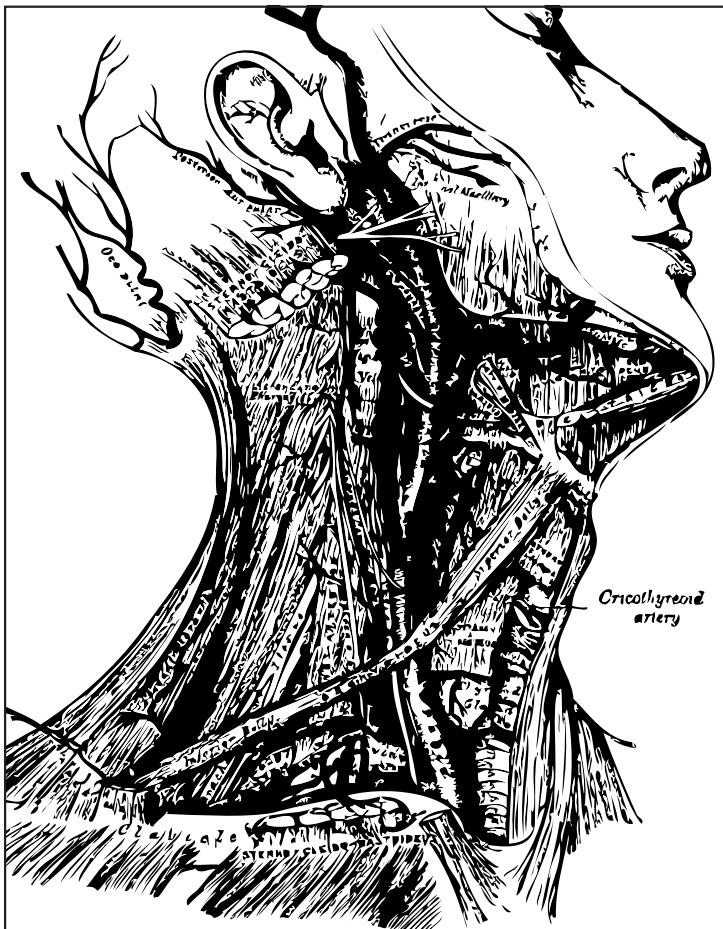


VOICES FROM THE WRITING CENTER

A CELEBRATION OF WRITING DONE IN AND AROUND THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA WRITING CENTER



SPRING 2011

EDITED BY CASSIE BAUSMAN, DAREK BENESH,
AND JENNY LEWIS

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ART IN THE WRITING CENTER

In the spring semester of 2011, the Writing Center's Art Inspires Writing gallery series featured the art of Sea A Joung. Selected on the basis of its merits and on the strength of her written reflection about connections between her art and writing, Sea a's paintings inspired writers in the Center throughout the semester. Following are her artist's statement and a writer's response to the exhibit.

WHERE WE STAND

Sea A Joung

What I paint lets you know what I see through the angle of my eyes. Choosing what to paint involves carefully looking at my surroundings and defining the world I belong to. The angle of my perspective has its own characteristics that are distinct from anyone else's, and this makes my interpretation of the world unique. What I see through my eyes suggests values of my world and ideas. Likewise, finding out where others are standing in their identities and leaning of their world leads me to paint with another layer of awareness.

My life in America began when I was 15 years old, when my family moved from Korea. As a young girl as I was, I swiftly assimilated to the culture in which I lived. For years, I lived, thought, and

acted same as the people around me. Yet, a question that often kept coming up, "Where are you from?" let me knew that, "I am from Korea." The more times I answered the question, the more times I was reminded that I am someone from elsewhere. Recently, I had a chance to go back to Korea for the first time since I left. I soon received the same question there too. "Where in America are you from?" I was not American, but I wasn't Korean either. In between two sides, I was a tennis ball that bounced here and there.

I realized that my eyes are not yours. And my eyes are not theirs either. My perspective stands in between two. My eyes are a hybrid and see though the world from a different angle. The

privilege of knowing the world in a special way, not as a native nor a tourist, but something else, inspires me to translate my surroundings through paintings. In the same manner, everyone has experienced situations of standing in between certain points and not belonging to any of the sides. Everyone has a unique angle of her eyes. So, I would like to know what you answer when I ask you, “Where are you from?” and “Where do you stand?”

FROM THE PAINTER'S PERSPECTIVE

Brett Brinkmeyer

From the start of this day I step
one after the other,
my feet on the pavement,
my eyes up, through scenes, passing
on each space from out there to here,
brushed in and welcomed.

Once in, painted to form even the shapes of light;
each drop of this inner paint, wet,
to symbolize the dry construction, or dry paint
to symbolize wet refraction . . .
am I the only one in this
grand room of a world?

Each still structure functions under regular rhythms,
as though some communication behind the scenes
is implicit, mute.

Each car in motion passes empty to some task that,
though not urgent, must be done or else
it would not happen to be me.

Who sees it?
Who saw it come into being, moments before I could
lock it in long enough to paint—into and then
from memory?
I step as each drop falls; I smear hair iridescent;
dendrites firing despite
the bold and taking calm.

I will always wonder what it was,
but always know that it was as I step again,
from painting to painting: windows, towers, air.
People by their doing or not doing have let this
happen by their hands, by mine.

And silently I raise my eyes and drink in this flowing fruit of color. I drift in and out of me, as it is that I am here, and as it was that I was there, it is here; now step.

Step in, through my eyes, and I will let the brushing you have felt be filled: colors, twists of paint in your verdant breath, the air around you full of you too because as it is, the colors are the reflections between.

The source is light: and I have not hidden my eyes; step with me, painting to painting, window to window, I have taken it in for you, for us . . .

It is strange and beautiful, strong and wondrous, subtle and slight, bold and surreal, clear and wet, it's me, my eyes which have painted and are— it's a perfect day, it is luminous, it is real, it is here.

CREATIVE WRITING IN THE WRITING CENTER

The Writing Center offers extracurricular opportunities for creative writers at the University of Iowa in the form of weekly fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction writing groups. Groups in the Spring 2011 semester met to discuss each others' work in terms of everything from craft and technique to revision, helping to produce and polish the essays, stories, and poems that follow here.

STILL FRIENDS

Tom Kray

Once, I fell in love with a lesbian. We had so much in common.

Once, she was not a lesbian. Life would have been much easier if she never mentioned her bondage tape.

Once, she had freckles and always tilted her head when she smiled. It was late, her robe was inside out; she came into my dorm, locked the door behind her, and collapsed onto my bed. She had come to me before. She came to me when her printer wouldn't work, she came to me when she cut her leg shaving and she couldn't stop the bleeding, she came to me when she didn't want to eat alone.

Once, looking at me, she didn't say a word. She didn't have to. I sat down on the bed and embraced her. She was crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Aaron," she said, choking on the words. "We had a fight. Now he won't talk to me." She slumped into me when I released her from the hug; I took the box of tissues off my desk and placed it on the bed between us. She took a handful and blew her nose.

"He'll come around," I said.

"It's been a week," she sobbed.

He had cheated on her once and she took him back. The

domineering hick, who controlled her life from a hundred miles away, had left her to imagine an endless number of temptations and tragedies befalling him ever since. She recounted them to me in detail.

I wanted to tell her to leave him, that he wasn't good enough for her, but that's not what she needed to hear. So I made up jokes so bad she had no choice but to laugh into her tissues.

I sat her up and said, "What happens when Steve Jobs teams up with pirates? They rob you blind then sell you an iPatch. I saw a guy on a Segway the other day. I always thought they were kind of expensive, but apparently you can get a really good deal on them if you trade in your self-respect."

She laughed. I wanted to be serious, to hold her, but I couldn't let caring about her get in the way of caring for her. So I kept the box of tissues between us.

She knew how I felt about him, but she came to me anyway. Maybe because she knew how I felt about her, too.

She came to me for the comfort of the lie, and I wouldn't deny her that, not that night. "He's not the brightest guy in the world," I said, "he probably just left his phone on his truck's bumper and drove off. I'm sure he'll call soon."

She threw away another tissue and said, "Thanks, you're really sweet." Then there was silence.

After two hours she didn't have the energy to cry anymore.

"Thanks for staying up with me," she said as she stood up.
"Anytime," I said.

She opened the door; lingering there, she wiped a tear from her face, "You know, if I wasn't dating Aaron, I'd want to have sex with you."

