


2011

et cetera

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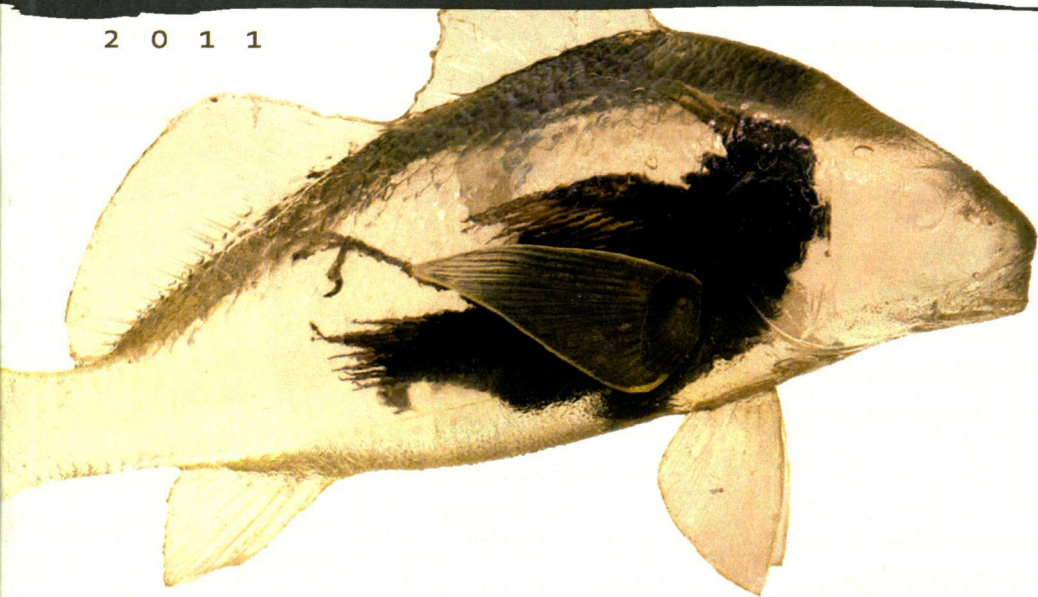
Marshall University, "et cetera" (2011). *Et Cetera*. 26.
https://mds.marshall.edu/english_etc/26

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Et Cetera

Since 1953, celebrating the
artistic and creative talent at
M a r s h a l l

2 0 1 1



Marshall University's Literary Magazine

Et Cetera

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Acknowledgements

The *Et Cetera* staff would like to thank Dean Hensley, Dr. Jane Hill, Dinty W. Moore, Dean Pittenger, Art Stringer, and the Department of English faculty and staff for their continued support.

Additionally, we wish to extend special thanks to the following Huntington businesses: Big Sandy Superstore Arena, Bob Evans, Chili Willi's, Francois's Pastry Shop, the Funny Bone, Future Destination Records, Huntington's Kitchen, Huntington Museum of Art, La Fontaine Cigar and Wine Shop, Marshall University Bookstore, Mug & Pia and Simply Whisk, Outback Steakhouse, and Starbucks at Pullman Square.

Finally, the staff would like to thank our faculty advisors, Anna Harris, Dr. Rachael Peckham, and Eric Smith for their tireless support of the magazine throughout the year.

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"We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. Sheep lice do not seem to share this longing, which is one reason why they write so very little."

Anne Lamott

DREW BLAKE

Bossa Nova Speaks

Drawn by the gravity
of things not meant to be comprehended,
understood like the teapot's whistle,
Bossa Nova speaks
with words I don't understand.
saudade
a word at its birth.
A word unneeded in English because
we are too fast

but bossa is metered.
It swings, left to right,
teaching me to dance without steps;
compelling me to learn
how to hold a woman close
just to be near her skin;
like two blades of grass
grown too tall for the hill where
they are found
swaying side to side.

REBECCA MINARDI

A River Screams Free

She knew the moment her foot hit earth,
that the shadows began to unravel.

A memory is best kept quiet.

A mossy thing facing west clinging to peeled bark,
to take out bit by bit, day by day,
to mull over, ruminate, then tuck safely back,
a cobwebbed attic strewn with clothes
of childhood summers and mothers' smell.

This tightly kept secret.

Yet here she was, shuttered tight windows
and tumbled dandelions gripping
curb and crack and prominence.

Supposing life stands still...
a canvas carved and stone.

A painted feeling, stoic, stiffing, warped,
until all breath and beat is strangled.

And suppose instead a river screams free
and barrels on regardless.

She swallowed and stepped,
facing once more the chasm
this canyon between a cobblestone road
and sleep.

JOHN CHIRICO

Scandinavia

I judge a person by their
dominant hand

I fall asleep in all the wrong places
where old dogs watch rugs
and covet things benign

The water is cold
The pipes are colder

We've never been in the trenches
We don't know what it's like
and breakfast at McDonald's just stopped.

CORY JACKSON

Gloria

In a different (but not necessarily better) world, where The Beatles stayed together as long as The Stones, where Fitzgerald named his masterpiece “Trimalchio,” and where JFK ducked, Gloria Denning walked out of those double glass doors and looked at anyone but me with her gray eyes — the ones that she used to say were sometimes green but have always been gray to me.

But in this world, where the most interesting and revolutionary people are broken or dead, where we’re borne back ceaselessly into the past and where our parents all remember where they were on November 22, 1963, the world stopped spinning under my feet on that day in autumn.

The circumstances that brought us to that particular parking lot — three lifelong friends, all seniors at a private high school — were made more tragic and awkward by how commonplace they really were. I used to wonder how it happened to me: Now, I’m amazed it doesn’t happen more often. Or maybe it does, to older, more sophisticated people, numb and jaded enough to let a guess become a certainty, a lie a promise and a mistake an occasion of divine providence.

But we were too dumb and innocent for any of that.

“What time is it?” Waserman asked.

“Almost time,” Kostich said.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Well, isn’t that all that matters?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said. “It’s eleven-thirty.”

It was actually eleven-forty, and we were standing in the parking lot of the squat, brick building. It was two days before holiday break, a Wednesday, and the leaves were piled up against walls and fences, ready to burn.

I remember that the year before, a sudden wind had come barreling through the valley and kicked the flaming leaves up into the air where for a moment they hung in perfection, looking like falling ash of a nuclear winter. Then the wind died, and the leaves fell into dry grass or onto abandoned barns and outbuildings, and the neighborhood men had scattered toward them with the sudden ferocity and unity of a cavalry unit to stomp out the tiny fires threatening to tear down their whole lives.

“Shouldn’t they be done in there?” Waserman was talking again. “I mean, the test is already over, right? All they have to do is tell people?”

“She just went in there. Chill,” I said.

He’d have the rest of his life to be anxious and miserable if it turned out to be his fault, I thought. No sense in rushing. But who was I kidding? Waserman would be eternally anxious and miserable no matter what happened today. He was, for all intents and purposes, the exact opposite of Kostich. While Waserman was the quintessential worrier with as many neuroses as allergies, Kostich was the idealistic optimist, and, somehow, I fit somewhere in the space between them.

“I don’t understand why we all had to be here,” Kostich said. “There’s no way I did this. No way.”

“You know that shit’s not always foolproof,” I said.

But from the look on Kostich’s face, I’d say he didn’t know, and I instantly felt sorry for telling him.

“Uh oh,” Waserman started. “Is someone gonna cry?”

“Yeah, you, when I kick your fat ass,” Kostich said.

He had a look on his face I’d never seen before. Uncertainty, maybe? Regardless, it was the kind of look you never wanted to see on the face of your once fearless leader.

“You know, we still have to be friends when this is over, guys,” I said. “Just chill out, and we’ll deal with it when we can. But fighting because there’s nothing else to do but wait is fucking stupid.”

“You’re right, Silverman,” Kostich said, picking a spot and sitting down on the curb that surrounded the lot of cracked asphalt.

Silverman, Kostich, Waserman — names that had been stenciled onto our jerseys, droned through at roll call and drilled into our heads for so long that we didn’t recognize our own first names. We didn’t know who Seth, Andrew or Jacob were, like we were only the continuation of dynasties, handed down from antiquity, with no room left for individuality.

Kostich had been pitching. I was batting, and Waserman was trying to play some semblance of outfield. But no one knows that. Except us.

We had been in the abandoned lot in the neighborhood, which had been a pile of overgrown weeds and littered soda and beer cans for as long as any of us could remember. (It’s been redeveloped now — flattened with huge, yellow machines and encircled by a temporary fence plastered with signs promising, “Project Completion Next Spring”, when the three of us would be graduating and running away to someplace else unfinished.) Back then, when we had been in junior high, the lot had served as an impromptu football field, baseball diamond, etc.

There were houses on all sides of the lot that belonged to our parents’ friends, the ones we had usually only glimpsed through the holes in the rails of stairway banisters during the muted, intentionally bourgeois cocktail parties our parents threw and then expressed regret about having immediately afterward. My father would spend the next morning hungover, rubbing his face constantly, picking up discarded toothpicks and glasses, my mother following him around like a fly, asking him his interpretation of what she assumed had been a backhanded compliment from Melissa or Helen or Grace about the furniture or the carpets or the drapes.

During these rare sightings, the parents of the neighborhood were magnificent, draped with black clothing and shining necklaces, the smell of their combined colognes and perfumes traveling upstairs and coalescing into a toxic mix that made me reach for my rescue inhaler. The men invariably congregated together in a corner like jittery rookies in a bullpen, unspeaking, and dreading when their wives might call them over to join in a conversation. My mother would often call my father over to tell a bawdy joke she would have usually frowned at; only during the parties, she would explode in tittering laughter.

On these nights, the entire town revolved around my parents’ ruined generation, nearly forty, weary from too much or not enough living, with the party oscillating in

front of them and all their children corralled by teenage babysitters back in the homes where they were surrounded by stifling curtains and photographs they couldn't remember posing for.

Other than the parties, these friends had only been glimpsed briefly, darting out and back into their doors in the morning for the paper or in the driver's seat of cars backing out of their driveways while we all stood waiting for the bus.

That afternoon, when Kostich had thrown a perfect fastball right where I liked them, a little high and outside, so I could step forward from my stance and drive the ball almost effortlessly deep into what we called the outfield, we met Mrs. Griffith face to face for the first time. She was, and I suppose still is, older than our parents by at least ten years, and her own children had escaped from her home long ago. She rarely attended parties and had become the local recluse, with legends abounding about her excessive pet ownership and lacking lawn care.

When the ball crashed through her second floor window, I'd thrown the bat behind me to hide the evidence, but there was no running; everyone knew we played in that lot. We had simply waited what seemed an intolerable amount of time for Mrs. Griffith to mutate from a disembodied head in the smashed window to a loud symphony of grumbling, stair creaking and door slamming, and then finally into a voice on her front porch.

"Boys," she'd begun, "which one of you is responsible for this?"

We didn't answer.

"Ain't no sense in all you all's parents getting a call from me. Just the responsible party."

She had been crossing and uncrossing her arms undecidedly, trying to determine which posture might be more intimidating to twelve-year-old boys.

Still nothing from Kostich or Wasserman. I'd expected Wasserman to squeal immediately, but he gave no sign of cracking. I started to step forward, but Kostich held his arm out a little, and his head twitched a minute bit left and then right.

"You know, you kids shouldn't be playing in this lot anyway," Mrs. Griffith said. "Maybe I should call all your parents after all and let them know that you've been playing here and that they have to all chip in on a window, since no one wants to step up?"

Her words had seemed like a question, as if it were an interrogation and she was both the good cop and the bad cop. But in the end, no one spoke up, and Mrs. Griffith did exactly as she'd said — called all our parents and, when even they failed to elicit a confession, they all begrudgingly gave Mrs. Griffith a third of the cost to fix the window.

Wasserman was grounded longer than Kostich and I, and the two of us were riding bikes by the railroad tracks a few days later when I asked him.

"Why didn't you guys let me fess up for that window?"

"Why should you just get in trouble?" he'd responded casually. "We're friends."

"But I'm the one who broke it."

"It could've been any of us who did that," Kostich said. "Maybe it wasn't the way you hit it. I gave you an easy pitch, I think, and anyway, Wasserman should've caught it probably. Besides, if it'd been me, you guys would've done the same, right?"

I know now that I would have. I wasn't so sure then, not because of any lack of loyalty to Kostich, but because, at that age, that kind of solidarity is alien and ineffable,

something you couldn't consider or recognize until it was upon you.

We hadn't spoken for at least fifteen minutes while we sat on the curb waiting for the succession of events that would bring Gloria out of the examining room, out of the office and finally, into the parking lot. I thought about the afternoon Gloria and I sat talking in my car and how I'd only offered to give her a ride home because Kostich had told Wasserman and I how easy it'd been for him.

There had been no question that Kostich was telling the truth. Three years ago, he'd told us about getting his hand down Megan Stafford's pants during the freshman assembly — the one where they told you that all those rumors you'd heard about high school (the sadistic seniors, group showers and menacing teachers) were all completely true. Kostich's first encounter with female genitalia was witnessed by no less than three faculty members, two of which had separated he and Meghan, while the third accompanied Kostich to the bathroom so he could wash his hands.

So three months ago, when he'd told me about Gloria, losing his virginity in his basement, her alabaster skin and small, round breasts, I believed him.

"Are you two like together then?" I'd asked him while we finished one such mandatory shower following gym class.

"Nah, man," he had said. "It is what it was, you know? To call it more or to try to pretend it was about love or something would be bullshit."

"She see it like that too, Casanova?" Wasserman had asked.

"Yeah, she's cool like that." Kostich turned the nozzle to the left, and the stream of water trickled down into nothing.

Gloria was cool in some way or another, even if I couldn't put my finger on how or why. She always wore pants that hugged her hips and then flared out at the bottoms with sweaters that looked like they'd been stitched together from carpet samples, and she left her hair curly and allowed it to hang free in a way that reminded me of Carole King on the cover of "Tapestry" — an album whose sleeve had hung above my bed for the last four years.

The day after he'd regaled us with his conquest of uncharted new frontier country, Kostich had been quiet, slipping wordlessly between Wasserman and I into his seat in homeroom. He seemed tired or worried or both.

"What's wrong, man?" I had asked.

"Another long night with G-L-O-R-I-A?" Wasserman had suggested.

Then, the way he spelled out Gloria's name had made me feel like we were in second grade and that she was some kind of curse word we didn't want to get caught saying. Now, it makes me think of, Van Morrison and Patti Smith and how Gloria told me once how much she hated that song.

"She was at my locker this morning," Kostich had finally responded, his eyes watery and focused on someplace behind me.

Neither Wasserman or I had been able to think of anything to say. Sensing our inability, Kostich continued.

"She, um, was there, with a record by that band you like, Silverman," he had said.

"Starts with a B? And she said it was for me."

I still had been unable to say anything. At that moment, I had been busy imagining

Gloria, wearing only panties and a t-shirt, dancing around her room to The Beatles or Badfinger or The Band. Does Bruce Springsteen count as a band? I hadn't been sure, but I knew I could count The Beatles out; even Kostich would remember that one.

