, more to clarify to myself what I was hearing than to get an actual answer. “What's wrong? Is everything alright?”

“Beth, it's been a long time since I've seen you,” she told me, as if we'd already been chatting for hours and she'd decided it was time to get to the point of the conversation. “It's time for you to come and visit me.”

Paul rolled over to face me. Half asleep, he rubbed my upper arm then let his hand rest on my hip. I pulled myself up into a sitting position. “What? Okay, that's fine,” I said. “When do you mean, you don't mean now do you?”

“No, good lord no,” she might have laughed here, if she were the type to laugh instead of smirk. “Tomorrow would be fine.”

“Tomm—” I began to object. One of the girls had something going on—soccer practice? No. Science fair, maybe.

But, she didn't let me finish. “Just come by during the day when the girls are at school. Eleven would be fine. I'll see you at eleven.”

I didn't have time to say anything before I heard a click and a dial tone.

I arrived at Alice's house twenty minutes early. Grandmother had been living with her for the past few months. Alice had finalized her divorce around the same time Grandmother had decided she wasn't fit to walk any more. When our older brother, Greg, mentioned at one of his visits to the nursing home that Alice could use some company, Grandmother had seen it as an invitation to move in. Alice didn't have the heart to turn





her away—after all, the woman had raised us, taken us in when our single mother left for Louisville one night with some sleazy boyfriend. Greg and I were just glad it wasn't either of us who'd gotten stuck with her. We wouldn't have been able to turn her away, either—Greg because he had a huge house all to himself and therefore no excuse, and me because I felt the same sense of obligation as Alice. Also, I'd decided long ago that I wanted my girls to have a family, to know the generations before them as I'd never been able to. Even if those elders had a somewhat less than pleasant disposition.

I considered waiting in the car for the twenty minutes left until eleven o'clock, but then I thought about Alice running around inside the house day in and day out, catering to Grandmother's every whim, being careful not to offend the old woman even when she dealt out a litany of thinly veiled insults and underhanded criticisms (as she was known to do quite frequently), because Grandmother had a "delicate disposition" and her heart "simply couldn't take such emotional strain." If Alice could do that, I could stand an extra twenty minutes with the woman.

Before I got out of the car, I checked my reflection in the rear-view mirror, combing my fingers through my hair and making sure I didn't have any food in my teeth. I remembered last Thanksgiving, sitting at the table with my family, when Grandmother had looked me up and down and announced, "I thought only lesbians got their hair cropped short, anymore." I'd pretended to brush it off, explained to the girls on the ride home that Grandmother sometimes says things to get attention because she's lonely. But, I'd also begun to let my hair grow out again, after that.

I hadn't been to Alice's house since Grandmother had moved in. She lived in a little rancher in a neighborhood in Ellicott City. She'd bought it with Jerry after they'd gotten married, expecting to populate it with kids over the next few years. Instead, she'd wound up with a bitter, bedridden old woman. I felt a pang of guilt thinking about this, and told myself I would try to visit with the girls more often. Get some use out of the yard.

I had to ring the doorbell three times before Alice actually came and answered. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but thick chunks of it were flying loose as if someone had come up behind her and ruffled it with their hands. Ever since the divorce, she'd looked tired and disheveled. It wasn't that she'd let herself go—she took care of herself and her appearance as well as any other newly single twentysomething. It was just





that, no matter how long she spent putting herself together in the morning, it all fell apart over the course of her day spent waiting on Grandmother. “Beth,” she was obviously surprised to see me. “What are you doing here?”

“Good to see you too,” I gave her a hug, and walked past her into the living room. “I guess Grandmother didn’t tell you I was coming.”

“No, of course not,” she closed the door behind her. “It’s only my house. I don’t need to know what’s going on in it or anything.”

“She called me last night,” I nodded towards the hallway that led to the guest bedroom. “Three a.m..”

Alice threw her arms up into the air and sat down on the ratty brown couch.

“Scared the hell out of me,” I continued. “You know, I was sure it’d be you calling to say she’d had a stroke or something.”