The door clicked shut behind her while I sat on the bed, a door, a stairwell, several layers of cement, and an empty box of tissues between us.

Once, she asked for honesty. I said, "Ok."

She asked, "Are you a virgin?"

She asked, "Have you ever used a sex toy?"

She asked how many dates had I been on.

I said, "How can you put a number on something like that?"

She said, “It’s zero, isn’t it?”

She asked, “Would you be a vampire if we had sex?”

The correct answer was yes. I over-thought the question.

I hadn’t seen her in over a year when she called.

“Are you still a virgin?” she asked. “I don’t understand how you can have a motorcycle and still not be getting laid.”

I couldn’t understand why she stayed with her cheating boyfriend. But I didn’t ask.

“It’s not about getting laid,” I said, “and it doesn’t actually work yet.”

Once, she was a brunette with long fingers. For two weeks, she ran them through my hair and talked about sex.

It was a Friday night when my phone rang. It was her. “Are you in your apartment?” she asked. “Could you come upstairs, I need your help.”

“Sure, see you in a minute,” I said.

I knocked on her door.

“It’s open,” she called.

I walked inside and sat down on her bed. She was sitting on the floor, doing her makeup in front of the full-length mirror leaning against her computer. “Do you like this shirt?” she asked, while standing up to face me.

“You called me for fashion advice? Really?”

“No. I know it’s cute, but does it show too much of my boobs?” she asked.

“Too much of your boobs? Hmm, I’m not sure I’m the person most capable of answering that question objectively.”

She crossed her arms.

“Seriously, it doesn’t,” I said, “you look good.”

“I need to change my pants then.”

I stood up to leave.

“Wait,” she said, “I still have to talk to you.”

She undid the button on her pants and let them fall in a pile around her feet. It had been storming steadily all day, and now water, several inches deep, was flowing in the streets. As we stood there, the thunder grew more prominent, and the rhythmic tapping of raindrops against her bedroom window filled the room with an

air of possibility.

She lingered in front me half-naked. A good sign, I thought.

Casually holding a pair of jeans in one hand, she moved closer to me and asked, “Can you drop me off downtown so I don’t have to carry an umbrella on my date?”

When I was twenty, I moved into an off-campus apartment. The ad said, “Four undergrads seeking a roommate.” It didn’t say they were four girls. Pretty girls. I spent the first thirty-six hours hiding in my room.

Much later, I was sitting on the couch with one of them and she said, “You’re so nice. When you moved in we all thought you were gay.”

“I get that a lot,” I said. “It’s becoming a problem.”

I told her that when I was in high school my mom asked if I was gay. I said I wasn’t. She said she didn’t believe me.

She could have at least waited until we left the restaurant to argue her point.

She said there was a fine line between nerds and gay boys. And people who didn’t know me well might just assume.

Once, she was just tall enough to rest her head on my shoulder when she got sleepy.

It had taken me a month to build up the courage to ask her out, and another week to work out what I wanted to say.

I had stood in my room, studying the pages in my notebook. This was the night.

I took deep, deliberate breaths to mitigate the adrenaline. I was already feeling as I rehearsed what I was going to say. I strummed my guitar, just to give my hands something to do as the minutes turned into an hour. Finally, I said, “I’m as good as I’m gonna get,” and I stuck my little notebook into my pocket and laid the guitar down on my bed.

I walked to her apartment. She opened the door; a mutual friend and two of her roommates were there, and they would be staying. They were my friends, too, and I begrudged them for existing.

We sat on the floor and played cards as minutes turned into hours, the notebook in my pocket reminding me of what I had

gone there to do all the while.

One of her roommates went to bed and we played again.

Yawning, she closed her eyes and laid her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her.

Her remaining roommate said, “Why don’t you go to bed?”

She grumbled a protest into my neck.

That a girl, I thought.

But she got up and went to her room anyway. I was begrudging my friend’s existence again.

The minutes passed like hours, and, finally, the last roommate said, “I’m going to bed. You two can stay as long as you want, just lock the door when you leave.”

I waited for the click of the roommate’s bedroom door, then I stood up. “I’m going to go see if she’s still up.”

“You gonna go ask her?” he said.

I smiled, “Wish me luck.”

Her light was on.

I knocked, and cracked the door, “Hey, you still up?”

“Uh-huh.” She was sitting on her bed, watching cartoons.

“Can I come in?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Sure,” she said. She knew why I was there.

I closed the door behind me and sat down on the bed next to her. She rested her head on my shoulder. A good sign, I thought.

At the commercial, I picked up the remote and muted the TV. “I need to talk to you,” I began.

She inched herself back to look at me fully as I continued. “I really like you. You probably already know that, but I wanted to say it all the same.” I paused; she waited silently for the rest. But I blanked. Draft after draft, and I blanked after the first sentence.

I could feel the moment slipping. I had to say something, but everything in me was screaming not to take out the notebook and start reading.

“I’m terrible live,” I said, “I can’t remember what I wrote down.”

She smiled, “You wrote it down? How long is it?”

“Not long,” I said, “just a few paragraphs, I didn’t want to forget them. So, yeah, irony.”

She was crying. She laughed so hard, she actually started

crying. She rolled back on her bed, “Paragraphs,” she said, gasping for air, “you made separate paragraphs.”

I had envisioned many possible outcomes of this night. This wasn’t one of them.

Regaining control of herself, she sat up. “I’m sorry,” she said. She was trying not to laugh again, “It’s just so cute. You’re such an English major. Is that why you disappeared earlier?”

“Yeah, I was practicing,” I said, “Not long enough, I guess. It was this whole thing, it was supposed to be sweet, but I kind of screwed it up now.”

“Yeah, little bit,” she said, “but I’d love to hear it sometime.”

“Yeah, when the mood’s right. Uncontrollable laughter wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I wrote it.”

She rested her head on my shoulder again. And I spoke again. “The point of it was I’d really like to take you on a date.”

“Is that your heart?” she asked, “Are you that nervous?”

“I was. I’m feeling a bit better now.”

She laughed again, and wiped a tear from her face.

I saw her again three days later. “I need to talk to you,” she said. We stepped out of her apartment, and she closed the door behind her. She had planned what she was about to say, but I didn’t ask if she had written it down.

She began: “I think we should just stay friends.”

I don’t know if she blanked after the first sentence, too, because I had that thing I had to go do, so I smiled and said, “Yeah, yeah that’s cool, I got that thing I have to go do, so I’ll see you later.”

And I walked home. Grateful I hadn’t stepped outside without my shoes.

We’re still friends.

FOR THE BEHOLDER

Rochelle Liu

ACT I: Scene Three: Echomemory

Same scene—the next morning. The first portion of the scene is in silence. JAMES is getting dressed. They are visibly arguing with each other. VENDETTA gives up, and remains in bed, facing the opposite direction. He is talking to her, but she is blatantly ignoring him. JAMES is again agitated, and ends up kicking the bed and yelling at her. WOMAN IN WHITE stretches out her arms lazily and retracts them. VENDETTA ignores her. JAMES pulls her out of bed, shakes her, and when VENDETTA is unresponsive, slaps her across the face. She continues to ignore him. WOMAN IN WHITE traces her fingers at JAMES's ankles, but does nothing. He gives up, finishes getting dressed, and turns towards her.

JAMES

I'm going to work. (*Beat.*) I'll see you tonight. (*Beat.*) Are you just not going to talk to me? (*Beat.*) Look, I don't have time for this. Bye. (*Leans over to kiss her, but VENDETTA turns her head away*) I love you.

JAMES steps away, stares at his hand, and back to VENDETTA. He buries his face in his hands as he exits stage-right.

VENDETTA

Damn it.

VENDETTA stops, then rushes off stage-left. We hear some undistinguishable sounds, and the doorbell rings. The sound of a flushing toilet. Pause. Doorbell rings again.

Coming!

VENDETTA rushes out across the stage, exits stage-right. We hear the door open, and some surprised and happy greetings.

VENDETTA and ANNA enter, laughing and hugging. They seat

themselves on the bed. WOMAN IN WHITE's feet are visible, tapping against the floor as if she is lying on her stomach under the bed.

How have you been? Haven't see you around—

ANNA

You know, same old, same old. Why aren't you at work?

VENDETTA

They gave me the day off today. And if you thought I was going to be at work, why did you decide to drop by?