"Looks like you've got a girlfriend." Waserman had finally been able to contribute something to the conversation that, until then, Kostich had been having with himself.

"That's the thing," Kostich had said. "I thought we'd had an understanding — that it was a one time thing and all — but when I asked her why she was there, why she was giving me gifts, she looked, I don't know, hurt. And I, well, I just said, 'I've gotta go,' and left."

Could it be the Beach Boys? I'd wondered. Buffalo Springfield? Or maybe The Byrds?

"Don't worry," Waserman had said. "I'll talk to her for you, let her know that you aren't into anything like that."

"Be cool about it?" Kostich had asked. "Not mean or anything?"

"No problem. I'll let her down easy."

But I'd barely heard any of what they'd been saying, the words registering somewhere shallow and hardly making an impression in the soft tissues of my seventeen-year-old brain. Instead, I had been thinking about Gloria's hair, about how it might feel to brush it out of her face and graze her pale cheek and about kissing her in my car while we listened to some band that starts with a "B".

That night, I sat in front of the mirror, saying her name over and over again until it seemed like nonsense, as if I'd never heard it before.

Gloria still hadn't come outside, and while Kostich and Waserman skipped rocks across the parking lot of the building, I thought about the day Gloria and I sat in another parking lot — the one at school. I remembered how, when I finally gathered the courage to speak, the slightest agreement or confluence of interests signified something destined to happen. And how when she mentioned that she liked Big Star, a band that no one could even remember (especially Kostich), and she could even sing the lyrics to "Thirteen," I knew that, at that moment, I was right where I was supposed to be. But I only thought about these things to keep from thinking about what happened next. I wanted to convince myself that those long, stilted moments before Gloria and I had sex were more meaningful than the few, anxious ones while we were having sex. Or at least that they were meaningful enough to justify having sex in the first place.

The janitors had just finished raking the first leaves of the year off the asphalt. Night air blew in through the open vents of the car, and the music seemed to drift with it into the backseat where Gloria and I panted panicked breaths into one another's ears and groped blindly for something to hold onto in the dark of the setting sun and tinted windows.

I hadn't known to ask about protection or prevention or any of the other "p" words that begin terrible conversations and awkward family discussions. And by the time the thought occurred to me, I was afraid to do or say anything that might break the rhythm I'd found myself unwittingly falling into.

"This wasn't worth it, man," Waserman began again almost on cue when the glass double doors swung open and Gloria stepped out.

"Can it," Kostich said under his breath. "Imagine what this is like for her."

"Well, maybe she shouldn't have let herself get passed around like fucking baseball cards."

"Yeah, well you helped her make that decision, didn't you, Waserman?" Kostich said. "You didn't seem to have a problem with it then."

"Fuck you."

"Shut up, Waserman," I said. And thankfully he did, as we all stood up from the curb and watched her cross the parking lot, looking down until she was within ten yards or so. She didn't look at Kostich or Waserman, just at me, with what were and always have been gray eyes. But to their credit, my friends, suddenly reconciled, took special care not to sigh too loudly with relief or celebrate before they were out of my sight.

"See you later, Silverman."

Kostich's words seemed more like a question then. I didn't respond, and Gloria waited until he and Waserman were out of earshot before telling me what I already knew.

"I'm sorry, Seth," she said and started to cry.

"It's okay, Gloria," I said, putting my arms around her and bringing her head into that crook of my neck and shoulder that seems especially constructed for the purposes of consolation.

"We'll have to tell your parents," I said staring over her shoulder and past the building at the mounds of leaves piled against the fence again and remembered that not all fires can be stomped out.

I remembered how our guidance counselor's husband had failed to find the burning clump of leaves on the roof of their attached garage before the entire thing was on fire and took half of their house with it before it was put out, sealing off hallways and leaving doors that led to rooms no longer there.

Gloria was still crying, louder and softer and then louder again.

"And we'll get married sometime this summer probably," I continued.

"No, no, no," she said. "We don't have to do that just because—"

"I know, I know," I said. But I didn't know. Generations of morality and tradition, love based on guilt and shame, swam through my veins, and I knew there was no other option for us.

She pulled back a little from me and wiped her eyes, trying to force herself to stop crying before speaking with breath she didn't seem to have.

"What do you want to call him?"

"Him?"

"Yeah, I think it's gonna be a boy," she said, taking in a ragged breath. "My mom always talks about how she knew I was going to be a girl, that sometimes mothers just know."

"Oh," I said. "Silverman, I guess."

"I know, I know," she said, adopting a kind of fake laugh that reminded me of how my mother tolerated my father's jokes. "But I mean the first name."

"It doesn't matter," I said, looking back in the direction Kostich and Waserman had walked, but I couldn't see them anymore.

When that baseball shattered that window, we all lost something. Maybe it was just a ball, or maybe it was something more. That day in the parking lot, I used to think I was the only one that lost something. Now I realize that all three of us lost something that day — something like our childish, naïve belief in fate as a fixed, preordained thing (when it's really just a way of explaining away things and moving on from mistakes or glories that we can no longer find the roots of in ourselves) and our ignorance of chance's role in our lives — how much of them are really just the results of blind, naked fumbling in the dark.

ENNIS BARBERY

I am told

High on the wall
a black and white but mostly gray
photograph on yellowing paper
My great grandfather
in dusty overalls and a hat
walking down the railroad tracks
Irish
poor
but proud
and working
just light and shadow to me now
Or is he in my skin? Under my skin
the conductor
standing at the front of my cellular orchestra
directing the buzzing resonance
of pale skin
and flourishes of dark hair
from reservoirs of code
of blood
My blood
siphoned from a pool
the people of an island that is
green
I am told
and hilly.

REBECCA MINARDI

Girls in Blue

A stony street cuts evenly,
between walls of wooden doors and windows.
Cracks thread up the washed cement,
rising toward moss touched tiles.
Two girls in blue sit heavily,
the step slouches beneath their sighs.
One hums a little tune,
the other bats the flies.
A tousled boy marches from two flats down,
from his hand snakes a string.
From the string a red balloon,
a round, red ticket to the clouds.
The little girls squeal and the boy takes off,
dresses and patent shoes hot on his heels.

CODEY BILLS

Hymn

Oh victory in Jesus—
my savior forever—
he sought—
me and bought me—
with
his redeem—
ing blood he loved—
me ere—
I knew him and—
all my love—
is due him—
he plunged me—
to victory—
I stand outside looking into
a place I once knew well.
Now though,
I stand on red church carpet, in a long bench
(a pew) with red cushions and
a carved cross on the arm on the aisle. The
glass is stained but not pretty, large rectangles
thrown together, imbuing the sanctuary (no asylum here)
sickly
multicolored lights, blending together, making
a brown
yellow vomit color, a sallow jaundiced
color for all these strangers
with fevered eyes closed and hands raised
feeling the invisible crucifix heat, emanating from
spirit charged electric lights and fans, from this do in
remembrance of me, the crucifix heat that
drips with drinkable blood.
Soon, cannibalism and broken bones,
vials of soured blood, non-intoxicating
in golden plates with holes, shined this
morning in a basement kitchen.
I open my mouth to scream
but nothing comes out but a harsh
puff, an impotent breath.
no words, no sound,
only useless knock knocking on
bleeding white walls—

beneath the cleansing flood.

KATHERINE MOHN

Distinguishing

Rare: Bad manners among the elderly. Excellent manners among the young. Potential in-laws who have more questions than answers. Children with more answers than questions. Smooth sidewalks. Growing more liberal with age. A taxi cab with fuzzy dice, license plate reading, "FRESH." Easy relationships. Long-term friends. Steak, when cooked lightly. Fashionable clothing that makes any sort of sense. Those who despise holidays. People who hear "Come on Eileen" and do not attempt to sing along. People who actually know the lyrics to "Come on Eileen." Red hair. Green eyes.

Cliché: Attractive cosmetic surgeons. Santa Clause, high as a kite, mumbling profanity. Women with pretty hands advertising cleaning products. "Clean-up in aisle three" (the liquor section). New-age healers. Improbable endings to romantic comedies. Italian grandmothers who pinch you. Catholic grandmothers who criticize your spouse. Leather jackets = hair product abuse. Head scarves and liberalism = cannabis use. Breath mints and cologne = olfactory harbingers of virility. Braces and t-shirt slogans = visual announcers of virginity. Peg legs. Parrots. Wine drunk from paper bags.

Winter

In winter, it is best that young girls reside in small, arts-y, mountain villages. They ought to have hippie parents who participate in outdoor winter sports. If possible, beads should be strung through wild masses of curly hair punctuated by the dancing of static electricity. Oversized boots, hand-knit hats—and clothing with more colors than they know names for—are helpful additions. Such a child, sitting in a high chair and gazing curiously at you from across a restaurant, can provoke snow-melting cheer in a single glance.

You Know

Distinguished things: Middle-aged women with wisps of grey at the hairline. Older women with loose hair and little jewelry. Men who write with the same pen for years. A spare handkerchief, clean and folded. Heirlooms put to use. Watchful cats. Hemlock trees. Echoing piano music. Jazz on vinyl. Clinking glass. Ladies who drink whiskey and smoke fragrant things. Men who balance sincerity with subtle restraint.

A first-quarter moon from the countryside. Rocky outcroppings. Crisp eddy lines.

Things delightfully undistinguished: The flirtations of very old women. The corner of undershirt above an unbuttoned collar. An older man with mismatched socks and a bulbous nose. A cat sprawled in a doorway with limbs outstretched. The rhythmic stomping of muddy boots in a backwoods dance hall. Worn leather work gloves. Small girls who quote Appalachian wisdom in drawling accents. Toupees. Dickies. Oversized shoulder-pads. Relishing a good sneeze. Fat tenors. Thin troublemakers.

Things distinguished and troubling: Self-consciously dressed people exercising publicly. College roommates planning weddings. Electronic devices in leather hip holsters at parties. Well-dressed regulars who neglect to learn a barista's name. Soulless elevator jazz on compact disc. The estimated value of Andy Warhol's used tissue. People who use unnecessary French for everyday phrases. Large diamonds. Small telephones. Most women's shoes. Cologne in closed spaces. Polite laughter. Insincere laughter.

Cruelly, repulsively undistinguished: Lucky rabbit feet. Trophy spouses, or use of the term. Solid objects hidden within hairdos. American dental practice. Condescending New Yorkers. Vindictive yoga instructors with surgically perfected bodies. Turtlenecks with keyhole cutouts. Teenagers with expensive cars. Man-made rapids. Baby-talk. Words screen-printed onto pants' posteriors, especially when purchased by a parent. Clever titles to terrible literature. Cars engineered to be louder. Squeaking Styrofoam.

Wakeless

Wakeful. Something is nautical about this word. Wake: The effect we leave behind. Wake: Vigil. Wakeful: to be full of this wake and to be vigilant of it. To know and to concern ourselves with our wake, our consequences. Wakelessness: Another word for sleep?

'Sleep' and 'dream' are lovely words with long 'e' sounds. Comforting 'e.' But one syllable? Abrupt. Try 'wakelessness.' Like wake, it trails off into the closed, sustained consonant 's.' When we are wakeless, we have no wake. We defy physics; our movement truly leaves no negative space. No area of low pressure to fill, only the fullness of each moment passed in dream sleep.

So much stealth is to be found in sleep. Our waking thoughts are light and fleeting; we take in stimulus and distraction. On the calm plane of still water that is dream sleep, we discover thoughts that dare not rise to conscious air, that do not pass our filter. That do not come, to pass. In dreams, we cannot sift this sand. Our hands tied, we must admire what pebbles may approach us.

Do dreams sharpen our lens somehow, as that of a camera, with the tossing aside of filter after filter? Truly, they may. And we may: Be sharp, and lens-like dreamers.

JOHN CHIRICO

X For I

under currents

rolled like cigarettes

muted like shell shock

thrust themselves

arches and troughs above

dune

sweetened and sculpted by moon breaths

refracted light on a field of particles

wobble in two dimensions

like uneasy spiders

metallic chair sits not with the turns of tides

stands in opposition

stands in quietness

sun shimmer off the curvaceous steel

beige cushions stop

stains more beige hide

forged comfort in cream color

CODEY BILLS

Trip

There was a grid behind the sky:
stars glimmering mischievously not in the sky
but through it
candles wearing the night sky like a pair of
Chucks
forgotten in the apartment when we left suddenly.

Contemplating the cigarette in my
hand,
feeling my finger through the brown stained filter,
screaming fuck it out unwashed windows,
I drive
with a cold wind pushing me through the night
into the open heart
of America.

The lights on this road are ecstatic
they cradle the road
lit uterus:
we are not children, but not adults
and the womb we inhabit
is not flesh
but
green hills cutting the sky into domed pieces.

A throbbing vibrating heart sits next to me,
inhabiting the passenger seat
incredible unity
her voice I hear in every song,
my voice, to her, is her voice,
and the songs we hear in Indiana echo the sunrise
that we're racing.

In Indiana, you can see
everything.
We sing the sky,
unaltered, no name for such blue nesting in us.
we sing flat forever fields of near harvest wheat,
we sing the violet tinged clouds breathing
hellion energy into us.
We open the windows for another cigarette,
and scream America!
out the windows into this,

the vibrating pulse sending amniotic life
in lines of huge trucks to metallic extremities.
We follow.

In America,
all roads lead to the city.
Up 23, over 70, up 65 and
always the promise of a gleaming
skyline.

Chicago.
Abundance.
The skyway in the morning
Traffic multiethnic horns and rattling trains.
Chicago.
American city.

The skyline echoes the diamond sheen of Lake Michigan
and opal tears flee and run toward
a toiling wind and the sweat and heat of millions.

The buildings, tall arms from deep foundations,
ground us both.
We walk eight miles on the lakeshore,
talk,
only get beeped at once by a cop
near the faux roman Soldier Field,
when we lost the sidewalk and ran across the sunhot grass,
we see a bride in a mermaid dress get pissed at the wind off Lake
Michigan,
see her bridesmaid on the beach sand grab the ass of and kiss some guy,
run through crowds,
sweat urban sweat,
watch gentrification tack brick facades onto tired buildings,
but not heal the wound of poverty,
eat authentic tacos, redfaced heat from fresh green jalepeños
walk through ivy covered metal gates into
a formidable university, ornate stonework gargoyles grinning mali-
ciously,
and ride back on the train.

The sun will always set,
and the lights will glitter into forever night
and the road will always summon us,
but now,
now we travel back and sleep at three different rest areas
and wake in the morning
and come home.

CORY JACKSON

Exodus

When the barefoot creek behind the baseball diamond floods, the water slowly invades
the infield, planting building-block bacteria in the sandbag bases, rotting the split
canvas from the inside out. In heavier rains, like biblical plagues, the pitcher's mound
disappears underneath the murky brown blanket that fills up the stair-step basin like a
bowl and rusts the tin roofs of the pitter-patter dugouts set deep into the hill.