“No,” Alice laughed bitterly. “I’m almost positive she’s playing the whole thing up. I’ll bet you anything she can still walk, and as for her “heart condition,” if it doesn’t stop her from demanding steak once a week, then I don’t think we need to be so worried.”

I looked around the living room. Alice had obviously been in the middle of one of her weekly “cleaning odysseys,” as she’d described them to me over the phone. A can of furniture polish lay on the couch next to a dusting rag, and the vacuum was perched in the middle of the floor, ready for action. Grandmother had told her that at the nursing home she had gotten used to an exceptionally sterile environment, and that she fully expected Alice to maintain the same level of cleanliness in her home. She’d explained to Alice that her lungs were “simply too fragile to function with so much dust and mold in the air,” and had pointed to the motes floating in the morning light as evidence of her granddaughter’s sub-par standards of sanitation.

“Set up some cameras, catch her waltzing around the house at night,” I suggested, jokingly.

Alice smiled. “If only. Anyway, how are Paul and the girls?”

“Alright,” I said. “Emily’s going to be in the school play, she’s got a singing part. Kayla’s playing soccer. Paul’s trying to find a new job, says he’s tired of the commute.”

“Two hours is pretty rough,” Alice nodded.

“Yeah,” I agreed. Ever since Alice’s divorce, I’d felt guilty talking too much about my family. If I found myself gushing about one of the girls, I





usually tacked on a few complaints to the end—something about how I never got any sleep anymore, how crazy it was running around so much, how I wished I could just have a few hours of peace—as if to assure her that the whole “family” thing wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. She never seemed to notice.

“So, three a.m.?” Alice looked at me quizzically.

“Three a.m.,” I repeated.

“Jeez,” she shook her head. “You know, she has been acting kind of weird for the past week or so. Not as mean. Well. She hasn’t been talking as much, so there are less opportunities for her to say mean things, I guess. But, still.”

“Huh,” I pondered this. “Maybe she’s reaching some kind of late-in-life epiphany. She’s going to apologize for a lifetime of maliciousness and tell us she loves us, and we’ll all live happily ever after.”

Alice laughed, and stood up to continue dusting. “Let’s hope so.”

“Come in, come in,” she demanded when I knocked on the guest room door. “It’s open.”

The last time I’d seen the room, Paul and I had been picking up the girls after Alice had babysat them for the weekend while we’d gone on one of Paul’s business getaways. It was late when we’d arrived at the house, and they were both asleep in the queen-sized bed, curled up in two little balls facing opposite directions, perfect mirrors of each other.

Now, Grandmother sat upright in the middle of the bed. Despite her purported inability to walk—and refusal to do much else for herself—she wore her white hair in perfect curls, just as she’d been doing for as long as I could remember. She still sported a face painted with Avon’s most expensive eye shadows and lipsticks (chosen by her because of their prices, she’d once explained to me. “Don’t you mean because of their value?” I’d asked. “No,” she’d scrunched up her nose. “Because of their prices. I’m not some cheap slut, I can’t just slap on anything from the CVS.”), and covered herself in as much jewelry as her body could support without crumpling under its weight. I imagined Alice standing behind her with the curling iron at five thirty in the morning, applying eyeliner and foundation to Grandmother’s face as the sun began to rise.

“Well,” she raised an eyebrow as she looked me up and down. “I see you took my advice about the hair.”





I pretended not to have heard the remark. “How are you doing?” I asked, hoping she wouldn’t ask me to take a seat on the stool by the bed, but knowing that she would.

“Come sit,” she pointed to the stool.

I crossed the room and sat down, putting my purse on the floor by her nightstand. “How are you doing?” I asked again.

She waved her bejeweled hand, as if waving away my question. “I’m glad you came,” she said. For a moment, I wondered if maybe she had realized how horribly she’d treated us, whether she really was going to try to manage some sort of apology—she’d certainly never told any of us that she was glad to see us. But then she went on, “I didn’t think you would, actually. I know how you can be so...flaky.”