ANNA

I thought I'd leave a note or something. I wish I was an editor like you, V. Imagine having a job.

VENDETTA

How's the job search?

ANNA

Absolute hell. You know, one of these days, I'm going to snap. I'm just going to get fed up and snap. (*Beat.*)

VENDETTA

Guess what?

ANNA

What?

VENDETTA

I told you about the company my friend Jason was working at, right?

ANNA

Yeah? Wait, was Jason that one guy you saw in college? That shitface who cheated on you or something?

VENDETTA

No, Jason was the mutual break-up. You're thinking about John in

high school.

ANNA

Oh, right. So then which one's Jake?

VENDETTA

The guy with the hair.

ANNA

The guy who dyed it a different color every other day?

VENDETTA

Don't make that face, Anna. That was a long, long time ago.

ANNA

So.who was it we were talking about?

VENDETTA

Jason.

ANNA

Right. So, Jason. What about him?

VENDETTA

I heard from him that there was an opening for a secretarial position. And guess what I did?

ANNA

You didn't!

VENDETTA

I talked to Jason, and he says that he'll give you a call.

ANNA

I did have a missed call while I was driving on the highway. I didn't recognize the number, so I ignored it. Do you think I should check and call him back?

VENDETTA

Go for it.

ANNA exits stage-right, and VENDETTA exits stage-left. The sounds of water running and teeth-brushing can be heard. She enters stage-left and seats herself on her bed. ANNA enters again.

ANNA

.thanks, Jason. I really appreciate it. Tomorrow morning. Eight. See you then!

VENDETTA

So?

ANNA

I'm going in for an interview tomorrow. V, thanks so much!

VENDETTA

Hey, what are friends for?

ANNA

So how are you?

VENDETTA

I'm fine.

ANNA

And James?

VENDETTA

He's fine.

ANNA

Is he still having issues with his father?

VENDETTA

Yes. He came home from his grandfather's funeral last night in a foul mood.

ANNA

(under breath) When is he not in a foul mood?

VENDETTA

Anna.

ANNA

Look, I'll admit that he was never that bad when you started dating. It's just lately, he seems to be a little moodier every time we get a chance to talk.

VENDETTA

That's not true.

ANNA

I'm just scared for you, okay? I don't want him to become violent or anything. (*Beat.*) Sorry. So, why didn't you go?

VENDETTA

James didn't want me to.

ANNA

But his grandfather was so nice to you when you two first got married.

VENDETTA

That's what I said.

ANNA

What's his problem with his family anyway?

VENDETTA

It's complicated.

ANNA

Fuck if it's complicated! Seriously, don't you ever ask him?

VENDETTA

I try to. He never tells me.

ANNA

You've known him since he was in college, and you dated him for, what, four years, and now you've been married four years-you must

have some sort of insight. And knowing you, Ms. Writer, you have plenty. So come on. Share!

WOMAN IN WHITE stops tapping her feet.

VENDETTA

He's just struggling with his identity.

ANNA

His identity.

VENDETTA

Why do you sound so doubtful?

ANNA

What does he have to struggle with?

VENDETTA

He and his father just don't get along. They have different philosophies of life, and James just doesn't quite understand what his father expects of him. (*Beat.*) You understand what he's going through, don't you?

ANNA

V, I don't mean to rag on your husband or anything, but yes, I went through the whole "who the fuck am I?" issue.in middle school. Just like every other normal human being.

VENDETTA

It's hard on him.

ANNA

How does he treat you, V? (*Beat.*)

WOMAN IN WHITE pauses in her activity. She begins to pull out the crumpled pieces of paper and straighten them out on the floor around the bed.

VENDETTA

What do you mean?

ANNA

Does James still hold your hand when you're out together? Does he make promises and keep them? Does he give you any indication that he still loves you? (*Beat.*)

VENDETTA

Yes.

ANNA

Are you sure? You say that all the time, but you know, sometimes I worry that you're just trying to convince yourself that everything's okay..

VENDETTA

He can be sweet, Anna.

ANNA

All the time, or only when he wants to fuck you?

VENDETTA

He has his moments. Besides, no one can be lovey-dovey all the time. And what about you and Paul? You called me at three in the morning one night, crying. Things worked out, didn't it?

ANNA

Yeah, by breaking up.

VENDETTA

And then you went back to him.

ANNA

Hey, he made a promise that he wouldn't hurt me anymore. He said that he'll make sure that I'll never be alone again. Blah blah blah. The whole sha-bang.

VENDETTA

So has he?

ANNA

You can fall for it once, but not twice. which is why I'm going to find Satan, and send that man to Hell. And then I'm going to write a play about it.

ANNA and VENDETTA pause before laughing uncontrollably for several moments. WOMAN IN WHITE gathers up the papers and pulls them back under the bed.

VENDETTA

When are you going to settle down, Anna?

ANNA

Now you sound like my mother.

VENDETTA

(Laughs) But really.

ANNA

When the time's right, and when I find the right person.

VENDETTA

That can take forever.

ANNA

Is that why you married James? (Beat.) V, do you ever think you were just settling with him?

Silence. Lights dim. End scene.

ACT I: Scene Four: Vault Secrets

At the park. A bench should be in place of the bed, and the coffin and wreaths behind trees. JAMES is holding a cup of coffee with his head in his other hand. TOBEY enters stage-right, looking frazzled.

TOBEY

Hey, I'm sorry I'm late. Actually, I'm not that sorry. You can't just call me out of nowhere and expect me to meet you at the park half

an hour before we're supposed to be at the office! And just so you know, we've got an exec meeting at 3:30. I forgot to tell you that yesterday, so I hope you can come up with some good report about the economic state of things in the next-oh, four, five hours?

JAMES

(*Head still in hand*) Don't worry about it. (*Beat.*)

TOBEY

Everything okay?

JAMES

I think I fucked up.

TOBEY

(*Buttoning her blazer and sitting down*) How? You okay? Gus didn't give you a hard time, did he? I mean, I know he's the head guy and all, but you do good work, so he shouldn't be too hard on you.

JAMES

I'm fine. (*Beat.*) I just don't think V is.

TOBEY

What happened? (*Beat.*)

JAMES

I don't really want to talk about it.

TOBEY

Okay. (*Beat.*) So, you know what we talked about yesterday?

JAMES

Yeah?

TOBEY

You were right.

JAMES

What do you mean?

TOBEY

Thomas and I got into a fight last night.

JAMES

About what?

TOBEY

About what concert to go to.

JAMES

How was I right?

TOBEY

You said that the lovey-dovey thing wasn't going to last long.

JAMES

Come on, Tobes. I didn't mean it like that.

TOBEY

But you were right.

JAMES

Every couple goes through stuff like that. It's normal.

TOBEY

I guess you're right.

JAMES

Hey.

TOBEY

Yeah?

JAMES

Do you think the past affects the present?

TOBEY

Sure I do.

JAMES

Why?

TOBEY

Why? I guess.how else would you have gotten here?

JAMES

What do you mean?

TOBEY

How else could you have gotten to this very place without having a road to go off of? How could you get here without creating a path?

JAMES

I don't understand.

TOBEY

Is your past bothering you?

JAMES

It's just something that V brought up last night.

TOBEY

What'd she say?

JAMES

She says that I throw away my past too easily.

TOBEY

Is she right?

JAMES

I don't know.

TOBEY

Well, what part of your past are you more than willing to throw away?

JAMES

My childhood.

TOBEY

Why?

JAMES

I don't know.

TOBEY

Yes you do.

JAMES

I just, I never had a good birthday until after I graduated college.

TOBEY

When was that?

JAMES

When I met V.

TOBEY

She threw you a birthday party?

JAMES

Well, not really.

TOBEY

What did she do?

JAMES

I-I don't know. I knew her in college, you know? She was two years ahead of me in school, so she had already graduated and everything, but on my birthday, she dropped by the dead-end part-time job I was at and wished me happy birthday.

TOBEY

That's it? (*Beat.*)

JAMES

Yeah. That's it.

TOBEY

And that was your best birthday?

JAMES

One of them.

TOBEY

Surely you've had better birthdays than that?

JAMES

I never really had any birthdays.

TOBEY

What do you mean?

JAMES

I just never had any real birthdays. You know, the whole family gathered around the kitchen table and singing happy birthday with cheesy party hats or anything. It was always just me and my mom overcompensating, trying to make it great.

TOBEY

What about your dad?