When the grains of sand are bloated enough to burst, and the rest of the water has
streamed back through the splintered outfield wall, where homerun dreams go to die,
all it leaves behind is sour septic odor and a dozen bloated fish, their xylophone bones
collapsing in on their oily organs, drowning in shallow parts of the outfield grass,
where lazy left-fielders watch line drives sail over their sun-stained scalps.

When I was nine years old, the fish were failed refugees. Bullet-riddled bodies on the
Berlin Wall. They didn't know where they were going, only that they hadn't made it,
like the Jews that died in the desert while Moses walked in circles. A generation in
exile. Who drowned in the Red Sea and never tasted manna. Who dried up in the desert
heat and blew away before they reached the promised land.

South. Then East Along the Railroad Tracks.

"Cody. Hey, Cody," Eric yelled when he finally caught up. He was trying not to pant too much after running half a block down the street. Cody was always the first one out the doors when school ended.

Cody was Eric's best friend. They'd been in the same class since elementary school. Cody was the shortest kid in the eighth grade, but he was still the most popular. Eric was at least six inches taller, but he was pudgy where Cody was wiry. Eric got teased about it sometimes. Cody kept his short blonde hair gelled down. Eric's mom wouldn't let him put gel in his hair. She said she liked it wavy. She'd grab him by the face and kiss him on top of the head when he said he wanted to trim it up and gel it down.

"Hey, man," Cody said, stopping for a second while Eric caught his breath.

They walked home together every day this way. Eric usually caught up to Cody right after the kids who lived between West 10th and Central City turned down Madison Avenue, laughing and shouting at Cody as they walked away. It was usually just Cody and Eric who walked south the four blocks to the railroad tracks and then turned left across the city. Eric's mom lived across from the bowling alley. Cody lived not too far from there—up past the Kroger and the Little Caesar's.

Eric liked it better when he and Cody were alone. Cody sometimes got distracted in a group. He liked to make everybody laugh. When they were alone they could just talk.

"I'm going to get my mom to take me to the mall tomorrow," Eric said when they started walking again. "You want to go?"

"Nah. I'm going out to my cousin's tomorrow."

"What you going to do out there?"

"Nothing. Just chill. Have an Airsoft war. My cousin's got all kinds of those guns."

"Ah, man. I'm going to have my mom get me one for my birthday."

Eric's birthday wasn't for two months. It would take every second of the next few weeks to convince his mom to get him one of those Airsoft guns, Eric thought, even though all they shot was plastic BBs.

"Yeah? My cousin's got this one—looks exactly like an AK."

"That's probably the one I'm going to get."

"Cool," Cody said.

They walked quietly for a while. The streets were all brick in this part of town. There were no sidewalks on this stretch, so they had to walk down the middle of the street past the back end of the DMV complex and a couple of old warehouses butted up against the train tracks. No cars ever came.

Eric was just about to ask Cody if he wanted to come over and use his mom's boyfriend's pool table when they saw Jordan. Jordan was in their grade but a few years older because he'd been held back a few times. Eric noticed Jordan was wearing a red bandana tied around his head. He'd pulled it down low over his eyebrows. Eric thought he'd have to look around the house when he got home. See if he had any bandanas. He thought there might be one in the hall closet.

Jordan was standing, holding a bottle, his bike dropped in the grassy median of a street that dead-ended in the railroad tracks. There was a pedestrian viaduct there. It had a wide series of steps leading straight down into the ground where there was a tunnel that ran under the tracks and came up on the other side. The entrance was surrounded by a concrete barrier that reminded Eric of the top of a castle. Jordan threw the bottle into the viaduct. Eric could hear it smash below.

"Hey, wiener breath! You better not come back up here!" Jordan shouted down into the hole.

"Hey, Jordan," Cody said when he and Eric got close enough. "What's up?"

"Shit. I was riding by, and I saw that one old homeless faggot poke his head out of there—that one that pulled out his dick at Trey and Evan last year. Motherfucker knows better than to mess with me."

Eric knew who Jordan was talking about. Eric had seen him digging in the dumpsters behind the CVS sometimes—fishing out cans and putting them in a big garbage bag. He always had on two coats. He tied them around his waist sometimes when it was warm. He had a beard and long, tangled gray hair he kept tucked under the same knit hat year-round. He remembered when Trey and Evan told everyone that story. They'd been skipping school and were walking to Burger King. That guy had been coming up the alley dragging his bag of cans. Trey and Evan say he licked his lips and pulled down his sweat pants. He wasn't wearing any underwear.

Jordan kicked a rock and sent it skittering down the concrete steps.

"What's he doing down there?" Eric asked. He and Cody walked by the viaduct every day after school. As far as he knew, no one had ever so much as gone down the steps.

"Fuck if I know," Jordan said. "Probably sleeps down there and shit. Why fuck do you care, fat ass?"

"I don't know," Eric said. "I was just asking."

"How do you know he's still down there?" Cody asked. He was squatting to try to peer into the tunnel.

"I don't know. Why don't you go down there and check it out for me?" Jordan asked.

"Hell, no," Cody said straightening back up.

"How much it take to get you down there?" Jordan asked. His eyes were lighting up. Jordan loved this kind of thing, Eric knew. Jordan had paid Skyler twenty dollars to put a dead cat on his head last summer.

"Shit. I wouldn't go down there for nothing," Cody said.

"What about you, fat fuck?" Jordan asked Eric. "I've got ten dollars if you walk all the way across to the other side and back."

"Forget it," Cody cut in. "Let's just go over to Eric's. Think Jerry will let us shoot pool?"

"I'll do it," Eric said. He was surprised to hear it come out of his own mouth.

"Bullshit," Jordan said. "You'll get halfway down the steps and pussy out."

"I'm not a pussy. Show me the money, and I'll do it."

Eric's stomach did a flip flop when Jordan pulled a crumpled ten dollar bill from his front pocket. He'd hoped Jordan didn't really have the cash.

"Hurry up," Jordan sneered. "I haven't got all day."

Eric turned and looked down the steps into the viaduct. He didn't like that you couldn't see into the tunnel from the top. He just stared for a few seconds.

"I knew you were chicken," Jordan teased.

"I'm going," Eric said. He'd tried to sound tough, but his voice came out in a whine.

"This is stupid. Let's just go, guys," Cody said.

"No. I'm going. I'm going," Eric said. Less whiny this time.

Eric looked again down the viaduct stairwell descending before him. There was a collection of dead leaves, plastic bags, broken glass, and other jetsam littering the base of the stairs. The walls of the stairwell were painted with washed out graffiti—images long scoured to blurs by rain and snow. He would have to venture all the way down before he could see what was inside the long, concrete passageway. He took a first, tentative step downward.

Eric looked back at Cody, but Cody just shrugged. Jordan started laughing.

"Is that as far as you're going? You're a bigger pussy than I thought."

Eric turned his face back to the viaduct. He willed his left leg to swing down one more step. Slowly, reluctantly, as if fear had partially paralyzed the muscles in his lower extremities, he began to descend. Then, once his legs started moving, he was at the bottom before he knew it. He tried to watch his step, but he crunched down on a sliver of broken bottle. Eric could hear it cracking and grinding under his foot while he paused. The sound sent tiny shivers of echoes down the tunnel.

He could see light shining down the steps leading up and out at the other end of the tunnel. This filled him with a sense of relief. The passage wasn't as long as he'd feared. But the distance wasn't entirely reassuring—there was a brief stretch in the middle where light streaming in from both ends of the tunnel couldn't penetrate. It looked like there were light fixtures in the roof of the tunnel, but they were all dead. The shadows were deep and dark, and Eric couldn't quite make out what they were hiding. Was that a shape crouching in the darkest part of the tunnel? Was it an old mattress? A rolled up sleeping bag? A garbage bag full of cans? A man?

Eric's eyes couldn't quite focus on it in the dim light, but he wanted to be sure before he moved towards it.

Above, Jordan kicked the metal handrail as hard as he could. The boom echoed like a cannon shot in the tunnel. Eric jumped.

"Yeah. Real funny," he called back up the stairs.

Eric could hear Cody and Jordan laughing. He knew he couldn't retreat now, and he couldn't wait any longer. Whatever it was in the middle of the tunnel didn't seem to be moving. Eric started walking slowly into the viaduct. He watched his feet. Each stride felt dangerous, like entering the high weeds at the park where the copperheads liked to coil.

The tunnel was a little wider than Eric's arm span. The walls were a patch work of layered graffiti. Tags painted over tags. The messages and crude drawings left on the concrete walls were protected from the weather, but they were still indistinct in the dark. In one white blotch of paint, it looked like someone had taken a key and scratched in big block letters, "Dwayne will never love noone like Krissa Boothe." Then, a few steps further down in the same blocky script, "Dwayne asked Krissa to marry him but Krissa never loved Dwayne the way he loved her."

The passage smelled musty and dank. It reminded Eric of the time his mamaw's cat had gotten loose in to her crawlspace and he had to crawl all the way under the house to coax her out with a box of treats. It had been cold and uncomfortable and damp. He'd had to get down on his hands and knees, and he'd kept bumping his head, making his scalp burn for a few seconds each time. The dirt under his hands felt dry but spongy at the same time. It had smelled like wet earth and decayed growth. It had smelled like pill bugs and worms. It had smelled like this tunnel.

He wanted to hurry up and get to the other side, but he was still wary of the dark, blank spot in the middle. As he was drawing closer and closer, he started to involuntarily slow his steps. In his mind, the dark shape started to take on the characteristics of a crouching man. Eric imagined him angry, seething, and stinking, driven underground by Jordan's taunts and hurled bottles, coiled and ready to strike with cruel, crooked fingers at anything that invaded his lair. Eric imagined a strong grasp trapping his ankle as he walked past and the feel of hard teeth sinking in to his leg. His hands. His neck. The weight of an adult body on top of him, pressing him to the cold, concrete floor.

But when he got right up on it, his eyes finally adjusted and he could see that the lurking shape was just an old cardboard box pushed up against the side of the tunnel. Eric wondered how it even got down there. He kicked it, but there was nothing inside. The box was wet and stuck to the floor, so his foot poked right through the side. The whole thing collapsed when he wiggled it free.

It was a short walk from there to the other set of stairs. Eric climbed up and out into the daylight. He blinked. He knew where he was. He was over near his mom's credit union. He could see straight down the street into the west end of the park. A few blocks from here was mamaw and Harold's house.

He turned around. He couldn't see Jordan and Cody over the hump of the railroad tracks. He could hear a crow cawing, and he looked around. It was sitting on one of the ceramic insulators for the power lines that ran over the tracks. Eric knew about the insulators because his dad was working as a line man for the power company over in Kanawha County. He liked to point out things like that when they were driving. Infrastructure, he called it. Eric didn't know what it meant, but he liked how it sounded.

The crow looked back at him and cawed three more times. He could see into its red mouth every time it opened its beak. It hopped into the air, and Eric watched it fly away until it disappeared down the track.

The sun was getting low already. He stared after the crow a minute longer, hoping to catch a glimpse of it darting up onto one of the power lines crisscrossing the tracks further down. The air felt warm after the cool of the tunnel. Eric could feel beads of sweat forming at his hair line. He wiped them away with his sleeve. He thought this is when it would be useful to have a bandana. Like Jordan's.

The trip back was quick. He breezed up the steps to find Cody and Jordan still waiting.

"Anything down there?" Cody asked.

"Nope," Eric replied. "Give me my money." He extended his hand to Jordan.

"How do I know you went through the whole thing?" Jordan said, getting on his bike. "I don't want to pay you ten dollars if all you did was hide down there and piss yourself."

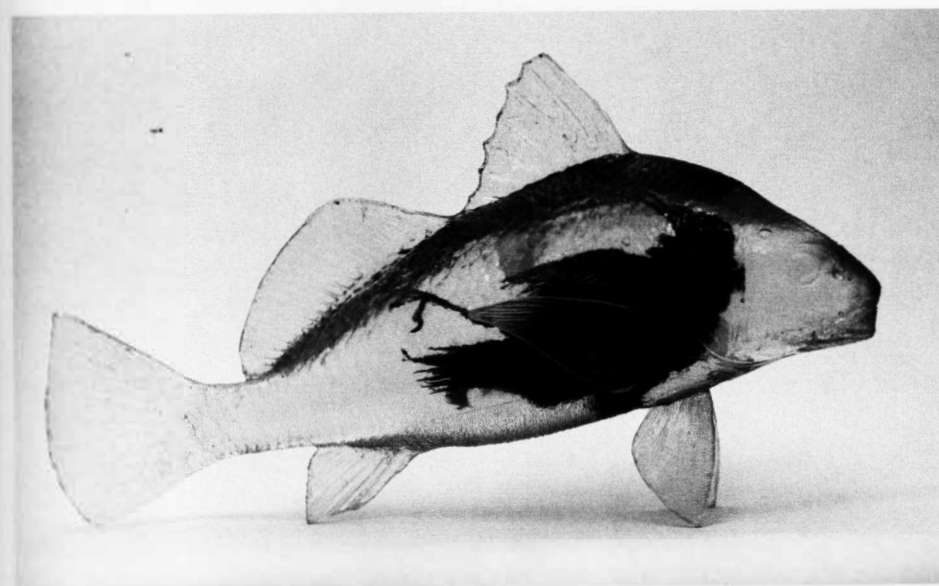
"Give me my goddamn money," Eric stated flatly.

“All right. All right. Don’t get your panties in a twist.” Jordan handed him the wrinkled ten dollar bill.