“Well, I guess you were right, it’s about time I came to visit,” I tried my hardest to overlook the last part.

“Yes. It is,” she declared. I always felt like I was five years old when I was around her—vulnerable, naïve, stupid. “And, how are those twins of yours? And that husband?”

I knew that the questions were asked by one disapproving of both Paul and the girls, someone searching for news of Paul’s inability to support his family and evidence that the girls were growing up to be what she called “pudgy, unruly sluts,” but I answered as if she’d asked with a genuine interest in their well-being. “Paul’s looking for a new job, one closer to home—”

“The best paying jobs are in the city,” she announced “and he wants to work closer to home?”

“It would save on gas money,” I ventured. She snickered, but I let it pass. “Emily’s got a singing role in the school play, and Kayla’s playing soccer. They’re both doing well in school.”

“How well?” she asked. “Can’t be that well, if they’re spending all their time running around from place to place after classes every day, doing this, doing that, involved in everything.”

“They’re doing well,” I assured her. “Very well.”

“Well, at least the soccer will help the one of them slim down,” she mused. “I doubt the other will have many more acting roles if she doesn’t follow suit.”

“And how have you been doing?” I asked for a third time, knowing that I wouldn’t get an answer, but running out of things to say.

“Anyway, I asked you here for a reason,” she said, pointing to the





nightstand. “There’s a manila folder in the top drawer—go ahead and take it out.”

I pulled the folder from the drawer and tried to give it to her, but she held up her hand in protest. “No,” she said. “You read it.”

I cracked it open, and began to examine the first piece of paper. It sat atop a fat pile of pages, all uniformly thick and important-looking, all held together with a giant black clip. At the top of the page were the words “Last Will and Testament of Barbara Estelle Wallace—5 June 2007.”

“Your will?” I asked, remembering too late that stating the obvious in front of Grandmother opened you up to further ridicule. “You updated your will yesterday?”

“That’s what it says, doesn’t it?” she rolled her eyes. “Keep reading. Or, just look at the last page.”

I flipped through the papers, finally arriving at the last one. I began to scan it, looking for something worth calling at three in the morning to show me.

“The last paragraph,” she said, exasperated. “Read that one.”

I found the paragraph to which she referred, and had begun to read when Grandmother called out, “Alice? Alice!”

I could hear the vacuum running in the living room, but Grandmother insisted on competing with its noise for Alice’s attention. “Alice!” she repeated, visibly flustered at having to call her granddaughter so many times.

“Grandmother, can I help you with anything?” I asked “I mean, I’m right here.”

“I gave you something to do already,” she nodded towards the will. “She’s not busy right now—Alice! Alice!”

I heard the vacuum stop. In the newly created silence, Grandmother called for her again; “Alice! Alice, come here.”

After a few moments, Alice’s face appeared at the door. “What’s up?” she asked, looking first at me and then at Grandmother. “What’s going on?”

“I need some water is ‘what’s going on,’” Grandmother looked Alice up and down. Her eyes stopped on Alice’s disheveled hair. She didn’t say anything, but her obvious stare was enough to make her youngest granddaughter take the elastic band from her wrist and pull her hair back into a neater ponytail. “Much better,” Grandmother declared.

With only a quick, defeated glance at me, Alice slunk back into the hallway. I thought of how Alice had been making fun of Grandmother





when I'd first arrived. Of course, she never said anything to Grandmother's face—none of us did. But of the three of us, Alice was always the most afraid of Grandmother, the first to shrink away in her presence.

“Well, go on, then,” Grandmother nodded towards the will. I found my place again, and began to read. “To my eldest granddaughter, Bethany Estelle Wallace,” it read (I didn't bother telling her that I'd taken Paul's last name, Harvey, when I married him eight years ago) “I leave all of my monetary assets, my jewelry, and my real estate.”