JAMES

He wasn't ever there.

TOBEY

I'm sorry. (*Beat.*) What were the others?

JAMES

Others?

TOBEY

The other great birthdays.

JAMES

They were all when V and I got together.

TOBEY

I think that says a lot, don't you? I mean, if your past hadn't been so upsetting to you, would you have appreciated her gestures as much?

JAMES

I guess not. But can't bad things carry over into your present too?

TOBEY

Sure. But are you thinking about something specific?

JAMES

Just, like, like a bad habit.

TOBEY

Well, yeah, if you don't quit it now, it'll get harder later.

JAMES

What if it was someone else? And you swore you would never be like that, but, but then it came, and you don't even understand why it came, and.

TOBEY

Hey, hey, hey. It's okay. (*Beat.*) Let's start over. What sort of bad habit?

JAMES

So, there's an acorn. A bad acorn. It's a little thing, but it grows with soil, water, and sunlight. It's there, but as long as you don't give it what it needs to grow, it won't. But what if you don't realize that you've been feeding it all along? And all of a sudden, you've got a huge tree on your hands. And this tree is so big that it's starting to break out of the earth, and it'll kill everything around it.

TOBEY

Well, you attack the roots—that's where its life is. (*Beat.*) What happened with you and Vendetta? (*Beat.*) You know, you've helped me with my relationship crap all of the time, and talked me through things. You know you can trust me to do the same for you, right?

JAMES

Look, V and I— (*Beat.*) We're fine.

TOBEY

If you can't talk to me, can't you find a time to talk to her? (*Beat.*)

JAMES

Yeah.

JAMES looks at his watch and stands. He holds a hand out to TOBEY and helps her up.

Let's get to work.

Lights dim. Scene ends.

LINDY HOP CORRAL

Laura Jackson

Here is what I know:
I begin with a wide stance, settling
My hand into that stirrup which is my partner's
Left hand. The position of that stirrup guides the rest
Of my body, the angle of my shoulders, hips, knees.
As the music wafts toward us, we fidget
Like bored horses, finding a common
Pulse to share. When we get it, we take off.
One slight movement of his left foot sets
My body into forward motion, and I am
A steady, constant force he must control.
He lets me drive forward past him, only to whip
Me around, square with him, but I'm still moving.
I charge him, and he steps lightly
Out of my path as I book it back to
Open range.
Once I'm free, I hold my ground against the pull
Of his weight and dance wildly in front of
Him; the mustang he can't quite rope.

BLOOD AND WATER

Devin VandYke

The priest poured the holy water into his cupped hand as the parishioner stood in front of him. He looked into his hand and exclaimed, “Jesus is lord! By the blood.” His deep voice trailed off as he turned on his heel, wanting to appear as though his movement was part of the well-choreographed baptism. His bloodied hand slipped through his robe and into his pants pocket. He squeezed a handkerchief and rolled it around in the palm of his hand, hoping to remove the coagulating dark stain. With his back to the congregation and his hand out of sight, he dipped his unsoiled hand into a glass of water he normally drank from during his sermons.

Smiling into the face of the two year old girl cradled in her mother’s protective arms, he flicked the water from his hand onto her face and with the congregation’s involvement the baptism was completed. As he guided his flock through the following ceremony and service, he frequently looked at his hand, trying to see if he had cut himself and bled into the holy water.

As soon as the service and ceremony were completed, he carefully examined the pitcher that held the remaining holy water, looking for where he might have cut himself or where the blood might have come from. Two hours later, he was sitting at his desk in his office staring at the pitcher of water, still in need of a viable explanation. He wondered if he had witnessed a miracle.

Grasping the pitcher firmly in his left hand, he looked inside and saw the bottom of the pitcher through the water. He poured a few drops into his hand over the garbage can and winced as it turned crimson on impact.

Jerome thought of himself as a good pastor, one who had the best interests of his flock’s salvation at heart. He thought of the church and its people as members of his family, just like his wife, his parents, or his hoped-for child. And yet, he was fascinated by the idea of something greater than his life, something that superseded life itself.

He first felt his call at six years old, when he went to church and was allowed to stay with the adults rather than attend Sunday school. He had known then that he wanted to be the one behind the pulpit, the one so important to everyone one in

the room, and the one who wore the robe and talked about God every week. He didn't know it was a pulpit, or that standing there required years of college, but he knew that he liked talking about this idea that no one could see.

When he was seven, the pastor allowed him to help with the collection, and he worked one side of the pews while Norm, long standing parishioner, worked the other. He wore his small suit with the pride of having mastered tying his own tie, and he thanked those who left offerings of coins and an occasional bill in the wide-mouthed, shiny golden bowl. After that, he felt responsible for making sure he and his family arrived early so that he could shine the plates for when they were needed. He liked to see his reflection in them.

Now he sat in his office, as small as his faith was deep, staring at his own Baptismal certificate, thirty years old and starting to turn yellow with age. His attention moved to the pitcher, its handle well-worn from years of service. He reached out to the pitcher and thumped it with his finger, savoring the ringing sound it made.

The familiar grey-bearded-face of Norm, church elder, leaned in the open door while tapping on it and said, "Got a minute?"

"I always have a minute for my elders. Pull up a folding chair."

The metal chair resonated like crashing cymbals as Norm flicked it open and set it on the floor across from Jerome's desk. Norm said, "You seemed a little nervous today during your sermon."

"Yes, yes I was. A weird thing happened today during the baptism. When I poured the holy water into my hand, it turned into blood."

Their eyes made contact and they both sat motionless.

Jerome broke the silence and said, "I'm serious."

"Someone must be playing a prank on you-and I don't think it's funny. Wait until the elders hear about it."

"I'm not sure it was a prank. I kept the water in sight from the moment I de-canted it, and it hasn't left my sight since." Both men stared at the pitcher which sat solemnly on the desk. Jerome picked it up by its handle and tilted it toward his friend, confidant, and supporter since childhood.

Norm saw what he expected-water. "Looks just fine to me."

"See the garbage can? I poured some into my hand five minutes ago. Now if God doesn't make a liar out of me, we'll see if it happens again, and if it does, I'll let you offer me explanations."

He poured a few sacred drops into his hand.

Norm inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh before dipping his finger in the pastor's cupped hand. His eyes opened wide as he saw the thick, sticky substance running down his finger. He leaned onto the desk. Jerome emptied his hand into the garbage can, grabbed a wad of Kleenex from the box on his desk, and offered one to Norm. The men stood silently, gazes locked on the pitcher.

Jerome poured a few drops into the garbage can and stared as the Kleenex became saturated with blood.

Norm broke the silence, "What should we do?"

Jerome said, "If I knew that, this conversation wouldn't be happening 'cause I'd already be doin' it."

Norm, always one to respect the chain of command said, "You're the head of the church. You can't just sit in your office and pour holy water into the garbage can all day. You have to decide on a course of action."

"I'm currently consulting with a revered elder and will come to a decision soon," Jerome shot back.

Norm said, "You know that Dan works for the Department of Criminal Investigations, right?"

"Aw, Norm, don't overreact. Nobody's been killed or anything. What do you think, someone got killed and then bled out into the Holy water? Besides, Dan's a bit Wild West for me. Did you know he wears his gun to service?"

Norm, looking shocked said, "How do you know he wears his gun to the services?"

"I hugged him after his kid's baptism, and I couldn't help but feel the presence of what felt like a small cannon under his shoulder."

"Maybe he felt the baptism merited bringing his gun."

Jerome, with a little sigh, said, "I asked him about it later, and he said he puts it on as soon as he gets up and doesn't take it off until bedtime."

"Well, I know him pretty well, but I didn't know he did that. Maybe I could have him get it examined."

Jerome said, "The gun is safe, so I'm guessing you mean the water, or blood, right?"

Norm looked at the pitcher and in a soft voice asked the question on both their minds, "And then what?"

The question was left hanging because both men were still dumbfounded. Their breathing was the only sound in the quiet, serene church. It was one thing when the water turned to blood and Jerome had told no one, it was another when someone else knew. Now the burden was no longer Jerome's alone. He had to figure out a course of action and lead his flock. He silently prayed he could do God's will.

"Okay, let's do that. I'm taking the water home with me and leaving it in the pitcher. You handle talking to Dan."

That night, Jerome was at home having supper with his wife, Carrie, when a pair of heavy footsteps on the porch interrupted their meal. Jerome smiled at his wife and excused himself to answer the door.