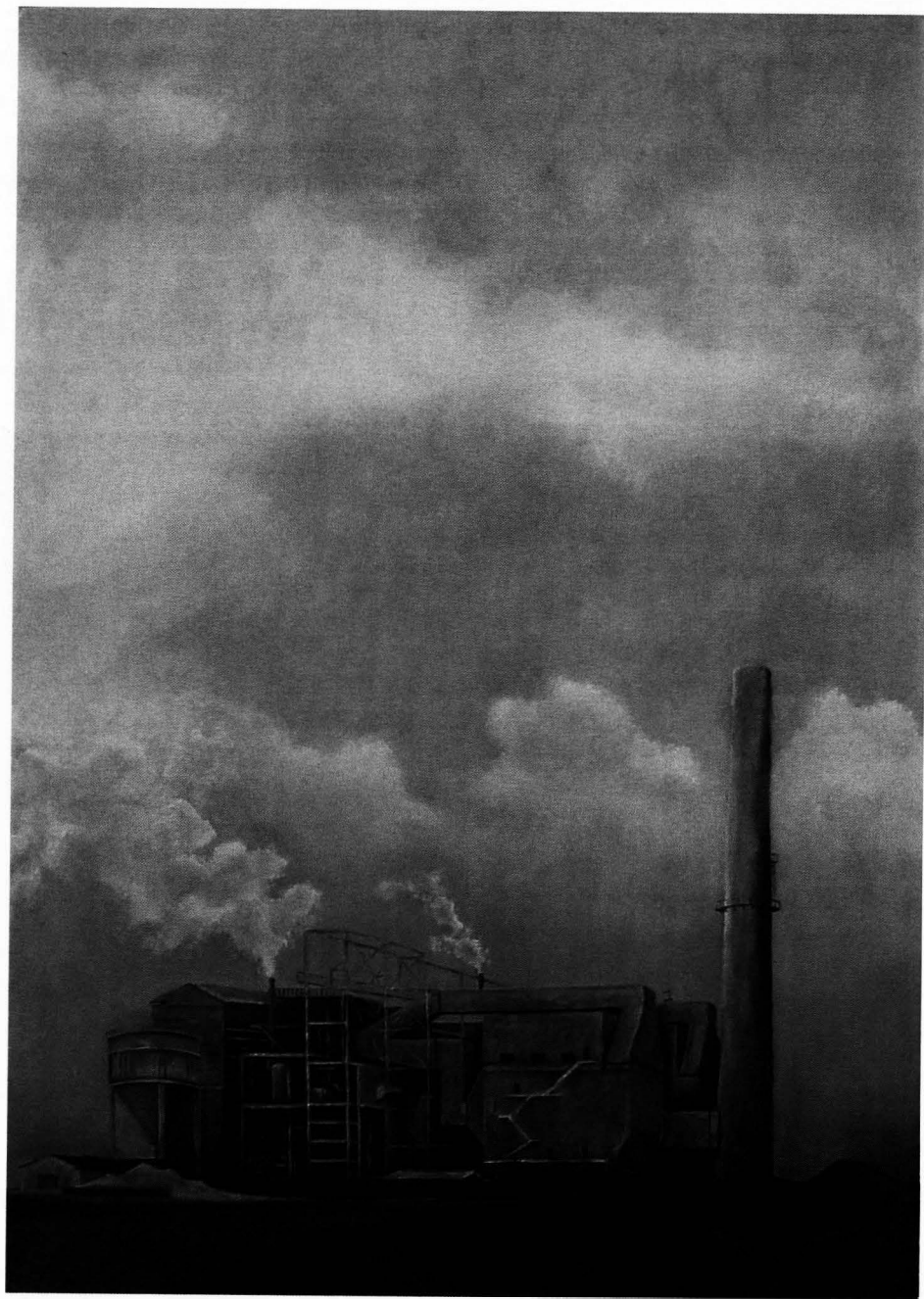
“You guys want to go shoot some pool?” Eric asked.

“Sure,” said Cody. “There ain’t shit else to do.”

The three of them kept walking—Jordan pushing his bike—up the street, parallel to the railroad tracks, toward Eric’s house.



CRISTOFER BOTKIN
The Grass is Always Greener



CRISTOFER BOTKIN
Powerhouse



JASON BRYAN
Untitled



JASON BRYAN
Untitled



JASON BRYAN
Untitled

MEREDITH DEVNEY

Wheel of Fortune

Vanna makes bank turning over letters
and I barely make a buck teaching teens
where to place commas, and the difference
between cumulative and coordinative adjectives.

I make them realize Hester Prynne is a whore
and Gatsby's parties are better than the one
they were wasted at last weekend, better
than any they'll ever attend.

I motivate my sophomores to question
Poe's mental stability. They self-define sanity
and in the process discover their own perversity.
My juniors dream in red hats and carousels,

of cliffs that make them cry out for their mothers
in the middle of the night. By the time
my seniors graduate, they're absurd.
They believe existence precedes essence;

rationality is a trap. Initially they ask:
*But how can the sun make Meursault
shoot a gun?* Until it strikes them:
They, too, are only focused on the physical.

*Like, how I obsess over sex? Yes.
Like, how if someone sneezes I get distracted?
Yup. Like, how my recent diagnosis of ADD
keeps me from productivity? Bingo.*

Vanna, you and I have a few things in common:
consonants, vowels, a nice figure.
But you only wear dresses,
and I – pants.

CORY JACKSON

Blonde on Blonde

it takes a lot of medicine to keep up this pace,
cupfuls of coffee and a mouthful of cigarettes
a handful of pills and your blood's so thin,
a papercut could burst you like a balloon.

bouncing your head on your arm on your leg to contain
a head full of ideas and a pocketful of fingers,
eyes full of sleep and a passion that turns you into
a column of air the wind might blow away.

*

you are a myth – thin-lipped ghost pirates on ghost ships.
an invisible train on invisible tracks that always lead the same place.
running on warm gulf stream water and whispers of leftover gasoline.

you are some forgotten story we almost remembered once
when we were young and stories were all we had
to keep the blood from boiling over in our veins.

*

try not to think about it too much
or it'll disappear,
like the meanings of words evaporate after a while,
coursing full of connotations and amphetamines.

until they float away, reclaimed by the ether,
and settle like stars into the heavens.
to look kindly upon us
and grant wishes from time to time.

KATHERINE MOHN

Hot Wheels

Cast of Characters:
(In Order of Appearance)

DORIS.....Wife to Bob, Retired Art Teacher, Mid-Sixties
CHARLIE.....Art Student, Mid-Twenties
BOB.....Husband to Doris, a Dentist, Early Sixties
KELLY.....Granddaughter to Bob and Doris, Age Ten
EMILY.....Granddaughter to Bob and Doris, Age Seven
STEVEN.....Son to Bob and Doris, Father to Emily and Kelly
JENNY.....Wife to Steven, Mother to Emily and Kelly

Act One Scene I

(In a cafe, five-thirty in the evening on a Tuesday. Late fall, a storm is coming. The cafe is crowded, but hums only quietly as students hunch over laptops, typing and scrolling. Doris and Charlie sit at a small circular table, waist-deep in conversation. Doris is a lovely, vibrant woman in her mid-sixties. Charlie is thin, charismatic and attractive, with horn-rimmed glasses. He is very loud, partially due to the disability that prevents control of his voice and restricts his mobility to a wheelchair. Some patrons sneak away to distant tables, repelled by their vociferous exchange.)

DORIS: Standing there, in the room, at the second exhibit, I . . . felt soothed. Held, in some way.

CHARLIE: OH, BUT -- WHAT HE'S REALLY TRYING TO TELL YOU. HE WANTS TO SORT OF SHAKE UP YOUR SENSE OF . . . SYMMETRY. SECURITY, YOU KNOW. HE'S SAYING "HELLO DORIS! COME ON DOWN! WAKE UP TO THIS WORLD OF BEAUTY!" *(Charlie reaches across the table and shakes her by both shoulders.)*

DORIS: You stop that! Jesus, Charl—can't you see I'm old?!

CHARLIE: I'M CRIPPLED. GET OVER IT, YOU OLD HAG. *(They erupt in laughter.)*

DORIS: Oh . . . God. But, anyway. I know you understand this stuff — and what do I know? But even with the asymmetry, he creates a sense of balance . . . don't you think?

CHARLIE: I GUESS, BUT – WAIT! I THINK I GET IT! THE ASYMMETRY IS LIKE . . . NECESSARY, RIGHT? LIKE YOUR EYES, ONE BROWN AND ONE GREEN. BUT THEN, THE BALANCE, I THINK, IS YOUR MOST LOVELY QUALITY.

DORIS: Oh, please. You flatter. Anyhow, can't you flirt with someone your own age?

CHARLIE: UM. DORIS, I THOUGHT YOU KNEW. I'M — WELL, I DON'T REALLY GO FOR YOUR KIND. WOMEN, I MEAN.

DORIS: Well, yeah. I gathered that. I'm old, not stupid. Besides, it kind of makes sense.

CHARLIE: HOW DO YOU MEAN?

DORIS: Well. I've always just thought that it must be easy. Well, no — not easy. No, but to have so much in common . . .

CHARLIE: SOMETIMES. NOT ALWAYS.

DORIS: But, kind of like symmetry.

CHARLIE: REMEMBER. BALANCE. GOTTA HAVE BALANCE.

DORIS: You know, Charlie. You would have been a catch if I'd known you . . . back then. You remind me of someone I knew back in junior high. I wonder if . . . well, I guess I'd never have known.

CHARLIE: IF HE WAS QUEER?!

DORIS: Hah! Shh! God, you're loud. You're like—! You know, you're really not like anyone else I know. And I'm, well . . . I'm bitchy when I'm with you. And really quite happy. How is it that we're friends?

CHARLIE: LUCK.

DORIS: Oh, god. Five-forty!

CHARLIE: TIME TO GO?

DORIS: Sorry! Potato soup tonight. You've gotta come over sometime. Next week?

CHARLIE: IT'S A DATE. YOU TELL ME WHEN. I WANT TO MEET THAT HUSBAND OF YOURS. LUCKY SON OF A BITCH.

DORIS: You mean husband of a — Ha! See you tomorrow. Unless class gets cancelled. It's raining like mad out there.

CHARLIE: MWAH! DRIVE SAFELY!

DORIS: Ten blocks. I could jog it. What about you?

CHARLIE: MY SISTER'S ON THE WAY.

DORIS: Mwah!

Scene II

(In the same cafe, early afternoon on a Friday. Ethereal techno music plays softly, as college students occasionally cycle through the joint. Doris and Bob, her husband, sit in trendy high-backed upholstered chairs, reading magazines. While Bob quietly tolerates these environs, Doris enjoys the youthful atmosphere.)

BOB: Doris?

DORIS: Hmm?

BOB: I think I remember . . . No, never mind.

DORIS: Mmm.

(Doris squints across the glossy surface of a magazine page, angling the paper to and fro. Intermittently the ghosts of her eyebrows dance, lines coming together in a tight

embrace, amorous arches sneaking behind the curtain of silver wisps that fall across her forehead. Bob, a less active reader, is awoken occasionally by the cool tickle of wire-rimmed glasses sliding over the greased end of his bulbous nose. The breakfast crowd has left. The cafe has entered the doldrums of early afternoon.)

DORIS: Bob . . . should we be leaving?

BOB: Hum? Oh, no. Maybe I could get this coffee warmed up. Do you, eh . . .

DORIS: Oh, no I'm fine for now. Still half a cup to go.

BOB: Ehh. *(Bob rises from the chair with difficulty.)* I'll be back. *(Bob walks to the bar and orders. He returns bearing a fragrant cup and a green plastic card, number 13.)* I feel like a corn dog.

DORIS: You feel like a corn dog?

BOB: I feel like eating a corn dog. Oh, you know what I mean.

DORIS: Well, that's not what you said, dear.

BOB: Now why would I say that? Makes no sense. Do I look yellow and greasy to you?

DORIS: Not particularly.

BOB: Hmmph.

DORIS: There is, of course, the stick . . . you know? Up the old . . .

BOB: Really, Doris? In a public . . .

(Doris chortles into her cup. Bob receives a plate from a waitress, and savagely begins to dissect the mustard-smearred corn dog with a knife and fork. Finishing the corn dog, Bob slurps at the stick and sets aside his plate. With an abrupt sigh, he turtles down into the cocoon of his beige sweater, satisfied.)

DORIS: When are the boys coming in?

BOB: You know how Bobby can be.

DORIS: Yes, but what about Steven?

BOB: Oh. Well he said Friday night. Leaving after work. Maybe nine or ten. They have a long way to drive.

DORIS: You think he'll spend all weekend on the phone again?

BOB: Doubt it. He'll probably want to get away from all that.

DORIS: That sure is a lot of money. Not to mention a lot of time . . . who knows how long it's going to take. Maybe you ought to call, you know, check on him.

BOB: Er . . . yeah. Maybe later. Maybe . . .

(Charlie barrels through with a gust of wind. He disturbs, in a flutter of vibrant red and yellow, the artwork along the wall. Smile wide, hands clasped, Charlie gyrates with glee. His wheelchair screeches to a halt at the table, next to Bob and Doris. Doris effervesces from her chair and bends over, swinging Charlie from side to side in bone-cracking squeeze. Bob, confronted with the rear view of Doris, turns and loudly slurps his coffee. Though Doris appears to ignore this, she sits back down, giving Bob a quick pat on the knee.)

CHARLIE: DOOOR-IS! AW, YOU ARE JYUST DEEELIGHTFUL!

DORIS: Charlie, I want you to meet my husband, Bob.

CHARLIE: FINALLY! DORIS HAS TOLD ME SO MUCH. OH, HOW ARE YOU?

BOB: I'm, eh. . .

DORIS: Bob is an artist like you! Aren't you, dear?

CHARLIE: REALLY, HOW WONDERFUL! WHAT KIND?

BOB: Oh, heh. . . well I'm not an artist really. I just make things. . . out of wood. I don't exactly know what that makes me . . .

CHARLIE: AH! AN ARTISAN!

DORIS: Oh, Charlie, that's wonderful! What do you say to that, Bob?

BOB: I like it. I mean. . . I can live with it.

DORIS: He said the same thing about me when we first met.

CHARLIE: HAH! OHH DORIS, YOU ARE JYUST TOO MUCH!

BOB: But, Doris, I never really said that.

DORIS: He knows that dear. It's all right.

CHARLIE: OH, YOU KNOW WHAT? I'M SPOSTA TO BE MEETING MY PROFESSOR IN TWO MINUTES!

DORIS: Goodness. . . are you coming back after the meeting?

CHARLIE: YES. IT'LL PROBABLY BE ABOUT . . . OH . . . HALF HOUR?

DORIS: We'll be here, won't we Bob?

BOB: Hmm? I'm on lunch, remember? I have to be back to the office by . . .

DORIS: We'll figure it out. Maybe coffee later? Call me!

CHARLIE: SOUNDS GOOD! WELL, GOODBYE!

DORIS: Bye now!

CHARLIE: NICE TO MEET YOU, BOB!

BOB: Bye.

(Again, the artwork flails, the walls shudder as Hurricane Charlie exits the café. Bob mumbles something that sounds like 'good riddance.')

DORIS: What's that, dear?

BOB: Oh. Just . . . he's rather. . . boisterous, isn't he?

DORIS: Isn't he? Just wonderful. A delightful, kid, you know?

BOB: How do you know him?

DORIS: Well, it started with having coffee. He was in my class. And now he knows everything about, you know, my parents, my favorite music, our kids. All that.

BOB: Mmm. So you're close.

DORIS: He's an artist, and a performer, like on the stage. He dances, oh . . . tremendously talented.

BOB: An artist. With hands like that? And what kind of dancer can't move his legs?

DORIS: Bob, you stop that right now. Just stop it.

BOB: And that voice! They really give him a microphone?

DORIS: Forget it. Anyway, I've decided. I'm going to invite him over Sunday for dinner, just the three of us. I want you to get to know him — you'll love him. Oh, you'll see!

BOB: Doris, no. I want to have time to talk to Steven when he calls. Maybe even have some peace and quiet, if you would . . . maybe take Charlie out someplace instead?

DORIS: I suppose we could. There's that new exhibit across town we haven't seen yet. And he could come over next weekend when the boys are here!

BOB: No, Doris. I mean — do you really think that would be a good . . .

DORIS: He's coming over sooner or later. I already invited him.

BOB: But . . . but how are we going to make it work? I mean, we've already got . . .