I stopped and looked up at the woman sitting on the bed next to me. “You're leaving everything to me?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes once more. I thought for a moment of a dog we'd had when we were kids. It had had epileptic seizures, and Alice, Greg and I would watch, horrified and amazed as it thrashed around on the floor, its eyes rolling back and forth in their sockets. “I don't know why you insist on wasting your time with stupid questions,” she declared.

“But...but, what about Alice?” I asked, thinking of my sister cleaning this woman's deadly motes from the air with a cheap Oreck vacuum, while she could be going back to nursing school or meeting her next husband.

“Please,” Grandmother waved her hand in the air, brushing away the concern with the same ease with which she brushed away my small talk. “Don't pretend you don't know how much money I have. Do you think it would be wise of me to leave it with such a pushover? She would be handing it out left and right. It would be gone within two decades. Now you—you may not be the most resolute person in the world, or the most financially savvy, but at least you have a family you'll want to save for. You have the twins, and that will make you less likely to piss it all away. Alice, she doesn't have anything stopping her from dumping it all into a million little purchases. She's unemployed, she has no family—why wouldn't she just live off the inheritance for the next few years? And, it's the same story with Greg. No, it has to go to you. You're the only one who will invest it, who will keep it.”

At this point, she reached out and grabbed my hand with hers, squeezing it tightly. My body stiffened. She hadn't touched me—touched any of us—in years. Even when we were kids, she only touched us to give us spankings. I loosened up a bit when I realized that, even now, she wasn't really touching me—her fingers were so covered with rings that barely any flesh was left exposed to make physical contact.





I imagined Alice sitting on the side of the bed at dawn, taking each ring out of Grandmother's jewelry box and placing it on one of Grandmother's bony fingers, Grandmother stopping her every so often to say that, no, that ring went on this finger, of course—and this ring was obviously meant to be worn under that one.

I pulled my hand out from under Grandmother's, and stood up. "I'm sorry," I said, placing the manila folder on the stool where I had been sitting. "But, I won't accept this."

"Of course you will," Grandmother laughed. Again I thought of the seizing dog, his teeth bared in some sort of half-crazed grin. "Don't be stupid. I'm giving it to you, you don't really have a choice."

"I'll give it to Alice," I declared, not knowing that I was going to say it until I heard myself speaking the words. But, I knew as soon as I'd said it that it was true. "Alice deserves it. If not all of it, than certainly most," I said, pointing to the folder. I paused for a moment, expecting a sharp retort. But, she was too slow and I already knew what I needed to tell her. "You know," I said "You don't deserve her."

"Don't you talk to me like that," she wasn't smiling anymore. "You show me the respect I deserve. I raised you when your whore of a mother left."

As I turned to face her fully, I was shocked by what I saw. Her eyes were wide with desperation, her face a deep red that not even her foundation could conceal. She somehow looked smaller, more fragile. The jewelry seemed to weigh her down, and the curls on her head looked too big, almost comically so. I wondered for a moment what she did with her time when Alice wasn't in the room. There were no books around, no TV, no newspapers. A phone sat on her nightstand, but I remembered Alice telling me that she'd never seen Grandmother use it except to call the nursing home periodically to have them verify that she was, indeed, "a very ill, very fragile old woman."

Then I heard the faucet run in the kitchen as Alice prepared Grandmother's glass of ice water. I thought of my sister, thought of my girls and how they'd stopped asking to go play at their aunt's house once their Grandmother had moved in.

"You most certainly did not raise us," I heard myself saying. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alice paused in the doorway, Grandmother's glass in her hand, water sloshing over the side and dripping onto the floor after its carrier's abrupt stop. "You gave us a place to live, sure, and clothes, and food. But raise us?"





No one said anything.

“You took us in,” I said. “And, we’re grateful for that. But, please. Don’t think that you had anything to do with-with-with instilling any kind of moral fiber into any of us, with-with teaching us to be caring and kind.”

“Bethany...” Alice whispered warningly, but I dared not stop. If I stopped, who knew when I—when any of us—would be brave enough to start again?