Dan dressed in shorts, steel toe work boots, and a T-shirt said, "I hear you need some investigative help."

Jerome thought he seemed too laid back to be taking a potential miracle seriously. He hoped he was making the right decision, but what other course of action was there?

An explanation was the priority. If it was a miracle, it would defy explanation. "Yes. I have no idea what's been going on."

"Don't worry, there has to be a simple explanation. Occam's razor and all. I need to examine the pitcher."

"It's right there on the table."

After putting on a gown, mask, and surgical gloves, the detective took out an envelope and removed a cloth, wiping around the inside of the pitcher just above the water line. He put the cloth back in the envelope and sealed it. He took the pitcher and moved over to the sink, and, with what looked like a pill bottle in his hand, poured a few drops from the pitcher into the sink, and as the drops hit the sink, into the bottle. The sight of blood expanding in the sink startled him, and more water splashed out, turning crimson and washing down the drain.

Jerome's wife covered her mouth and let out a muffled scream.

Jerome sighed, and the detective said, "Wow. Are you sure

your sink was clean?"

Carrie said, "It's not sterile or anything like that, but when I finished with dinner, I left it clean."

Dan frowned. "I'll let you know what I find out. It's probably not even blood. If it is human blood I'll have to make an official inquiry and such, but I can't imagine that happening. I'll know more tomorrow. I need to reposition my holster if you don't mind."

Jerome said, "Where is it? I don't even see it."

"I've been trying to show the undercover squad I'm qualified to help them out, so I've been practicing hiding it out of sight. I got it on my back, but I can't quite reach it, and it's horribly uncomfortable on the bus."

Jerome said, "You rode the bus over here?"

Carrie said, "I think I've heard enough. The game's on-- I'm taking my supper to the living room."

As Dan pulled his shirt off over his head, his cigarette case flew out of his breast pocket and clattered as it landed at his feet. "Yeah, I wanted to look like an authentic poor drug dealer, no car at all."

Jerome said, in a slightly higher voice, "When did you start smoking?"

"That's just another prop. I figure the squad can put a wire in it."

Dan turned so his back was facing Jerome and said, "Could you take the piece out? Don't worry, the safety's on."

Jerome reached out with two fingers, like he saw on TV, and tried to remove the gun. When it wouldn't come out, he undid a Velcro strap across the trigger. He set it on the table next to his lunch and said, "Nice trigger lock."

As Dan wrestled with his holster and pulled it from his back he said, "I adapted an over-the-shoulder holster so it rests on my back and I just look hunched over. It's kinda hard to reach. I had to have my son help me put it on. The combination kind is the best because there's no worry about some criminal stealing the keys. To get my gun he'd have to steal my mind. And you know that can't happen!"

"You mean you have your five-year-old strap on the holster for this, this cannon?"

"It's not that big. It's the same one Dirty Harry used. I

wanted one in a fifty caliber, but the Army wouldn't let me have one. They're idiots. You got a paper bag?"

Dan said, "Yeah, sure. Are you going to put the sample in the bag?"

"Yeah, I'm putting the evidence with my piece in the bag."

"Was the gun too uncomfortable to wear that way?"

"Yeah. I'm just gonna have to add some more foam rubber to the holster." He picked the gun up off the table and played with the combination on the trigger lock.

Jerome said, "Are you taking that off for your ride home?"

"Naw, I'm just making sure it's set so no crook'll have a clue what the combination is. I'll let myself out."

The sound of his boots on the porch and on the steps faded as the birds chirping and children playing filled the air before the front door swung closed.

Jerome picked the pitcher up off the table in one hand and decided against trying to carry his bowl of soup in his other hand into the living room. He set the pitcher down on the table in front of the couch next to Carrie's dinner. A commercial droned on in the background. Jerome let out a breath of air and took a deep breath as if he were about to say something, then looked his wife in her eyes. Carrie hit the mute button, and the room became silent. Then together their gaze drifted to the pitcher.

Finally, Carrie broke the silence, "What if it is a miracle?"

"How would we know? Is a miracle something that defies explanation? Will this always defy explanation?"

"Honey, what if it does?"

"I don't know. We couldn't really risk telling anyone, or the public would inundate our home, our jobs, and our world. If the knowledge of this.happening.were to get out."

She hugged him, and while looking into his eyes said, "Don't worry, we'll get through this. Who's number one?"

He smiled and pointed up with his index finger. "He is."

They said, "Amen," together. Carrie turned the sound back on and exclaimed, "Honey watch this hit. I love the slow motion-they hit each other so hard they knock off drops of sweat and you can almost feel their bones breaking. HD TV is great."

Jerome said, "I thought we would have Sunday supper without the game, honey."

Carrie said, "This is a unique Sunday, though. We've

witnessed a miracle.”

“So this means we indulge in our carnal desire to watch grown men run into each other while trying to score?”

“Husband, love of my life, it’s really great that you have this passion, and I share in it. But today was really stressful and I need some down time-a chance to just not think about what that pitcher has in it and what it means to our lives.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, I can understand wanting to be sure the pitcher is safe and undisturbed, but I think it was a bit much to take it into the garden with us this afternoon. The neighbors took turns staring and pointing.”

“They stare at birds eating worms after a good rain.”

Carrie, knowing it was time to put her arguments to bed said, “Honey, carrying it through the grocery store will only draw unwanted attention, okay?”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll leave it in the cart next time.”

Carrie finished the sentence and said, “Or maybe in the car.or even at home.”

The next day, when Carrie arrived at the elementary school where she worked, there was a police car parked in the lot and an officer at the door. She asked him what was going on, and he told her there had been a murder the day before in the morning and that “A student’s mom had been shot and the only witness was her eight year old daughter.”

“When?” asked Carrie, filled with questions, “Is she okay?”

“You know how kids are in this neighborhood. It happened early yesterday morning. We got no leads yet, and the locals will freak out if we round up the usual suspects.”

Carrie swallowed hard, said thanks for the heads up, and walked to her classroom. She called her husband and told him what was going on.

He asked, “Do you think it’s the mom’s blood?”

She sighed. “I don’t even know if the daughter is one of my students or not.” Then she looked up from her desk as a uniformed officer walked through her door followed by a man in a suit and tie. “I have a feeling she might be. I’ll call at lunch if I get the chance.”

In his office that afternoon, Jerome tried to write an outline

for his Wednesday evening prison service. He started several times, and each time scratched out his beginnings. The events of the last two days in his otherwise peaceful working man's parish were overwhelming him. He liked to think of his neighborhood as a nice place, where the majority of his congregation was working in some way, even though he knew their lives were fraught with hardship and struggle. Most of his flock, if they had jobs at all, were at the bottom end of the wage scale. He smiled as he thought that this blighted neighborhood where misery and poverty were rampant could be the place where a miracle occurred. He pondered the idea that it was more similar to Jesus's neighborhood than others in the city. Maybe this could be the focus of his sermon—that his incarcerated flock had more in common with Jesus than most people. A knock on his office door broke into his dysphoria.

Dan stepped through the door clean shaven, the frown on his face rising above his suit and tie. "I gotta tell you, that stuff in the pitcher was human blood, and there was a murder right down the street this morning, one we think happened well before your service. Since it was human I've had it sent along for genetic testing to eliminate it as coming from the victim or her daughter. They're going to call in few minutes to let me know. If it's negative for both, this visit never has to have happened. But if it's positive, there's a uniformed officer outside, and we'd have to bring you in for a formal statement."

Jerome slumped in his chair, and after letting out a long sigh, invited Dan to sit down.

"I think I'll stand, thank you."

Norm stuck his head in the door and saw the angst on Jerome's face. He said, "Come on, don't worry. There's no way that blood came from anywhere but God."

Jerome said, "It's nice to see you're keeping the faith."

Dan said, "We'll know who it didn't come from any time now."

A muffled ringing noise filled the office, and all three men drew their phones. Jerome had been hoping his wife would call to tell him more about what had happened at the school. He turned and started talking in quiet tones as the two other men put their phones away. It was the local newspaper asking him if he knew that there had been a murder two blocks from his church on Sunday morning. And did he know that the daughter of the victim was one

of his wife's students? The conversation ended when he said, "I do now. Bye."