DORIS: All right! Spit it out, Bob. What's wrong with Charlie coming over?

BOB: Oh, nothing.

DORIS: No, what are you implying?

BOB: Nothing. I'm just wondering. How much plaster should I buy? And, should I reinforce the walls now, or just wait to repair them later?

DORIS: Oh, for goodness sake, Bob. Live a little.

BOB: As opposed to the alternative?

Scene III

(The fat honeydew hisses softly, responding to the fluid motion of Doris' knife. A satisfying slurp is produced as the two halves separate. She sits at the kitchen table performing this dance, as Bob assumes a place of honor at the stove, his rotund shape pronounced by the flowing expanse of a red apron. Whisk, whisk, whisk. Tap, tap, tap. Surrounded by an array of glittering plastic containers, Bob adds a sprinkle of one, mixes vigorously, and pours in the next. Suddenly, an offensive BLEEP! With a dash of salt and a bit of flourish, he lifts the heavy glass pan and tosses it into the oven's wide mouth. Grimacing, he meets the face of his watch.)

BOB: How does anyone sleep that long. It's ten-o-nine. It'll be cold. My Saturday casserole . . .

DORIS: Bob, they didn't get in until two-thirty. And then you wanted them to stay up talking . . . Emily fell asleep under the table again.

BOB: I'm going to go wake them. *(Bob starts toward the door.)*

DORIS: Don't you dare. *(Blocking his trajectory.)*

BOB: But Doris.

DORIS: You dare to cross a knife wielding woman?

BOB: Let me through!

DORIS: Not a chance. Now kiss me.

BOB: But you haven't brushed . . .

DORIS: Well, at least calm down then. Have some cantaloupe.

BOB: Fine . . . fine. *(Sitting)*

DORIS: How is it my Boo Bear can get so worked up before breakfast?

BOB: Oh, good god.

DORIS: I mean it. I worry. Have you told the boys yet? About the other day?

BOB: No. No, the doctor called it a 'fibrillation.' I mean, there I was thinking I was dying, and then come to find out it's a . . . some kind of minor thing. 'Fibrillation.' Sounds like a sissy problem. Like a mild case of irritable bowels, or something. And we're supposed to be scared?

(Kelly bursts in, hair combed and braided, wearing crisp plaid pajamas.)

KELLY: Pop-pop, what are you supposed to be scared of?

BOB: *(Recovering composure.)* Your Mimm told me to watch out . . . for ambush . . .

DORIS: By a tribe of Wild Indians!

(Emily enters and pounces on Bob, a blur of unkempt auburn hair. She wears an oversized Donald Duck t-shirt.)

KELLY: Dad said we have to call them Native Americans, Mimm.

DORIS: Oh? Well, he's right. My apologies.

EMILY: Whatever! Achh! Not tickle monster!

BOB: I'm gonna get you!

EMILY: No! No! Uncle!

KELLY: By the way, Mimm, is Uncle Bobby here yet?

DORIS: Not yet, Kel. He had to work today. Might make it in sometime after supper.

(Steven appears, striking in Saturday attire. A brown belt cinches an olive t-shirt over his frame, while hazel eyes, though weary, envelop his surroundings with a warm beam of light.)

STEVEN: Nope. Bobby just called, won't be making it in at all.

DORIS: Oh, Steven dear. We hadn't heard you up.

STEVEN: I roused about six-o'clock. Couldn't get back to sleep, so I looked over some of the bank papers.

GIRLS: Morning Daddy! Where's Mommy? *(The girls converge upon Steven, each embracing one of his legs.)*

STEVEN: She's on the way down.

KELLY: Dad, could you please tell me the time?

STEVEN: Ten-twenty. Go hop in the shower, squirt.

EMILY: But we wanna swim! Can't we please go put on our swimmy suits?

STEVEN: Sure thing. I bet this is the last good day of the year for it. Brush and comb, though, at least.

KELLY: Already finished, Dad. That's Emily's morning breath you're smelling.

(Kelly runs off on long legs, trailed by Emily's doll-like figure.)

DORIS: *(Popping up from her seat.)* Ten-twenty. Oh! I've got to go pick up Charlie!

BOB: Oh, God.

DORIS: Bob, don't.

STEVEN: Who is Charlie?

DORIS: A good friend. Delightful kid . . . you'll see. Oh, I can't wait! *(She grabs her purse, exits.)*

BOB: So, what are you working on with the bank? *(Offering Steven a seat and a steaming cup.)*

STEVEN: Oh, just trying to see . . . what kind of recourse I might have.

BOB: Huh. There's your problem. No recourse now.

STEVEN: Listen, Dad, I know that. Look, I'd rather not . . .

BOB: I mean, Steve. He had no connections, no references. How could you just trust him like that? I taught you to invest wisely.

STEVEN: There's nothing I can do now. I'm only trying . . . Can't we just drop it?

(Smoke is seen pouring from the oven. Jenny enters the kitchen, then rushes out, covering her eyes from the smoke.)

STEVEN: Oh my god!

(Steven runs to turn off the oven, then waves a dishcloth ineffectively into the dark, oily fog. Jenny returns with the extinguisher, opens the oven, and fires the stream of white dust onto the flaming egg casserole. Three seconds of silence, as everyone stares. Bob kicks the side of the oven. Then the smoke alarm.)

BOB: God DAMMIT!

Act Two

Scene I

(Jenny and the girls have filed out on the front porch to wait. Inside, Steven has silenced the alarm and is busy opening windows, as Bob mourns his casserole, scrubbing the scorched empty pan. The silver mini-van rounds the corner, coming to rest in the driveway, and Doris pops out to open the trunk.)

DORIS: Jenny, hon, can you give us a hand here?

JENNY: Doris! Here, let me.

(Jenny finishes unfolding the wheelchair and lets down the brakes, just in time for Doris to help Charlie settle into the seat.)

CHARLIE: HELLO!

KELLY: Hello. Who are you?

CHARLIE: I'M CHARLIE! DELIGHTED!

KELLY: I am Kelly. How do you do?

EMILY: I'm Emily! Wow, those wheels are HUGE!

KELLY: Emily. Shh! That's not . . .

CHARLIE: I KNOW! THIS CHAIR IS JYUST AWESOME! DORIS HELPED ME FIX IT.

DORIS: And he's really fast, Emily. You'll have to race later. Kelly, Emily, this is my good friend Charlie. He's going to be joining us for brunch, and maybe even a swim.

EMILY: A swim! Wow! Can you bring that thing in the pool?

DORIS: No, Kelly. But Charlie is an excellent swimmer. Look, he's already wearing his trunks!

EMILY: But what's wrong with his legs?

KELLY: Emily!

CHARLIE: OH, IT'S OKAY. I'VE GOT SLEEPY LEGS! ALWAYS HAVE. THEY ONLY WORK SOMETIMES.

EMILY: Wow.

KELLY: Cool!

EMILY: Hot wheels!

JENNY: Let me see if the boys are done in there. How does fruit sound for breakfast, Charlie?

DORIS: And the Saturday casserole. Bob's famous.

CHARLIE: OHH! I THOUGHT I SMELLED SOMETHING DEEE-LICIOUS!

KELLY: Well, you did. Only now it's gone.

EMILY: We had a fire, Mimmy!

DORIS: You what? How?

JENNY: The casserole. Oil caught fire.

DORIS: How bad?

JENNY: Not terrible. Charlie, you mind to wait out here a minute? I'll go check it out. We want you to see the house at its best.

CHARLIE: SURE THING!

EMILY: Mommy, I'll come with you. I wanna see the fire!

KELLY: It's out now, hush.

EMILY: *(Running to open the screen door.)* Daddy, Daddy! Is the fire out? Mimmy has a friend out in the yard. He's got hot wheels!

(Jenny and the girls enter the house, Doris and Charlie wait outside)

DORIS: Charlie, I'm so sorry. I had no idea any of this was going on — I hope you'll still stay. I can whip up something to eat in no time!

CHARLIE: IT'S NO BIG DEAL. I'M NOT ONLY HERE FOR THE FOOD — WELL MOSTLY I'M HERE FOR FOOD. BUT I LIKE YOU OKAY TOO. AND YOUR FAMILY, THEY'RE LOVELY!

DORIS: Well, thank you . . . I know they'll love you. I hope things aren't getting too crazy in there. You know, we're all under a bit of stress right now. Steven, my son, lost a big sum when the housing market headed downhill earlier in the fall. Jenny has gotten a second job — the girls have been so good about taking care of themselves in the afternoon until she comes home.

CHARLIE: THEY ARE SO SWEET! NOW THE REDHEAD IS . . . ?

DORIS: Emily. And Kelly is the blonde. I think they keep everyone's spirits up. Steven is taking things really well . . . of course, we're all worried about how Christmas will come together this year. The girls deserve something extraordinary, and we also promised them art classes. They really have a talent.

CHARLIE: IT WILL ALL BALANCE OUT. OH . . . HAH! GET IT?

DORIS: You're relentless.

CHARLIE: ART STUDENT. IT'S MY NATURE.

DORIS: Old hag. Try me.

(Jenny peeks through the screen door)

JENNY: Are you two coming in? It's all clear, and Steven is whipping up brunch. Come on, Charlie!

Scene II

(With one even stroke, Steven makes the final cut and places a fruit pizza on the turnstyle at the center of the table. The girls are saucer-eyed. Bob's arms are folded tightly across his chest.)

CHARLIE: OHHH MY GWOODNESS! WHAT IS IT?

JENNY: A fruit pizza, Charlie. Steven's own recipe.

CHARLIE: LOOK, DORIS! AT THE SYMMETRY! *(they laugh)* AND STEVEN, IS THAT A CROISSANT-DOUGH CRUST?

STEVEN: Sure is. Cream cheese, strawberry, and caramelized brown sugar over top. Jenny's idea. Really, Dad. It was just a shame about the casserole.

BOB: Well, it's that damn oven. Cooks too hot. I'm always telling Doris . . .

DORIS: Charlie is a vegetarian, anyhow.

KELLY: A what, Mimmy?

DORIS: A vegetarian. Charlie doesn't eat meat.

BOB: Hippie.

EMILY: What Pop-pop? Why is Charlie a hippo?

DORIS: Robert!

BOB: What? Damn savage way to live. Gotta have protein and stuff.

CHARLIE: OH, BUT I LOVE EGGS. THE CASSEROLE WOULD HAVE BEEN DELIGHTFUL. I CAN STILL SMELL IT! THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME!

BOB: Right.

(Bob snatches a small piece, picks at it with a fork. The girls devour, ask for seconds, and devour again. They squirm in their seats. Charlie continues to eat sloppily amid a chorus of slurps and clattering dishes.)

EMILY: Daddy, is it swimmy time yet?

KELLY: Yes, I'd like to swim, Dad.

JENNY: But you just ate. The water will make you sick, Em.

STEVEN: Nonsense, Jen. That's just an old wives tale. Go on, girls.

CHARLIE: I KNOW! LET'S GO PLAY A GAME AND THEN GO SWIM! WE CAN —

BOB: *(Interrupting.)* You want to go upstairs with Pop-pop and see my new carving? She's a big scary grizzly bear with two cubs.

KELLY: But it's nice out, Pop-pop! Come outside with us, Charlie!

CHARLIE: I KNOW! WE COULD RACE!

KELLY: Ooh, yeah!

EMILY: Hot wheels! Hot wheels! Boy-oh-boy!

CHARLIE: WE START WHEN THE GARAGE DOOR OPENS. RACE YOU TO THE END OF THE BLOCK!

KELLY: Let's go!

(The girls grab plates and cups, stack them in the sink and lead Charlie out towards the garage. Bob grimaces as the rumbling garage door is heard opening. Bob slams his glass down suddenly.)

BOB: What the hell. Who races a guy in a wheelchair? Doris, Steven, why are you letting this happen?

DORIS: What do you mean, Bob?

BOB: It's just wrong! I thought those people were supposed to have some dignity, for christ-sake. The girls are fast. Are they just supposed to let him win? Is that it?

(Steven and Jenny exchange knowing glances. A pregnant silence is broken as Jenny scoots out of her chair.)

JENNY: Steven, I'm going to go out and supervise. That street can be busy on a Saturday.

STEVEN: I'll come too. See you Dad.

(Steven and Jenny hurry out the door, leaving Bob and Doris at the table.)

DORIS: Robert! What is your problem?

BOB: Well . . . since when are they too cool to come up and see my artwork?

DORIS: Bob, we have a guest. Can't you just settle down?

BOB: I'm settled, okay! That's just it. I'm settled! No one cares, no one's interested. I'm just an old bore.

DORIS: Shh. Sweetie, we all love you, but . . . you can't expect everything to be . . . perfect.

BOB: I can't even make a casserole, dammit. Someone had to steal the show.

DORIS: You can't always be the centerpiece. Kids grow up, make their own fun.

BOB: Yeah, some fun.

DORIS: Are you just going to sit in here and pout?

BOB: Maybe. Maybe I will.

(Emily runs into the kitchen.)

EMILY: Pop-pop! Pop-pop, I just beat Charlie to the end of the block! Kelly won though.

BOB: *(Regaining his composure.)* Sounds like you ran hard . . . Congratulations, squirt!

EMILY: It's swimmy time now, Pop-pop! Charlie is about to get in the pool. Go get your swimmy stuff on!

DORIS: Oh, Bob, you really should. You work so hard on that pool.

EMILY: Come on Pop-pop!

BOB: Well . . . maybe I will.

EMILY: Hooray! Kelly, Pop-pop's coming! See you in a minute!

(Wet flip-flops patter over the tiles. The screen door squeaks and slams.)

BOB: Be right back, Doris. You seen my trunks lately?

DORIS: In the laundry room.

BOB: *(Stalking off toward bedroom.)* Hah! Charlie swimming! This I have to see . . . *(Noise is heard from adjacent room.)* Doris! Did you shrink these? They don't seem to fit.

DORIS: Can't you make it work?

BOB: Ouch. Dammit! *(Bob emerges, wrapped in a towel. He exits through the side door, taking small, cautious steps.)* I'll show him. Who does he think . . . *(Exiting to backyard)*

EMILY: Pop-pop! Boy-oh-boy! Come get in the pool!

KELLY: Show us your swan dive! Charlie, watch him! This is sooo cool.

(Doris turns off the fluorescent light, pours another cup of coffee, stirs in milk. She opens a book, closes it, releases a sigh. The striped walls of the kitchen are gray in the harsh afternoon light. The window blinds cast shadows across her weary face, as her wide blue eyes search the distance. Shouts and screams echo from the deck outside.)

BOB: Alright, squirts! Watch this!

EMILY: Here he comes!

KELLY: Look at him go!

EMILY: Pop-pop! Whee!

(Bob takes a running dive into the pool. He is mid-air when he realizes he's jumped too far. His splash is seen at the edge of the shallow end. He doesn't come back up.)

KELLY: Dad, what happened? Something's wrong.

EMILY: What's wrong with Pop-pop? Is he playing?