Grandmother’s chest was heaving up and down heavily, and I wondered how much her necklaces must weigh. She was breathing through her nose, and I remembered how Greg had once instructed Alice and I to hold our dog down during one of its seizures. “You two take its back legs,” he’d told us. “I’ll pin its shoulders.” We’d obeyed, scared of the thrashing dog but too curious about the results of our brother’s experiment to refuse to help.

I remembered feeling the dog’s muscles twitching beneath the skin of its hind legs as Alice and I fought to keep them down. When the three of us had finally succeeded in pinning our pet to the ground, we’d held it in that manner for a few minutes longer. Alice and I were too afraid to let go at first, thinking that it might leap up and bite us for what we’d done. It was breathing loudly through its nose, its eyes wide but slowly normalizing after their frantic rolling. Greg, who had been straddling the dog’s torso and holding its front legs down with his hands, slowly slid off of its back and knelt down beside it. We watched wordlessly as he began to pet the dog with the back of his hand. As he rubbed our pet’s back and stomach, it began to breathe less heavily. After a minute or two, we released the legs and joined him, petting the animal’s head and scratching between its ears. Eventually, it rose calmly from the ground and walked away as if nothing had ever happened.

“You—” Grandmother began, but I did not let her finish.

“No,” I said slowly, calmly. “You certainly gave us a reason to band together, I guess we can thank you for that. But, you didn’t raise us.”

Her mouth opened and closed several times wordlessly. It certainly didn’t do anything to detract from her appearance of absurdity. Finally, she pointed a bejeweled finger at me. “You,” she declared with an ineffectively veiled air of desperation “are an ungrateful bitch.”

I stood up straight, faced her fully. “I’m grateful that you took care of us,” I stated composedly, unemotionally. “And, of course, we’ll return the favor.”





But please. Don't expect any more from us than what we got from you."

She didn't say anything, but pressed her lips together tightly. She crossed her arms, turned up her nose, looked away from Alice and I and out the window to her left. Neither of us pointed out that the shades were closed.

I picked up my purse and slung it over my shoulder. Alice padded silently into the room and placed the glass of water on the nightstand which had housed the will in its belly until this morning. As if an afterthought, she pulled a tan ceramic coaster from the drawer and slid it underneath the glass. We both stood there for a moment, watching our Grandmother as she watched the drawn shades flutter in the breeze.

Then, as if we had shared the thought between us, we moved in unison to either side of the bed. We each took a corner of the floral quilt which lay folded at the foot of the bed and pulled it up to the head so that it covered Grandmother's legs. I smoothed the fabric, then tucked the edges in under the mattress. Alice did the same on her side. As my sister knelt down to shove the fabric between the bed frame and the mattress, I thought I heard Grandmother sigh. I saw her let her shoulders slouch ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly if you hadn't actually seen her do it. I could not see her eyes, and wondered if they were still as wild as they had looked only moments ago.

Alice stood up and looked at me. She put her hands on her hips and smiled. I smiled back. "Come on," I said to my sister nodding towards the hallway, and we walked out of the room.





ART







Excerpt from "Watch Out For Dem Man Tunnels!"

Jenna Brager

Drawing on paper with pen and ink (5.5" x 8.5")



“Siblings — A Flashback”

Jiangjiang Cao

Acrylic, collage (16”x 20”)





“Don’t Hold Your Breath”
Danielle Brown
Acrylic on canvas (24” x 32”)





“Nude”
Jaclyn Littman
Charcoal on newsprint (24" x 18")





“Mountain Zebra”
Morgan Noonan
Colored pencil (8" x 10")





“Thick”
Caroline Battle
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas (3' x 4')





“Vain”

Caroline Battle

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas (11”x 14”)





“Controlled Fall”

Shai Goller

Acrylic, pastels and ink on canvas board (18" x 24")





"Jessie"
Shai Goller
Ink and coffee on paper (8.5" x 11")





“Silent Warfare”
Libby Formant
Acrylic on canvas (24" x 48")





“Wisdom”
Libby Formant
Acrylic on canvas (60”x 20”)





“Sunlight”
Michelle Atkinson
Photograph





THE JIMÉNEZ-PORTER LITERARY PRIZE

The Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize is an annual writing contest open to all University of Maryland undergraduates. The Prize is in its seventh year and is administered by staff at the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House. To preserve anonymity, judges read the manuscripts after names of authors have been removed.