A phone rang again. While holding eye contact with Jerome, Dan said, "Detective Roberts." A minute later Jerome and Norm heard, "Okay. I'm glad to hear it. Yeah, go ahead, check all your criminal data bases and let me know." Then, as Dan holstered his phone, he said to Norm and Jerome, "I'm relieved. I've never had to take a formal statement from a pastor. My guy downtown ran the sample through our system, and we're not finding a match yet. It's not from the mom, or the daughter, or any victim or perp for the last thirty days statewide. He'll let the computer continue to search and check with me later. I gotta tell you though, its weird-we get a match 93% of the time by now. Now, just to cover ourselves, tell me anything you know about this murder, so I can keep our consultation on your sample quiet."

The dinner table was quiet in Jerome's house that night. He and his wife had endured many crises in their life, like when the church's bank failed, or when a member of the congregation was accused of violently raping a twelve year old, or last summer when all the grass in the playground died, but this thing was bigger than all of them combined. They both had an attachment to their neighborhood and did everything they could to help lift the community to greater economic security. They didn't do it for some abstract belief in a reward after they were dead but because they felt, as Jerome liked to say, "It's the right thing to do."

That night Jerome and his wife made an unusually vigorous effort at creating the child they both desired. After they finished, Carrie, concerned that her husband was still ruminating about the blood that had entered their lives, said, "Look at it this way: a child is a miracle and maybe this blood is one, too."

"Yeah, but what if the situation gets out of hand? It could put our efforts here in a bad light. In our circumstances, no publicity is better than bad publicity."

"But doesn't that depend on how people react to what's happened?"

"Now you're talking about how to control the spin."

When Carrie faced this kind of a situation with her spouse, she shifted her tactic and tried to appeal to the reasoning in his Christian mind. "My husband, the leader of his flock, is this

not the exact situation where you should call upon your powers of persuasion and manipulation in order to command a positive outcome?"

Jerome sighed and turned his head, making eye contact, and kissed her passionately as the rumblings of an encore performance brought their bodies together.

Wednesday morning, Dan called and told Jerome his usual police escort to the prison service was sick. Therefore, as the answering machine said, "I'll be ridin' with you to the prison to minister to the felons." Jerome wondered how the service would go, because he had carefully picked the escort officer from the ranks of the new recruits, and Dan was certainly not a new recruit untested by the steely coldness of a career in law enforcement.

Dan showed up at the church in a patrol car in a formal uniform that looked more like a dress outfit for an awards banquet. Jerome met him at the door and said, "Roger usually wears jeans and a flannel shirt, and he gets an unmarked car."

"Doesn't sound to me like that recruit is going to last 15 years and three months and two weeks, as I have, because he doesn't have an appreciation as to how dangerous the convicts can be."

Jerome looked over his glasses and up and down the uniform and said, "Those clothes are not going to protect you, Dan."

"You're right there, pastor man. This uniform intimidates the bad guys into not fooling with me."

"In other words, your clothes are going to scare guys who have raped and murdered innocents."

Dan's chest puffed up and as he stood with his back straight he said, "You could put it that way if you like."

Jerome got in the car, and as Dan started it up said, "You're not going to run the lights are you?"

"I don't think going out to the prison to spread the word of God is an emergency, do you?"

"It might be."

After riding in silence for half an hour, Dan's phone rang, and the cruiser swerved a little as he wrestled his phone free. He said into the phone, "Okay expand your search to include any genetic match for perps or victims up to the federal level. I don't care whose blood it isn't any more. I just want to know who the

heck's blood is in my pastor's holy water."

After Dan hung up the phone he snickered and said, "I assume you got all that. It's getting' to be like the X-files. We can't figure out whose blood it is. But we know it's human."

Five minutes later, their car slowed as Dan pulled up behind a state trooper who had pulled over a motorist. He parked behind the trooper's car, and with gun and badge drawn, walked up an offered assistance. The trooper looked up from searching the suspect and said, "Hiya, Dan, how are you?"

"Fine thanks, you need any help with this."

"Suspect, Dan, he's a suspect. Jury trial, constitution and all. Tell me, Detective, do you always go around with your trigger guard on?"

"Well, right now I'm doing more of a PR-type thing, escorting the preacher man to minister to the convicts at the prison."

The suspect pressed up against the car with his head firmly held by the trooper said, "You probably forgot the combination."

"And so what if I did, you scumball?"

The trooper interjected, "Whoa, Dan, let's keep our disagreements cordial." The trooper cinched the cuffs onto the man's wrists and walked him to his car and stuffed him in the back under Dan's steady gaze.

The trooper turned to get in his car and said, "Thank you kindly for the offer of assistance, Detective. Go easy on those prisoners, now. You know what they say, 'If not for God there go I.'"

Dan walked backed to his car, and he and Jerome went to the prison where he listened intently to the message of how poor and humble Joseph and Mary were when they bore the baby Jesus.

The following Sunday at the end of the service Jerome said, "My wife and I have become witnesses to a miracle. Carrie is pregnant."

The congregation broke into applause, and as they left the church, they shook Jerome's hand with vigor and showered the couple with congratulations.

Norm and Dan were last in line, and as Dan grasped Jerome's hand in his he said, "Congrats sir, I'll stock up on Cuban cigars."

Jerome shot back with, “Aren’t those illegal?”

Dan smiled. “We got a bunch in evidence. Nobody will miss a few. And I have some news about that blood.”

Jerome looked at Carrie and then at Norm and said, “Well, the gang’s all here.”

Carrie said, “You mean cabal, don’t you?”

Dan smiled and said, “That’ll work. The blood was sent to the University, and it turns out that at least one cell came from a guy who died in prison in 1955, another cell came from a newborn on the east coast who needed a transfusion, and one cell came from the body of a Civil war casualty that was exhumed in 1997. The researcher said it appears as though each cell in the sample comes from a different source, with no apparent pattern.”

Norm, his voice wavering said, “You mean that stuff that came from the pitcher came from millions of different people?”

Dan said, “That’s a reasonable statement. The researcher has already identified DNA from hundreds of different people; he just doesn’t have access to enough records to identify the people themselves. And at some point it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Jerome said, “I don’t see any point in letting this little secret out. Do any of you?”

Dan said, “The researcher doesn’t think anyone would believe what he’s found, and he said he couldn’t write about unless the results could be replicated. So I guess you could say the case is closed.”

Jerome said, “I’m just going to put the pitcher on the altar under the cross and let it evaporate.”

Nine months later, after his son was born, Jerome checked the pitcher. It was still full.

A REVIEW OF MY MOST PRECIOUS FRIENDSHIP

Jiazi Zhou

One may meet thousands of people in his or her life. However, only a select few become good friends. Among close friends, there is always that one with whom the connection is above the rest. This friendship is the most precious thing in life. There is no better feeling than knowing that you have the support of a best friend. The friendship that I am about to share is my most important and special one.

The first time I met Wenwen, she was standing next to me in the week-long military training program that all new Yanshan Middle School students had to attend before school started. During the training, we began to get to know each other. At first, I did not like her that much because I thought she was arrogant and I already had two other friends, Yalin and Mingmei. Therefore, Wenwen and I were just friends because of friends.

Our real friendship started several months after we met. Yalin, Mingmei, Wenwen, and I usually played together. But eventually, it was just me and Wenwen. Yalin wanted to find more people to vote for her in the League member election, which was like an outstanding student honor, so she started to make friends with those people who could help her with the election. Mingmei liked to play with boys so she spent less time with us.

As Wenwen and I began to know more about each other, we realized that our personalities made us the perfect friends for each other. She is an outgoing girl, whereas I am a bit more shy and reserved. It is the balance of our different characteristics that makes our friendship so strong. I was extremely sensitive when I was in middle school, while she could be thoughtless, so sometimes her words hurt me. Once during a break in the hall, she made a joke that I was in a romantic relationship with a boy in our class. Being in a relationship was a serious and forbidden issue. Even though I knew she did not mean any harm, I was still mad at her because the joke made both the boy and me embarrassed. I stomped back to the classroom and left her alone in the hall without saying anything. She tried to apologize, but I was too angry to listen to anything from her. We did not speak to each other for the next five days and even ignored each other in school. On the fifth night, she gave in and called me. The moment I saw her number on my phone, I forgot everything that she had said that hurt me in the past five days. We talked just as usual. She complained that I had not missed her because I did not call her, so I apologized. It seemed like those five days never existed. We never fight with each other anymore because we have learned to understand and compromise for the good of our friendship.