STEVEN: Oh my god!

JENNY: Oh, god! He hit the bottom. Charlie, can you get him?

CHARLIE: I GOT HIM. I'M COMING. HERE, GRAB HIM! YOU GOT HIM?

JENNY: Okay, slowly now. Kelly, get a towel.

STEVEN: Rest his head on it. Does anyone know CPR?

CHARLIE: I DO. I GOT HIM. HELP ME, HERE. LIFT UP.

JENNY: Should I cut off his shirt?

STEVEN: No, it's fine for now. Charlie, what's it look like?

CHARLIE: OKAY. WE'VE GOT A PULSE, NO BREATH THOUGH. HEAD'S SWELLING FAST. EMILY, CAN YOU RUN INSIDE AND CALL 9-1-1?

JENNY: Steve, go get your mom.

CHARLIE: YES, GO GET DORIS. I'LL STAY WITH HIM.

(Charlie begins mouth to mouth. The girls and Steven are running through the grass. Doris cannot move. Buried in snow on the hottest day of the year, she hears only muffled screams. The dull thunder of footsteps move across the deck. The screen door squeaks open.)

Scene III

(Charlie and Doris are sitting on a bench beneath a tree. Late evening in mid December. It is snowing lightly under one lit street lamp.)

CHARLIE: HOW DID HE DO, ONCE YOU BROUGHT HIM HOME?

DORIS: Well enough. You know, I think he needed the break. I'm taking the class over next semester — I hated that I had to drop out.

CHARLIE: WE REALLY MISSED YOU. BEAUTIFUL OLD LADIES ARE HARD TO COME BY. BESIDES, YOU WERE A GOOD ACCESSORY FOR ME TO TAKE TO PARTIES.

DORIS: A conversation piece. An antique, even.

CHARLIE: A SACRED RELIC. OH, THAT REMINDS ME. I'M TAKING RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY NEXT SEMESTER.

DORIS: That sounds lovely. I wish I had the time.

CHARLIE: WHY DON'T WE BOTH TAKE PAINTING INSTEAD. I WANT LESS THINKING AND MORE DOING THESE DAYS.

DORIS: I know just what you mean. But, really, I don't have the time. Bob's going back to work in another month. We have to get him ready.

CHARLIE: I KNOW. THAT'S WHY WE'RE TAKING IT AT YOUR HOUSE.

DORIS: Really? How do you mean?

CHARLIE: YOU DOUBT MY SKILL?

DORIS: You would teach me?

CHARLIE: SURE. BESIDES, YOU HAVE A PROMISE TO UPHOLD.

DORIS: What are you talking about?

CHARLIE: YOU'RE GOING TO TEACH THE GIRLS HOW TO PAINT WHEN THEY COME TO STAY IN THE SUMMER. I'LL HELP.

DORIS: Oh, wow. Charlie, that's too much! They love you, you know that. That will be so great.

CHARLIE: IT'S A DEAL THEN. A DATE.

DORIS: God, it's been so lonely in that house. It feels so good to be out here, in the cold air, with you.

CHARLIE: SHH. LOOK.

DORIS: What?

CHARLIE: UP. THE TREE.

DORIS: Come on. No more symmetry, okay?

CHARLIE: OH. NO, NOT THAT. THE SNOW — IT'S EVERYWHERE. BUT THEN IT'S NOT STICKING TO THE TREE.

(A moment passes. Doris slides out of her hood and catches a snowflake.)

DREW BLAKE

After the first flush of purple fear

After the first flush of purple fear
the blue wires start to shake
striking currents of electric waves
rolling in the sparkle before a solar eclipse.

Darkness is a decent bed
after the feathers stop flying
and the warbles slow to a weeble
when the madness finally settles

in distraction so thick the crickets can sing,
and the birds can be convinced
the sky is too big
without the sun.

Do you think the man in the moon is lonely
without a lady at his side?
Or is it enough that the sea comes just a little closer
without a word between them.

TIMOTHY ROWE

Tinman

Stock still
unseeing eyes glare at
hard, cold, yellow brick
dull with moss and
dead
apple tree leaves
compost pile curbs
my appetite
resolved
(resolute? resolution . . . revolution . . . revelation)
content? to stand
ignored/ignoring
(no longer grinding my axe)
and small children dance around
my rusted shadow
occasionally rapping fleshy knuckles
'gainst tin flesh
laughing in wonder at the echo
of my hollow soul
Empty . . .
And children scatter when mother calls . . .
Sheet metal statue
sheds silent oxide tears
recalling for one rusty moment
"she could have filled me."

CHRIS BREWER

Something New

A slow and heavy rain was falling, puddling and catching the early morning sunlight around the cracked and beaten sidewalk. It was so steady that I could almost judge the distance between each drop from the living room window where I stood watching with a cup of stale coffee. The thin blades of grass looked as if they were drowning, but I understood the temporary nature of weather and knew that the ground couldn't stay wet forever. I let the ashes fall from my cigarette, rubbed them deep into the carpet with the callused sole of my bare foot, and moved to the sofa where things were dry, for now at least.

I took a final gulp of coffee and dropped my cigarette into what was left of it. The cherry went from hot orange to wet black in an instant. One last curl of sweet-smelling smoke turned out from the liquid to let me know the war was over. My hands felt as if they needed to be doing something, so I made a trade with the catch-all coffee table, exchanging the cup for the morning paper. *No news is good news*, they used to say. But everything these days just seemed like filler. I flipped to the sports section and checked the scores from the previous night's games just to pass the time, then returned the paper to its rightful cluttered place. I had never devoted my attention to any team in particular, which made it hard to care about which ones were winning and which ones were losing.

I could hear the distant sound of Jo moving quickly around the bedroom. I heard zippers opening and closing, clothing being taken from the hangers, being folded and set aside, and the soft clanking of plastic against metal and then plastic again. Everything sounded far away except for the rain, and she worked as softly as a ghost passing through. I could imagine the plan she had in her head, the order in which she intended to move from one object to the next. She had the patience for doing things right, and she was always hard to distract when her mind was set on something. So I decided to stay in the living room and out of her way. *If you don't have something nice to say*, they used to say. So I didn't say anything at all.

Jo and I had met at a bar a few blocks away from the post office where I'd been working at the time. It was a seasonal job, around Christmas, when the holiday cheer had convinced everyone that the right thing to do was to start mailing out cards and letters to people that they wanted nothing to do with for the other eleven months of the year. The job paid well, but after the long hours of trudging through biting winds and iced-over sidewalks with bag after bag full of those green and red snowflaked envelopes, I often found that I needed more liquid encouragement than a simple drive home could offer. The bar that I frequented doubled as a pool hall and watering hole for the local factory workers who, for the most part, didn't have money to burn. *Lucky's*, the place was called. A combination of beer and unbroken resolve was sometimes known to take hold of a patron's better judgment, and a fight would break out when someone refused to pay up for his losses at the pool table. The music was never too loud, and the atmosphere made conversation easy whenever the opportunity presented itself,

which usually didn't happen in my case since I preferred the company of women.

The night I met Jo was the first time I had ever seen a woman carry a suitcase into a bar. Seeing a woman there at all was unusual in itself, and nearly every head in the place turned to watch her as she planted herself a few stools down from where I was sitting. Too many drinks had turned a few heads into centerpieces at otherwise empty tables and those, of course, didn't watch anything. She had left her suitcase by the door, thrown her purse up on the bar, and fished out a pack of cigarettes. She plucked one from the pack, lit it, and took a long first drag before ordering a double shot of whiskey on the rocks with a glass of water. I had been watching her hard, but hardly realized it. My awareness of the situation was lost in the no-man's-land between alcohol and longing. She lined up her cigarettes and lighter with the edge of the bar and placed her two glasses side by side in the order she intended on drinking them – whiskey on the left, water as a chaser on the right. She was an angel of order amid the chaos of clattering pool balls, broken men, and their cursing at shots that simply refused to go as planned.

From the living room, the sound of rain hammering the old tin-roofed carport was becoming unbearable. This part of town wasn't known for its wealth, and the constant dinging of water on metal reminded me of New Year's Eve when our neighbors piled onto their lawns, armed with pots and pans, shouting and banging them wildly as soon as the clocks struck midnight. None of them could afford a more expensive way of celebrating or making noise, which part of me had been thankful for. The other part knew that Jo and I were in the same boat, and that was something I wanted to change. We watched them from the living room window and made our resolutions. We were happy then, or I was at least. Maybe her resolution had something to do with where we were now. Maybe it had something to do with where she was going.

I lit another cigarette and pulled the smoke down deep until it felt like my lungs were on fire. Jo stepped out into the hallway and shot a quick glance my way, then a more serious one back toward the bedroom as if she'd forgotten something, but I knew she hadn't. She was holding a small white makeup bag, and her long brown hair was pulled up and piled in a knot, out of her eyes and out of the way. She moved to the bathroom without saying a word. I wasn't sure what there was to say, but I knew one of us had to say something sooner than later. But she had already made up her mind, and there was nothing that could change it. It was all motion now, as casual as if she'd been rehearsing it in her sleep, so I let her go.

I had been watching her for a while when I pulled a crumpled ten dollar bill from my pocket and straightened it against the edge of the bar. "I'll take another beer, and get the girl one of whatever she's having," I told Jimmy, the bartender.

"You got it. You're a lady-killer, Les," he said, winking and letting a grin slide across his ragged face.

"Hey, I'm feeling lucky. Keep the change," I replied with a slight smirk.

At that point I knew the line had been crossed. It was a waiting game after that and the suspense had balled itself up so tight in my throat that the cold beer had trouble squeezing past it. My hands were trembling like a fault line. I fumbled for my cigarettes and managed to get one lit as I watched Jimmy pour a double shot of whiskey in

a rocks glass with three ice cubes rattling around the bottom. I glanced down the bar at her soft, brown-headed profile to make sure that my order hadn't been overheard. Elton John had been working his way out of the jukebox between the occasional clicking of pool balls colliding along the felt-topped tables. It was one of the early songs. *Amoreena*. Jo kept her head down and acted like she hadn't heard anything at all.

Jimmy finished pouring the drink and put it to rest on a small paper napkin in front of her. When she turned her gaze up toward him, he glanced down the bar and nodded his head in my direction. She looked straight at me from four stools away, gave an inviting smile, and waved gently with two fingers. It was a gesture that struck me as fitting her perfectly, even though I didn't know a thing about her at the time. The light caught her eye in a way that I knew meant trouble, and all I wanted was to get closer to it. When she patted her hand on the stool beside her, I made the move.

"Going somewhere?" I asked her, nodding toward the suitcase by the door.

"That all depends on who's taking me," she answered. It was in a way that almost sounded like a challenge, the end of it brightened with the same inviting smile. She took a long sip of her drink and didn't return it to the napkin.

"Well, which side of the bed do you sleep on?" I asked, smiling back.

"I usually sleep on the right," she returned.

"That's too bad," I said. "It'll never work out."

But from the way she looked down and grinned, tilting her glass and letting the ice roll around the inside, I knew it would. At the time, I thought we both knew it would, even if we didn't know for how long. She told me her name was Joanna. I loaded her suitcase into the trunk of my car a few hours later and we never looked back.

Jo steps out of the bathroom and her hair is down, long past her shoulders with little hints of curl at the ends. She's carrying her makeup bag, and I know that everything's in it and she's ready to go. It's a rehearsed moment, complete with a soft smile, her head tilted gently to the side, and a look of pity that says, "*I'm sorry. It's better this way.*" I can still hear the rain, and a soft breeze seems to blow through the living room as the past catches up with me. Jo walks into the bedroom, the final zipper closes, and she reappears almost immediately, dragging her suitcase out into the dim light of the hallway.

She pulls the suitcase through the living room, past the cluttered coffee table, past me on the sofa, and then leaves it alone by the front door. She turns and walks back to the hallway closet for her umbrella as if it's just another rainy day. I take a long drag from my cigarette and watch her footsteps, trying to memorize their rhythm. I close my eyes, listening for their sound, but all I hear is the heavy rain beating dents into the battered roof of the old carport.

"I guess we better get going," she says from the end of the hallway, the red folding umbrella dangling from its strap around her wrist.

I nod my head and drop my cigarette into the half-empty cup of coffee on the table. I watch the last swirl of smoke dance out as the cigarette submerges briefly then bobs back to the surface, colliding with the other one. The two wet cigarettes spin circles on top of the dark liquid, never touching again after the shock of their first encounter, only floating around the edge of the cup until their shared momentum slows and they both just stop.

Jo steps to the side as I rise from the sofa and move toward the hallway, heading to the bedroom for shoes and a pair of socks. The closet doors are open and all of her clothes are gone. The hangers dangle from the rack, lifeless and empty, and seeing them almost takes the breath right out of me. I want to scream at them, beg her clothes to come back, but I know that nothing can change it now. I reach backwards, searching the air for the edge of the bed with my shaking hands, and when they finally find it, I let myself sink down into the mattress until I'm convinced that I won't remember any of this. *It's like ripping off a Band-Aid*, they say. But it's nothing like that at all.

"Are you coming?" Jo calls from the living room. "My bus leaves in an hour," she reminds me.

"Yeah, I'm coming. Just a second," I say, gathering my shoes, and myself, before heading back into the living room for our last moment in the house together.

"Do you care to take that on out to the car?" she asks, nodding toward her suitcase as I enter the living room from the darkened hallway. "I'm going to get a drink really quick before we go," she says.

"Yeah, sure," I tell her, burying the urge to beg. She turns and walks toward the kitchen, and I hear the faucet turn on as I pick up the suitcase and head out the door and into the rain.

The grass is struggling to stay afloat as I cut through the yard on my way to the carport at the side of the house. The hard rain soaks my shoulders, shoes, hair, and everything. By the time I make it to the trunk of the car, every inch of me is dripping, and I imagine how pitiful I will look to Jo as she saunters down the broken sidewalk under the safety of her red umbrella. I imagine the slight curls at the end of her long brown hair, dry and bouncing lightly with every step she takes. She knows how to make a thing look easy. As I pop the trunk and put her suitcase inside, I know I won't be able to watch as she steps out of the front door, turning the knob twice to make sure it's locked, the same way she always does. Instead, I plan my distraction ahead of time. I light another cigarette and stare blankly down the tree-lined street, watching the rain fall as far as the eye can see.

When I hear the front door open and close behind me, I flip my cigarette into the rain and move to the driver's side. Without watching her, I get in and start the car, turning the radio off before it has the chance to make a sound. Jo appears on the passenger side and I can see her shaking the rain from the umbrella before folding it down as I fumble aimlessly with the switch for the windshield wipers and pretend not to notice. She opens the door and gets in, dropping the umbrella to the floorboard and letting out a short sigh. I can smell whiskey on her breath.

"Any other time, you would've opened the door for me," she says, adjusting herself in the passenger seat beside me.

"Any other time, I would've wanted you to get in," I tell her.

"Les, let's not start that now," she says with a slightly irritated disinterest.