POETRY JUDGE

Laura Lauth served as founding director of the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House from 2002-2005. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland, College Park, where she is currently working on a doctorate in English Literature. She lives in Takoma Park, Maryland, with her husband and two sons.

PROSE JUDGE

Antonya Nelson is the author of nine books of fiction, most recently *Nothing Right* (Bloomsbury; 2009). She teaches creative writing at the University of Houston.





THE JIMÉNEZ-PORTER LITERARY PRIZE

PROSE AWARDS

1st Place: “The Value of Everything” by Steven Yenzler

2nd Place: “Nadia on Her Knees” by Megan Stetz

3rd Place: “Sex and the Letter B” by Savannah Renehan

POETRY AWARDS

1st Place: “94 Bones,” “Staging,” and “Leisure World” by Steven Yenzler

2nd Place: “I Knew a Girl” by Lyons George

3rd Place: “How to Wait” by Larisa Hohenboken

Honorable Mentions:

“Not the Promised Land” by Andrés Pérez Rojas

“Dandelion Boy” by Jenna Brager





STYLUS AND THE JIMÉNEZ- PORTER WRITERS' HOUSE

Stylus is funded and supported in large part by the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House, a Living and Learning Program at the University of Maryland, College Park. Many of the journal's staff members belong to our program (though any UMD student can be involved with *Stylus*). Located within Dorchester Hall, the Writers' House is a campus-wide literary center for the study of creative writing across cultures and languages. Students hone their skills through workshops, colloquia, and lectures led by Writers' House faculty and visiting writers. The two-year program is open to all majors and all years. For more information about joining the Writers' House, visit our website at www.writershouse.umd.edu or call the director at 301-405-0671.





SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submit all work online at www.styluslit.org.

Stylus accepts high-quality submissions of poetry, prose, and art from all currently enrolled University of Maryland students. Our reading period is from September to March, and our final deadline is February 15th. Submitters will be notified of their status by April 1st. We accept up to five pieces per genre, though some students may be invited to submit more. The work is put through a rigorous, anonymous review process. We maintain flexibility in the layout process; no work is guaranteed acceptance until publication. If interested in serving on our staff, please email our account or visit our website for more information: www.styluslit.org.

Poetry and prose should be submitted in both the body of the email and as a Word document. Our prose limit is 2,500 words. Students interested in submitting longer pieces of exceptional quality are invited to email an excerpt of their piece, along with an abstract.

Multilingual work should be accompanied by an English translation when possible, or with expressed permission to be translated by our staff.

Art submissions may be emailed in TIFF or JPEG format at greater than 600 dpi. Submitters should also include information about the medium and dimensions of each piece. Students unable to send their pieces electronically should email the account to contact our art director.

Stylus is a project undertaken solely by students of the University of Maryland at College Park; the University of Maryland is not responsible for any of the statements, opinions, or printing errors contained herein. Furthermore, while the Stylus staff has done its utmost to prevent any printing errors, if an error should occur, the journal will print a correction on the website.



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BENEFACTORS

The Jiménez-Porter Writers' House
The Student Government Association
The Department of English

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CAROLINE BATTLE is a senior Art and Art History double major from Silver Spring, MD. She will graduate next December with hopes of going to graduate school for her Masters of Fine Arts.

DANIELLE BROWN, along her path from growing up on an island in Alaska to living across the country in Maryland, has realized that it doesn't matter where she is as long as she is true to herself, to her loved ones, and to her art. "Don't Hold Your Breath" is a reminder of where she has been and the excitement of the future. Every breath is a new opportunity.