Our friendship gives us courage to try new things. Every class in our middle school would hold a party on New Year's Day. Students organized the party, and anyone could sign up to perform and host. My dream at that time was to become a famous MC. So at every New Year's party, I would tell myself to sign up for it, but never had the confidence to follow through. At the end of 2004, when we were starting to plan for that year's party, Wenwen and I talked about our goals for the coming year, and she asked me whether I wanted to be the MC this year; I was surprised that she remembered my dream. However, I still did not have the confidence to handle a party on my own. She noticed my hesitance. She said she knew me pretty well and believed that I could be the greatest New Year's MC ever. She said, "You don't need to worry about anything because I will sit nearby to give you courage. No matter what happens, I am always by your side." Her encouragement touched me, so I went to the head teacher's office to apply for the position right away. When I was practicing for the competition, Wenwen would always watch me and give me some advice. After I got it, every day after school she would stay two hours late with me to watch my rehearsal, and went with me during the weekends to find suitable dresses for the party. We did a lot of work every day, but I never felt tired. Instead, those days were so happy for us. I can still remember what a great job I did of holding a successful party, and I will never forget the courage I gained from our friendship.

Because of our friendship, we were constantly improving our studies. She was good at chemistry and Chinese, and I was good at English and math. When we were in middle school, we spent a lot of time studying together. She helped me with my chemistry, and I helped her with her math. Both of us made huge progress by doing this. At the beginning of the year, we were in the middle of the whole class by score, but by the end of the first semester, we were the top two.

After building such a good friendship with Wenwen, I never felt alone. When my mother went on a business trip and my father had to go to the hospital to visit an injured student, I was left at home alone. I was scared, so at ten at night I called Wenwen. When Wenwen knew I was at home alone, she begged her mother to let her stay with me because she knew that I was afraid of the dark and being alone. Even though it was late, she still insisted on accompanying me. Since then, I have known that no matter what time it is or where she is, as long as I need her, she will come to be with me, which comforts me and gives me confidence. After we graduated from junior high school, we went to different senior high schools. Even though we could not see each other every day, we wrote diaries to

record our daily life for each other. We exchanged diaries every two weeks. Therefore, even if we were not together, I still knew everything about her and felt that she was with me all the time.

Although this friendship sounds perfect, Wenwen and I still have some issues. Since we are so close to each other, we do almost everything together. This closeness stops both Wenwen and me from making other new friends. Several classmates of ours have told us that they are jealous of our friendship. They claim they have not had a friendship that is as good as ours. When our classmates talked with either of us, they assumed we do not want to be friends with them because we have each other.

Another hard part of our friendship is caused by the physical distance. I am receiving education in the United States, and she is attending a college in China. We are under different educational systems, so we have different opinions and less in common with each other. We still talk to each other online, but not as often, and all we talk about are things from junior high school or big events in the world. This makes me sad, but we understand it is a part of growing up.

We have been friends for seven years, and overall it is a wonderful friendship. Our support and encouragement is more than a friend could ask for. Because we have each other, we are not afraid of challenges. Not only did we play together, but also we studied together.

We use our own strengths to fix the other's shortcomings. This reliance is also shown in our personalities. Although we have different personalities, they are the perfect balance for our relationship. This friendship is growing with us and it carries many important memories. I am confident that our connection is strong enough to overcome any obstacles we may have in the future.

We have been friends for seven years, and overall I would rate it as a wonderful friendship. Our support and encouragement for one another is beyond most friendships. I am lucky that I could find a friend like Wenwen in my life. I feel that every piece of me matches a piece of her. Sometimes, eye contact is enough to let each of us know what the other is thinking. I believe that everyone can find a friend like Wenwen. When reading my review, the person that you are thinking about must be your best friend. When you find that special person, please cherish her as the most valuable thing in the world.

THE LADY'S DREAM, IN WHICH SHE CALLS TO BOTH HER TRUER FORM AND TO CHRIST

Brett Brinkenmeyer

I'm sleeping as in some faraway dream
and all this life is nonsense.
Awakened within, I reach for truth,
hands battling my grasp,
and nothing is fulfilled. I am alone.

As a girl, I protected myself from
all those reaching hands, too,
and as a woman,
I will become true.

My truer form awaits, calling in this night,
and I
am amazed.

Let me wake up from this in-between,
let me become my end;
call to me and I will respond,
reach for me,
I am here.

A tender-hearted servant, I am yours.

WOVEN

Brett Brinkenmeyer

A motionless skein found on the shelf
is pulled from the others; then from within
is unraveled into less raw form, itself
complete before it should begin.
The child whose shadow passes below
and recedes into a future begotten;
a figure comes to mind to show
a path less chaotic, less alive, more taut than
a bundle of life wrapped 'round in blankets,
greenly bending to winds and forces unknown:
a sheer reliance, shuttled and reliant
with a finally formed future, yet to be known.
The last of material, briefly unbound
will yet be clasped again, fitted and found.

ABSENTIA

Bradford McDonnell

They had purchased a king size bed when they moved into the house together. It was a little larger than they needed, but it fit the room nicely, where a queen size would have left a little too much space and looked awkward if their measurements weren't plotted correctly. Neither Charlie nor Andrew had the best design sense, so it was a relief that they didn't have to look around for something else to fill the space. No need for the tiring arguments about what would look best against the wall, or tucked into the corner. They didn't actually need the extra comfort space the king afforded, spending most of their nights as tightly wound to one another as comfort allowed.

But now the king size proved to be much larger than Charlie was comfortable with. Andrew was not sleeping in it anymore, the now vacant bed partner having been missing for over ten months now. In another two, Andrew can be declared legally dead with the right paper work filed. With his loss, another follows.

The computer was beside the bed, where Charlie Stuart sat. She gave herself another half hour before calling it quits, unable to afford another night searching on her computer until the dawn broke. She did not have to be up early that morning, but neither did she want to become a full-fledged night owl. She didn't feel the slightest bit tired, but knew when her head hit the pillow, sleep would soon follow. She just had to get herself over to the bed.

The patch on her forehead was beginning to become uncomfortably warm. A defect in the model she learned about after purchase, but never got around to replacing. She let her fingers tap against the desk consistent as a metronome, keeping pace as she worked: a habit from an earlier age that still sneaked up on her in times of anxiety, despite her many attempts to quell the dependency.

Information was processing through the computer, and sending information directly into her via the patch. Things she wasn't supposed to be seeing. The Jack-mod was software Andrew was the most familiar with back when he was around. It was part of his job to monitor and probe employees, evaluations, clientele needs, all of which involved a government-approved model of

jacking software, and only specifically requested individuals were allowed to run them. Of course someone in his profession is aware of the illegal versions, as most people are to some extent. As to where he actually acquired the illicit version Charlie was now using was a mystery to her. “He?” she thought, and furrowed a lip.

On the computer were friends and coworkers. Most she knew, but a few were unfamiliar. She spent time with each of them, jacking into their bedside Stym-Comps, having discovered long before that personal computers are less reliable. As far as personal data is concerned, people generally store the basics on the computer. The Stym-comps hold everything. It took a great deal more time to go this route, and time was her enemy, but what choice did she have. Andrew will be dead soon. The disturbing aspect attached to that concept was obvious. What wasn’t disturbing was that numb feeling laced underneath that she couldn’t shake off.

Dillon, a close friend, was talking to her. Not Charlie specifically, but another friend named Shawn. Charlie was Shawn tonight. Shawn’s thoughts, emotions, and memories were stored in her personal Stym-comp, and Charlie had been jacking into it for the last several hours. The computer was the bridge, and Charlie’s body was temporarily ignored, save for the tapping of her fingers on the wood of the desk. She was Shawn. She could feel what Shawn feels, or remembers feeling. Of note, Shawn had spent several moments throughout the party, now infamous, pulling down her black dress which had a habit of bunching up on her. It was a size too small for her, but damned if it didn’t make her look fantastic. A price well worth paying. Her eyes would wander across the crowd; always checking on what everyone else was doing, never wanting to be left out of anything significant. She caught Charlie and Andrew, arms around each other’s waists, being introduced to someone named Cameron Worth. Charlie wore a similar red dress, with a silk scarf around the neck, tied down past her breasts, her brown hair hanging down, nearly touching her bare shoulders. She showed perhaps a little to much of her legs for the evening, but they were thin and smooth, with just the right amount of color evenly shared. Looking at herself from another’s eyes, she looked gorgeous, but her posture seemed more slouched than she would have preferred it to be. Something to work on. Too much like how a man would stand.