So I let the thought go and put the car in reverse, backing out from under the carport, into the road and the hammering rain. "Your sister's going to pick you up when you get there, right?" I ask her, even though I already know the answer.

"That's the plan," she says, still hanging on to her irritation. "Three hours on a bus. She better be there when I get there."

Jo stares through the rain-spotted passenger side window as the steady stream of water splashes up from the road and onto the sidewalk, and I drive slower than usual past the rows of identical single-story rented houses. We both watch as they drift by in different colors. Aside from that, they're all the same. Ours is one of them, but it's behind us now.

I drive her past the post office where I worked last winter, past *Lucky's*, then under the overpass that leads to the interstate. After that, we're only a few miles from the bus station, and I'm afraid to know what she's thinking. I grip the wheel hard and try to steer my thoughts in a different direction. I realize that you can retrace your memories looking for the moment when a good thing went bad, but once it's done, it's done, and those early warning signs don't count for anything.

"That's the best part," Jo says suddenly, but without much enthusiasm.

"What is?" I ask her, trying to match the feeling.

"That. Just now," she says. "You get so used to the sound of rain all around you that you don't even really notice it. Then you drive under a bridge and everything just stops. It reminds you what silence sounds like."

"Silence doesn't sound like anything," I tell her, and we're both quiet again.

The last few miles go by in a blur, and before I realize it, we're at the station. Jo's bus sits idling as the travellers file into it with tickets in hand. The driver seems frustrated, or maybe he's just a little nervous. The awning overhead keeps the rain off the car, but Jo hasn't let go of the thought of it.

"Maybe that's it," she says, opening the door and picking up her umbrella. "Silence doesn't sound like anything. That means it's something new every time, right?"

"*Something new*," I say, emphasizing her choice of words. "I guess you're right."

When she's out of the car, I pop the trunk from the inside and pretend to check the mirrors. I turn off the windshield wipers and wait. I hear the trunk close, and then I can see her silhouette out of the corner of my eye as she leans down into the open passenger side door with the suitcase behind her.

"Well, I guess this is it," she says. "Goodbye, Les."

"Goodbye, Jo."

She smiles gently and waves with two fingers before closing the door. I watch her for a moment as she walks toward the bus, pulling the suitcase to her place in line, and I try to remember if there are any bars nearby. The dry curls of her hair bounce with each step, and I'm still soaking wet. I take a deep breath before rolling down the window and lighting another cigarette, my eyes tracing the outline of the empty passenger seat to my right, and then I check the mirrors to see what's left of me.

WHITNEY NAYLOR-SMITH

"You Can't Clear Your Throat": An Interview with Dinty W. Moore

Dinty W. Moore is the author of several books, including *The Accidental Buddhist*, *Toothpick Men*, and *The Emperor's Virtual Clothes*. He has also published two writing guides, *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction* and *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. He is the director of the creative writing program at Ohio University and editor of the nonfiction journal *Brevity*. For this issue of *Et Cetera*, Moore sits down with nonfiction editor, Whitney Naylor-Smith, to talk about his work as a teacher and editor of creative writing, his take on creative nonfiction, and his latest memoir *Between Panic and Desire*.

Etc.: You're the director of the creative writing program at Ohio University. Can you talk a little bit about the program and what kind of classes you teach?

DWM: It's a very large undergraduate program and a very small graduate program, which makes for an interesting mix. I teach editing and publishing, and I teach creative nonfiction. I teach more undergraduate courses than graduate courses, but every year I teach at least one graduate course. Those tend to change thematically—sometimes we do experimental essay, sometimes we do more personal essay, sometimes we do memoir, and sometimes we do literary journalism, where I force the students to write about something other than themselves. We have both an MA and a PhD program. I think there are only about eight places where you can get a PhD in creative nonfiction, so by virtue of the fact that we're one of only eight in the country, I think that's a pretty unique stamp to our program.

Etc.: Some people are unfamiliar with what *creative* nonfiction actually is. Some think it's a lot more journalistic, or like scientific writing. Can you talk about your definition of creative nonfiction?

DWM: The one sentence definition is: true stories artfully arranged. But, I can expand on that. Creative nonfiction has a lot in common with journalism and a lot in common with all nonfiction writing. The difference is that there are certain types of nonfiction writing where the facts are supposed to be so much in the forefront that the author disappears, and there is no personal point of view—there is no sense of who's writing it. Whereas in creative nonfiction—whether it's the essay, which is sort of writing about thoughts and ideas, or whether it's a memoir, which is writing about the author's life and things that have happened to him or her in the past, or whether it's literary journalism, which is writing about things outside of the self—whichever of those modes you're in and whatever your subject matter is in creative nonfiction, the reader should get a sense that there's an author behind it. The reader should get a sense that the

author's view of the world and the author's unique sensibility is informing every detail and every metaphor. The author is informing where the gaze turns. If you or I and six other people who write nonfiction were to go write an essay about the same event, by definition there should be six very different essays that have very different tones, and very different focuses, and very different language. Whereas with the old style journalism—if we all worked for newspapers—we're supposed to all go and write the exact same thing. So, that's what creative nonfiction is. It's essentially bringing the sensibility of the author to the story. And then there are a lot of other smaller things, like the language, and the imagery, and the things we borrow from fiction writers in terms of the scene and character, and the things we borrow from poets in terms of metaphor and such.

Etc: Talking about some of the different forms of nonfiction leads me into my next question. As you know, an increasing number of writers are breaking away from a sort of traditional, creative, yet still factual form, and creating works that are basically invented, but still calling their work nonfiction. Can you talk about these different distinctions of the genre and whether you think that one or the other is correct?

DWM: I don't really, totally understand that. I mean, I understand your question, but I don't understand why—for as long as we've had a genre called fiction and authors have taken true events, or their own childhoods, or things that actually happen to them or their family, and they've changed it around a little to make it a better story, and they've added and subtracted details to make it flow better, and they've published it as a short story or a novel—why nonfiction writers want to do the same thing and call it nonfiction. There are so many breakaways, subgenres, now. If we're talking about the lyric essay, and the focus on language and sound, and the different rhythm of a lyric essay, then I think that's a wonderful thing, but we're still dealing with the author's honest thoughts and impulses. If we're talking about these writers who say, "Well, I made some of it up but it's still creative nonfiction, this is 80 % what happened, but I changed key details to make it a better narrative," to me, that's not creative nonfiction. That's what fiction writers have always done. So, I guess it depends which of these two ideas you're talking about. One of which, under a big umbrella, you call the lyric essay, and the other one, I guess, I'll call bending the truth. People want to throw them together in the same package, but I say these are two very different impulses.

You can ask me a follow-up if you want, because I'm not sure if you're asking about one of the two or if there's something else you're asking about.

Etc: I was mainly basing that question off of the recent video you created.

DWM: Oh, right. (laughs)

[Moore created a YouTube video titled "What is Creative About Creative Nonfiction," in which two characters comically debate their subjective views of creative nonfiction. The video can be viewed here: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxkDOOQ6D7o>>.]

DWM: Well, my idea of nonfiction is: you're telling the truth. Now, there are all kinds of footnotes to that. Memory is imperfect, so if you're working from memory, all you can do is say, "I've really tried to give you the best and most honest version my memory can recreate." In other words, you know when you're trying really hard to remember it right. You're probably getting things wrong, because you may be writing about ten years ago, but you know when you're trying really hard to get it right, and you know when you're lying. In nonfiction, in memory, you're trying really hard to get it right. You're doing your absolute best in the sequence of events, and the sequence of the people there and what they said. You're trying your best to get it there, and those things that you can check, somehow, you do check to make sure you're right. If you call your sister, and she says, "I remember it entirely differently," that doesn't mean you're wrong, it just means that's what human beings do. You might want to talk about that in your essay. So, in nonfiction you're telling the truth. Is there one truth? No, but you know when you're telling your truth and what you believe to be true. And, you know when you're making stuff up. To me, it's not *really* simple, but it's kind of as simple as that—don't make stuff up! It's hard enough to get close to the truth. Given the difficulty of observation, given the difficulty of subjectivity, given the weakness of memory, it's really hard to get things right. But, if you're making things up, well, it's a whole other game. I have nothing against making things up, just send it to the fiction editor.

Etc: You're also the editor of *Brevity*, a journal that publishes brief nonfiction essays. Can you talk a little about how the conventions of the short form differ from those of a longer work, like a personal essay or a memoir?

DWM: You can't really pin it down. As soon as I say a successful 750 word essay must do "X, Y, & Z," somebody will send me one that doesn't do that, and yet it's wonderful. Like all art forms, an attempt to define what's right and what's wrong is always bound to fail, but on the other hand, you have to say something. So, part of what a very brief essay has to do is, like a poem, it's the compression of language, the "every word has to have a specific reason for being there" and often, words, or sentences, or images will do triple duty. They're advancing the story line, they're contributing to characterization, and they're creating an overall mood to the piece. I still look for a narrative arc in a very short piece of nonfiction, just like I would in a longer piece, but sometimes a narrative arc is carried by metaphor, instead of by plot. Sometimes the epiphany that comes at the end is carried by the language rather than the plot, as defined in fiction. Often, like memoir, short nonfiction will have a plot—a rise and fall of action. Metaphor will carry it, the language will carry it—often it's just a quick burst. If you read a wonderful book-length memoir, or a wonderful novel, one of the beauties of it is you spend hours living inside of somebody else's life—for real, in memoir, in make-believe in fiction. I think really good nonfiction does the same thing, but instead of spending hours immersed in somebody else's life, it's like a teabag. You're in it for a second, and then it's pulled back out. The reader gets a flash of experience in somebody else's life, in somebody else's point of view, or somebody else's experience. The term "flash fiction" was around for a while, and I suppose "flash nonfiction" is one of the terms people use for these brief essays, because it is like just a flash of experience for the reader.

Etc: Are there other specific qualities you would look for in a potential publication in *Brevity*?

DWM: You can't clear your throat. For me, clearing my throat is those two or three sentences that authors often use to sort of gently enter into the story. Sometimes they do it because they haven't edited enough. Sometimes they do it in longer pieces because that's part of the pacing of the narrative. You just can't do that in 750 words. You need to drop the reader right into the hottest part of the story. When I say story, it's not always like "this is what happened to me on Tuesday" kind of story. There are different kinds of stories. It could just be a story of how someone reacts to a particular place. It could be the story of how someone feels about a particular color. But, there's a part where that becomes urgent and incendiary, or hot. You need to start there; you can't start a page and a half before you get there.

Etc: Now let's talk a little bit about your memoir, *Between Panic and Desire*. In the prologue to the book, you note that Panic and Desire are actual towns that you visited. Is there any reason in particular these towns drew you to visit? And, did you know when you made that trip that you'd get a book out of it?

DWM: I had no idea I was going to get a book out of it. I wasn't even sure I would ever write about it. I like looking at maps—it's just a sort of geeky thing I like to do. I like looking at road atlases, and I don't remember when it was now because it was probably ten years ago, but I can kind of remember sitting there in my living room looking at this Pennsylvania road atlas and discovering these two towns and saying "wow, that's kind of weird. If I'm ever around there I should go over there and see what's going on." Maybe a year later, I was driving back from Pittsburgh to where I lived at the time and realized, "you know, I'm kind of close to there, and it would take me twenty minutes to get off my route and go find Panic and Desire." So, I did. And then it started out as a three page, very brief, sort of essay that I wrote for the newspaper in Philadelphia. I forget what it was called, but it was kind of the genesis of *Between Panic and Desire*. I wasn't thinking about a book at all. That came along slowly.

Etc: You talk about the way TV and popular culture were such huge parts of the lives of your generation, especially for those, like you, who were searching for absent fathers. In chapter 3, you describe diplopia, or double vision, a condition with which you were diagnosed. Does your double vision also serve as a metaphor for those of your generation who grew up comparing their own family members to those in shows like *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*?

DWM: Well, I do actually have diplopia, which is double vision. But, yes, I think it functions as a metaphor in the book both for what you said, in the sense that you're looking at your family out of your left eye and you're looking at the ideal television family out of your right eye, and I think it also functions as, or I hope it functions as, a metaphor for the way we project our past experiences. Whether it's an experience—I'll use myself as an example—an experience I've actually had, which was my family, growing up in my particular family dynamic, or whether it's an experience I shared

with my generation. The protests against the war in Vietnam, the distrust of the Nixon presidency, the death of Kennedy—these experiences which are so strong in the individual. For the rest of our lives we sort of see the world through the lens of those experiences, and so we have a "double vision." We see what's really there, but we also see what's really there with the ghosts of our past reshaping and recoloring what we're looking at. For instance, with the discussion about the Bush administration, and the wars that we got into during the Bush administration, you hear echoes constantly from people of a certain age of the Vietnam War and what happened in Vietnam. That's just one small example.

Etc: In the middle section of the book you discuss how writing was a major factor that moved you out of the "paranoia" stage that exists between panic and desire. You also mention later that you teach students that "writing is discovery" because you believe it. Are there other ways in which writing has significantly changed your life or led you to discover something new about yourself?

DWM: That's a good question. I wrote a book about ten years ago—it may have been more-called *The Accidental Buddhist*, which began as more of a journalistic assignment. I was going to go out there and look at the experiments people were having trying to make Asian philosophy—Buddhism—fit into a very different kind of American culture. I was just going to look at it from the outside and try to make cogent points that would be interesting out of what I saw, and I ended up getting pulled into it much more personally than I thought I would. It ended up making much more sense to me than I thought it would. I ended up changing the way I think about how I interact with people and interact with challenges in my life. In that way, the subject of what I was writing about had a big effect on me. Writing itself forces you to—and this is the really wonderful thing about writing—it forces you to slow down and really fact check what you think. I think that affects everything. I don't want to get political here—I don't care if you're democrat, republican, independent, whatever—but I think there are a lot of people who run around just spouting opinions, and they never stop to check them. It's like they learned it when they were kids, or they heard it on the radio, or it's what they think they're supposed to believe. The one thing good writers do, no matter what it is—whether it's a comfortable thought, an uncomfortable thought, an expected observation or unexpected observation—if you're really serious as a writer, you examine it. You examine it, and turn it over, and say, "Do I really think that? Did I really see that? Is that really what it meant?" And you do that over, and over, and over again until you're satisfied. I think that changes who you are as a person, in a positive way. You can do that without being a writer, but being a writer forces the issue.

Etc: For my final question, is there any advice you would give to new writers who are just trying to get their work out and get it read?

DWM: It's pretty common advice, and it's also still the right advice. It's just stubbornness. It's not easy at the beginning. It's not easy to know how your work is going to read to other people. It's not easy to know where to send your work, or how long to work on something before you send it out, but you have to make the same mistakes I

made, and the same mistakes all the other writers made, and then learn from them. If you or any other writer is stubborn about it, you will learn from the mistakes, keep going, try something else, keep going, learn from your mistakes, be tough on yourself (in terms of your writing, be nice to yourself in every other way). If you just keep doing that, you're going to learn, and then you're going to get better, and then you're going to learn more, and you're going to get better, and it's going to work out. It's not the magic key people are looking for. People are looking for the magic key that says, "Here's the trick, and then it's easy." If there is a trick that makes it easy I haven't learned it, but I do know that stubbornness is a kind of trait. I've discovered it myself. I've actually recognized it. I go to conferences and writing events, and the writers I meet—who have been successful as poets, have been successful as nonfiction writers, male, female, born in America, born in foreign countries—the one thing they all seem to have is stubbornness. The other thing they all seem to have is that they love words. So, I guess if you can put those things together, it'll work out for you. I can't tell you when, but it'll work out for you.