JENNA BRAGER is a twenty year old American Studies major from the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland. She enjoys the use of art to avoid human interaction, occasional forays into creative writing, working on her zine, Sassyfrass Circus, and posting on her art blog at sassyfrasscircus.com. She has been published in the Always Comix Anthology Zine, Stylus, the Oregon Literary Review, and at her ongoing blog for the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center.

JIANGJIANG CAO is an Economics student who enjoys painting and journaling. She likes working with large canvases and mango sorbet in her lap.

GABRIELLE DUNKLEY is currently a Write Bloody Publishing Author Finalist and a former Jiménez-Porter Literary Prize winner for poetry. As president of TerPoets, she has coordinated events that featured world-renowned poets such as Anis Mojgani, Andrea Gibson and Derrick Brown. She spends her nights writing manuscripts during the wee hours of the morning in the Writers' House basement. She is known for her incessant hat wearing, mysophobia, and soothing voice.



ADAM FISHBEIN is graduating from University of Maryland in Spring '09 with degrees in Philosophy and Linguistics. Apart from writing fiction, he enjoys making movies with his friends. He has no idea what he's doing after graduation.

SHAI GOLLER is an American Israeli British Sophomore English and Art double major with a passion for creative writing and graphic design. He draws editorial cartoons for the University of Maryland's independent student newspaper, *The Diamondback*. In his spare time, Shai enjoys traveling, hiking, painting and writing. When he grows up he wants to be famous but not a pretentious asshole. You can see more of his work if you visit his blog at poetryfrommud.blogspot.com.

LIBBY FORMANT has been developing the ideas of humanity's relationship to nature, and vice versa, in the past years. She focuses on the strange and almost bizarre in order to provoke interest and a slightly uncomfortable feeling. She believes that nature is still our greatest teacher, and we should always find humility in its midst.

LYONS GEORGE is a small-time bookie at the University of Maryland. He plans on somehow funneling his prize money either into that hustle or his long-championed search for the cure for syphilis. Lyons is a sophomore, and in his spare time he enjoys poetry and self-effacement.

DAVID HATTON is a junior English and secondary education major at the University of Maryland.

LARISA HOHENBOKEN is a sophomore studio art major, a cellist in University of Maryland's Repertoire Orchestra and an avid rock climber. This is her first year in the Jimenez-Porter Writers' House.

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ADAM PELLEGRINI is completing his first year in UMD, College Park's MFA program. He also co-edits a small journal, *Cartographer Electric*, that can be found online at www.cartographelectric.org. His work has appeared or is appearing in such journals as *Pebble Lake Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and *Blood Orange Review*.





ANNE PRICE is a recent graduate of the University of Maryland (December '08). Originally from southern Louisiana, she came to Maryland for college in 2004. Now she lives in DC and works as a union organizer.

MORGAN NOONAN is a second year Art Studio major at the University of Maryland. She has always cultivated a passion for art as well as science. This dual fascination is embodied in her work, which is zoological in nature, and has led her to pursue a career as a scientific illustrator. Her dream is to be published in *National Geographic Magazine*, and to be a guest star on the television show *Lost*.

SAVANNAH O'TOOLE RENEHAN, born into an enormous Irish Catholic family, first discovered writing as a coping mechanism for being athletically challenged. She graduated from the University of Maryland Sigma Tau Delta with a degree in English and a focus in Creative Writing. She hopes to do cross genre work in an MFA program and solve the world's social injustices.

VIRGILIO PIÑERA (1912-1979) was an iconoclastic, relatively unknown Cuban writer, whose work includes poetry, novels, short stories, plays and essays. While holding a doctorate in Philosophy and Letters, Piñera chose not to work as a professor or as a journalist. Instead, he dedicated his time to his writing, which has been esteemed for its antiintellectualism and for its individuality in the face of the more well-known Latin American writers of his time.

LINDSEY PORAMBO is a sophomore English Major at the University of Maryland. This is her first contribution to *Stylus*.

TRICIA SMITH is a junior journalism major and English minor. She thanks the Jiménez-Porter Writers' House, her family and the carbon cycle. Her favorite word today is lachrymose.

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