KATHERINE MOHN

Watershed at Lower Ames

No one is looking. All alone, I am here, flexing my biceps and gazing into a narrow mirror flanked by gaudy gold wallpaper from the seventies. It is mid-morning in the apartment by the train tracks. The muscles bulge from my pale skin, standing out against their own bluish shadows. My right shoulder shoots pain into my arm. I look, to myself only, much like one of those women on the gladiator game show, the fierce and gorgeous ones in reptilian spandex. If I am ever excessively proud of surviving six months of river guide training, it is only now, in the vainest and most secretive of moments.

Ask me tomorrow. Say, "Are you a river guide?" (Your subtext here is skepticism: I am puny, vaguely feminine, nearly pretty, deep in thought.) I do not look like much. My answer will come, heavy with uncertainty; it took me two seasons of training to be able to answer "yes."

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From the first time I paddled a raft down the rapids of the New River, I knew that I wanted to be one of them—a river guide. In the summer when I was fourteen, my long legs were leading me all to kinds of new places, particularly right up to the river's edge. I strode with my white helmet on backwards and my feet shoved into old track shoes. The guide possessed a golden glow, an aura: she was sinewy, suntanned, loud, confident, and female. She showed me where to sit and how to paddle, using my whole body.

My friends were all terrified, with girly acidic screams and running mascara. I consisted, in that series of moments, of smiles, heart palpitations and grunts of enthusiasm for the feel of my paddle running through water. No other paddle was in the water, not from troop #3620. Clearly, I was different. The guide shouted at me, again and again, to "stop f-ing paddling, dammit!"

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The thing I never suspected about the river is the mental game. The delicate dance between the river and me involves two questions: What is the water doing? What is my paddle doing? This sounds relatively simple. Okay, fine then, you try it. With *one half of your mind*, try this: (1) find the eddy current, the sweet spot, (2) drop into it beyond the rock that will pin and capsize you, but ahead of the hydraulic that will eat your boat, (3) spin, quickly, find the next current, (4) slip between the bloody undercut rock and the house-sized wave, but you'd better turn before the invisible rock that will eject you from the boat. Great, you're through the first part of the rapid, the easy part. Now, with the other half of your brain, try to control your paddle and a crew of customers: all forward, rudder rudder, stop, I said stop dammit, draw draw, we're not gonna make it, left back, all forward, here comes a big ass wave, all down, all back, rudder like you got a pair, all forward. Okay, you've made it. But couldn't you just do it with a bit more finesse? That wasn't very lady-like.

Connected to the paddle is an arm, and connected to that arm, with any luck, is a clear and quiet mind. Information travels along this pathway. When those messages start to move too fast, you function in a kind of alternate reality. Back there,

above the rapid, you had a constant rate of time and space: that was a different dimension. Reality has rigid standards for frequencies and wavelengths, space and time, but when the continuum is compressed, you get a Doppler effect of sorts. Hence the high pitched ringing in my ears as I bust through the first waves; the massive sound that, from my tiny chest, pierces my larynx at the moment when I think we may not make it; and the slow motions, deep sounds, deep stillness, and deep calm at the end of a day on the river. Something is unearthly about this place.

Many things at the river are not of this world. The campsite I share with Michael during summers of rafting, built on a Sunday with tools we borrowed from our dads. In the town of Ames, our hillside is referred to as "Lower Ames," and this name bears some significance. Back in the sixties, our campsite was the town dump, and around the campsite we are constantly picking up debris. The trees, the leaves, the soil, and the rocks have accumulated over the layers of refuse, and with each new rainfall, bottles and cans spring up through the ground, a perennial garden of muddy, muted trash. I remember morning time at our campsite:

- 5:55 a.m. Light through the tent fabric searches out shapes in blue shadow. The face of a sun-browned lover appears purple, and the air is cool.
- 6:02 a.m. A first, anxious bird calls tentatively. The blankets move like water over the body of the barrel-chested snorer.
- 6:18 a.m. Awakening, as from the bottom of a river, calls are heard from birds, choral and frantic. The lover radiates heat; the blankets are abrupt and sticky with condensation. Someone outside is heard urinating by a tree.
- 6:37 a.m. Calm birds are feeding. The sound of diesel engines aggravates the irritable birds into frenzied chatter. Tall grass can be smelled baking along the hillside.

Here, in the apartment by the train tracks, it is wintertime and the sound of a single bird is startling and lovely. The coffee maker brews automatically, calling me with fragrance, a smoke signal. Nearby are two cats and the same snoring companion, and I am suffused with longing and chill.

Cold is not an unfamiliar force to me, when thinking of the river. Perhaps you do not think of cold as a force; it is technically, after all, the absence of energy. Yet cold is a being, a thing with long fingers and glistening teeth, a perverse thing that will pierce the skins of those who are not wellarmored. I learned this on Easter Sunday, an optional training day. From a training class of fifty, about half showed up, braving snow on the mountain roads. We were *rewarded* with flip drills—this means that we flip the boat over and take turns climbing out of the icy water and onto the slippery bottom, using a small rope to right the boat.

Seven of us splashed out of our boat as it flipped for the first time. Then, our trainer told us that we had to swim two rapids, about half a mile, before we could try to flip the boat over. While that information sank in, a few of us took off—you should never sit, inert, in freezing forty-degree water. Dave, another trainee, was just ahead of me in the first riffle, breaking through the waves with his head and chest. I noticed, in the pool below the second rapid, that Dave wasn't moving quite as much. Catching up with him easily, I asked him how he was holding up, and his white lips only mumbled into the green water. I kept asking questions, silly things, and he just kept staring at me. By this time, we were out of the current, floating into the eddy. On a large rock, I pulled him up, panting, trying to get him to talk; the color of his face made me frantic. We stayed there until another raft came by. A trainer pulled Dave into the raft, telling *me* that I looked healthy enough, that I was on my own, that I needed to go and find my own damn raft.

Swimming back into the current, I did just that; my trainer was up on shore with the boat tied to a rock. He shouted at me to "get to it." Shaking uncontrollably, I swam to the capsized raft and dug my fingernails into the seam of rubber on the bottom. Kicking my feet, sloshing the water, and lifting with every fiber of muscle, I made little progress up the side of the raft. Arms over my head, straining and crying out, I felt, rather than heard it. A loud tearing, a ripping noise, followed by a click. My shoulder. I couldn't move or feel my shoulder, arm, or fingertips. To the sound of my trainer screaming at me, I slammed my arm against the side of the raft, again and again, until the noise came once more, and I could move my arm.

The next weekend, many of the trainees dropped out, even the ones who hadn't been there, who only heard about it. Dave was taken to the hospital. I told only three people about my shoulder; one of them told me to shut up. She said, "For a girl on the river, a sign of weakness is a white flag."

Michael has never viewed me as weak, I am convinced. He is as much in awe of me every day as I was of him on the day we met—walking into a college class on the first day with warm brown skin, long black hair, and a quiet, melodic voice, telling me my wait is over. He treats me, not as some fragile thing, but as a thing treasured; I open very few of my own car doors these days, even after three years. Michael, a fellow guide, first inspired me to train on the river, and I do not think he was prepared for the result.

Living on the river with Michael is a process of dressing and undressing. Early in the morning, I awaken and leave him in the tent. I go to the bath house and begin to dress in my armor, the dense fabric needed to battle men, and women, who would like to see me fail. This is a competitive business. I once had a female trainee offer to help me carry some coolers and gear, only to find out later that she told everyone I was "slacking" and she'd had to carry "[my] shit."

At the end of the day, it is important to undress. I must remove the layers of armor and become human again. This usually occurs in the shower, with a beer in my hand, over the course of about fifteen minutes. I stare at the wall; I relax. Once, I came right off the river without undergoing the process. This was unwise—I ended up screaming at Michael when he offered to carry my gear to the car. He was only trying to help.

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In truth, the changes in me have not all been for the best. Thick skin is built up over time to prevent failure. Failure was my only experience, the first summer. I was slow; not reacting quickly enough, not learning quickly enough, not making friends, allies, quickly enough. Some people dive right in; Michael, for example. His paddle flows through the water, he takes risks, he never over-thinks. Many times, I would be in the back of the boat, headed for a bad place, a big hole, just staring at the water, trying to decide what to do next. "Cerebral," they called me; always thinking, never acting. The information was there, but the pathway to my arm, to my paddle, was blocked. The first year, after four months of training without pay, I just quit. Michael found me in the tent one day, curled in a ball, red-faced, limp, incoherent. He called my dad, drove me back home to Huntington. Later that month, we moved into an apartment together and I started graduate school.

The following spring, I came back, trying my luck at a different outfitter. I trained for three months, and out of fifty trainees that started, ten guided on the river at the end of the summer. By no means am I the best; I fail often and am usually afraid. I've been pinned on a rock with a screaming family in the boat; I've flipped a boat full of crying Girl Scouts; I had a guy with a heart condition evacuated after he fell out of my boat. I fuck up, frequently. The river is no easy life. It is a dangerous, gorgeous world.

...

Why the hell did I stay with it for so long? I sift through the expanse of this experience trying to discover an answer. The river is too big, too close, and grafted inseparably to a deep well of emotion. I must tell you the answer through something else.

The reason I love the river is also the reason I love rock climbing. There, standing at the bottom of the wall, looking up, you are one distinct person. The thing in front of you is iconic, almost religious: it is life itself. In the *Ramayana*, Valmiki the poet, describes life as "a dream, a chance, and a great adventure." To live is to press upon the wall that separates the realm of the possible from the world of dreams. Half-way up the wall, dizzy, with shaking arms and sweaty palms, the task is impossible; you are going to fail. Yet, you are glued to the wall by a force within; you have come this far, and to let go is to waste the entire day, or a lifetime. In a casino, this way of thinking would be considered an addiction. You keep climbing, you keep betting. At the top, you are not the person that once stood below. That is all I can say.

...

My shoulder, which still aches, is not the shoulder I had two years ago; my relationships, with Michael and with myself, are not the same. These are stronger now, though less pristine. Before, I used to be able to cry — I reveled in a good sobbing cry. I was sentimental, a trait inherited from my dad, and cried when I skinned my knee on the soccer field. Last week, I face-planted on my snowboard, onto ice, and came up laughing. Emotion is perplexing to me nowadays.

A few weeks ago, Michael asked me what kind of ring I wanted. I calmly told him, "nothing expensive," and waited for him to leave the apartment, waited to be alone. How could I begin to express that joy? Closing the door, I managed to issue forth a series of wails and gasps; I contorted my face and screamed into a towel. In the

end, I could only produce a look of confusion, which, seen in the frame of the bathroom mirror, caught me with wild laughter. My eyes were still quite dry.

...

Looking into the mirror now, flexing my muscles in a moment of self-absorbed folly, I see a girl who can do, or be, almost anything. Can I possibly be the person he deserves? The experience, the years, will change me. We will not be the people we are today. Thinking of the risks, I am shaking and sweating, so very afraid to fail. Yet, I look at the river, and I see it. Life: the adventure. With each riffle and each rapid, we are transformed. We transcend barriers and invent, anew, what is possible. So, ask me, "Are you a river guide?" Ask me anything.

Contributors' Notes

Ennis Barbery will graduate from Marshall in Spring 2011 with a degree in anthropology. She hopes to pursue a graduate degree in Cultural Anthropology and to continue learning about people's and communities' stories.

Codey Ryan Bills is currently a junior attending Marshall University, where he majors in English Literature and Philosophy. A native of St. Marys, West Virginia, Codey is deeply influenced by the people, geography, and ideologies of his home state. This is the first time his work has been accepted for publication.

Drew Blake is a 2010 graduate of Marshall University and a full-time Software Developer. Once he has had his fill of full-time, made his amends making music part-time, and planted potatoes on the plains in the hard times, he plans to hitchhike to Brazil.

Cristofer Botkin is currently pursuing a Master of Arts with a concentration in sculpture at Marshall University. His work has been on display at the Clay Center, West Virginia Culture Center, Huntington Museum of Art, Parkersburg Art Center as well as many local galleries. The focus of his work centers on environmental issues where he attempts to find a common point of interest on the subject between people of opposing views.

Chris Brewer is currently pursuing an M.A. in Creative Writing at Marshall University. This is the first time his work has been published.

Jason Bryan only adjusts contrast, compensates for exposure, and crops, and dedicates the purity of his work and its publication to a dear and well-missed friend for whom he was regularly mistaken by the closest of mutual friends. Jason hopes a copy of this publication will find itself nestled in a box in the back of a Ryder truck on the way to wherever his friend's journey may lead.

John Chirico currently attends Marshall University, where he is pursuing an MA in English. He graduated from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville in 2006 with a BA in English. He works as a tutor in the Marshall University Writing Center. In addition to poetry, he also writes fiction, music and lyrics. This is his first publication.

Meredith Devney recieved her MFA from Emerson College in 2006. She currently teaches full time as a high school English teacher and adjuncts at Marshall University. Her work has been previously published or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Coe Review*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Front Range Review*, *CircleShow*, *Sawbuck*, and others. She currently lives in Kentucky with her husband and child-like cat.

Cory Jackson graduated from Marshall in 2010 with a degree in Creative Writing. He is currently the Night City Editor at The Beckley Register-Herald in Beckley, WV, and continues to write stories about growing up while somehow managing to avoid doing so himself.

Rebecca Minardi graduated from Marshall University in 2008 with degrees in International Affairs and History. She currently lives in Iowa, avoiding desk jobs and consuming impossible amounts of coffee. She will one day move to East Africa without looking back.

Katherine Mohn resides in Huntington, West Virginia and will graduate in May 2011 with an MAT holding certification in English. She also holds a BFA in Theatre from Marshall University, graduating Summa Cum Laude in 2008. She is an avid explorer of the West Virginia outdoors and draws inspiration from the scenery, communities and people of her beloved home state.

Ian Nolte lives and teaches in Huntington. He is pursuing an MA in English at Marshall University.

Tim Rowe is a 47 year old alumni of Marshall University and is currently working in a factory.

Poetry

Ennis Barbery, Codey Bills, Drew Blake
John Chirico, Meredith Devney, Cory Jackson,
Rebecca Minardi, Timothy Rowe

Fiction

Chris Brewer, Cory Jackson, and Ian Nolte

Art

Cristofer Botkin and Jason Bryan

Drama

Katherine Mohn

Interview with Dinty W. Moore

Whitney Naylor-Smith

Non-fiction

Katherine Mohn