Charlie had already spent time in Cameron Worth's head, and ruled him out some time ago. It was Shawn she was focusing on now, and whether or not she knew anything about Andrew's disappearance sometime after the party. No obscure thinking patterns or plotting was running through her head just yet, but something strange could still occur. It was getting less and less likely.

It was an expectancy party; a pre baby shower of sorts. Charlie and Andrew weren't expecting yet, but the papers had officially passed through the legal systems, and a medical examiner approved the union. They were free to procreate. In a world overburdened by its people, the right to conceive a child was not only a privilege, but an honor few achieved, and even less gained as quickly as they did. Parties weren't unheard of, but Charlie made it clear several times to Andrew that she thought the celebration was still a little premature. Their friends and family were ecstatic, and simply unable to wait any longer. She had to bite the bullet, and enjoy the evening for everyone's sake. She quickly got over her stubbornness, but still felt uneasy. Nothing had happened yet.

Shawn eventually glanced away from Charlie and returned her attention to Dillon, feigning fascination about his works in neuroscience. The present Charlie couldn't help but laugh from her computer. She never did think Shawn the type to have the mental faculty to keep up with Dillon. It takes a special kind. Charlie once loaded up the plethora of data files necessary to understand what he talks about so enthusiastically, but what she couldn't do was focus on any one part of it. Neuroscience is its own kind of art, and not something Charlie could see herself maintaining long term interest in. The bits and pieces he presented were enough, and worth engaging into dialogue. With the advancement of bio manipulation, anyone is capable of learning anything, just not everything all at once. To learn one thing at a certain point is to remove something else. People are comparable to cups, only capable of holding so much without overflowing. Some cups are bigger than others, and Shawn's was hardly worth a shot of espresso. Personality, focus, and individuality were not things a computer could change, and some forms of knowledge are better suited for the right character type. Shawn's Stym-comp files and backup files were in short supply compared to all the other peoples Stym-comps she jacked into. Poor girl.

And still Dillon kept on talking to the ever roaming eyed Shawn, faster than most people can keep up with. Charlie had listened to Dillon's stories from that night from several different perspectives, but not from the source itself. She knew at some point she'll have to dive into Dillon's head. No one else at the party was giving her any directions in regard to Andrew's disappearance, or suspicions of others she has yet to check. But unless forced, she was saving Dillon for last. He was too good a friend to vandalize in such a personal way. She liked Dillon, and really couldn't see him as the kind to abide or even aid in Andrew's disappearance. Yes, she'll save him for last, hoping not to violate him at all. Someone knows where Andrew went. Whoever that person is was at this party. Everyone was there.

As so many attempts before, Charlie's night in the present was a dead end. Eventually Shawn's night spiraled into many more drinks, having finally escaped Dillon, and many more pulls on her dress, the evening ending with a woman Charlie only knew as William Stout taking the inebriated Shawn home, her hands wandering onto Shawn's legs on the drive to her condo. The rest of the night, though enticing to experience, was beyond Charlie's business, and worthless in her pursuits. While Shawn was sleeping in another's bed, Andrew would be walking out of their door, never to return. Charlie logged off of the jacking mod, and removed the patch from her head. Making sure the run-around-hack was doing its job, a mixing program that buried any hint of a jacking violation deep in its victims subconscious, Charlie breathed in a deep sigh of relief and adamant regret. More work will have to be done tomorrow night. She couldn't afford to skip it.

One last thing before bed, Charlie checked Andrew's bank statements. She didn't need to know how to hack in since she already knew his codes. No change. He wouldn't have a second account, and if he did, it would be a mystery where he was getting the money to put into it. They both knew each other's financial situations well. Neither of them could help competing with each other in secret over who was bringing in the most money. For the longest time the clear winner was Andrew, but even before his going missing Charlie was catching up to him.

She flicked the light to the bathroom on. Taking off her shirt and blue jeans and tossing them into the hamper, she stood in her bra and panties and turned on the to wash her face. The

water in the building was too hard, and was murder on her skin. Drying her face on a towel, Charlie stopped to admire herself in the mirror as she finished up. She liked how she looked. Her breasts were perky, and one of her favorite features she liked to flaunt, the occasions to do so rare. A treat to wear around her city and just a little over the average woman's size, and very sensitive to the touch. She rubbed one of her nipples in the manner Andrew would, and shivered, leaving the bathroom moments later.

She moved the bed sheets aside for entry, but held back from slipping into the monstrous thing. That desire for change crept up upon her as it does when she spends too much time in one skin, more so in this skin than ever, and so she went to the bedside Stym-comp and switched over the settings. The bedside stands main drawer a cooler, where she reached in and retrieved a plasm pack. She placed it in the Stym-comp as well as a fresh waste bag on the other hook up. The connector, wired to the comp, was locked in place into her upper arm, and the Stym-comp flashed green, beginning its cycling.

That mechanical voice asked her if she approved of the pre-set memory/data settings. She thought about it. The knowledge and skill prerequisites needed for the Jacking-mod took up a lot of space in her head, so the earlier standards were set on "save" to make room. Her job niceties were in their own save folders, as well as a lot of her childhood memories she hated to part with, but she knew she'd be returning as soon as possible, and finally a few other needless things she should have dumped long ago anyway. They had to go since her present situational memories and data were needed more for her investigation. The last annoyance was the Stym-comp's request to reformat the scattered files. They were a mess, but that's the way it was going to have to be for the time. She told it to ignore, crawled into bed, hit the lights, and tried for sleep. It didn't take as long as she thought it would.

Charlie Stuart woke as he usually did those mornings after the change with a painfully hard erection. The silk panties he still had on weren't designed to handle such an obtrusion, and were stretched beyond their designed intentions. Usually in the middle of the night he would wake long enough to remove them, but he blessedly slept much too soundly on this occasion. He stayed in bed long enough to let it settle before getting up, and heading to

the bathroom, tossing out the empty plasm pack into the full and sickly green waste bag on the way. The loose bra was removed from his flat chest and thrown into the hamper with the panties.

Out of unnecessary concern, Charlie looked over his body. He felt over his flat chest, moving down to his male parts, finding them properly formed without any additions still hanging around, a small sigh of relief followed. There had been a panic brought on by the news a few years ago when a cheap Stym-comp knock off system was leaving its users halfway between genders after a cycle. No permanent damage done, each case corrected by a therapy specialist, and the defective products were recalled immediately. The entire media scare was blown completely out of proportion, but that didn't stop the entire country from remaining single gendered for months at a time. And still Charlie couldn't keep from checking himself or herself over after each switch from then on. Andrew would laugh each time he or she caught him. Today staring back at him in the mirror was the male Charlie. Slim, the size he preferred to keep up for both his bodies, for if one got a little larger the other had to follow. What he couldn't manage was his height, and he was a little taller than yesterday. That was fine. His hair still nearly touched his shoulders, but as long as he didn't style it up as he would as the other Charlie, it remains masculine. Any longer and he'd have to cut it to save face. Satisfied with his body, Charlie took a shower.

Breakfast was never a major part of his day, simplified to a cup of black coffee. The male part of him preferred the bitter taste, but there were creams and sugar waiting in the cupboards to be used by the next gender, his having a sweeter tongue. He took the coffee to the front door and grabbed the paper on the other side, taking both items into the living room. Charlie still preferred getting his news from the paper, where Andrew had a more limitless knowledge on his Q-Drive updating just as fast as news happened. Most people went this route, but Charlie liked the chance to take a step back from current technology as much as he could manage to get away with. There was no reason for this.

It was getting closer to nine, and if it was Charlie's term he would have been at work an hour ago. He had the kind of job that only allowed him to work two-thirds of the year. With the influx of bodies drowning the job market, living and job standards shifted in the last decade to allow more people to work. Though the arguably

new standard was still rough around the edges, it didn't bother Charlie as much as it did a few other groups and unions. But he liked working. It kept his mind preoccupied, which was something he needed at this time. But the rules were firm, and even though he was still being paid, it was nearly half as much as when he was on the job. It was just enough to get by. The cost of living had been going down significantly over the years, but his and Andrew's house was large, and still being paid for, relying solely on Charlie's funds now, where Andrew's additions would have made things much more comfortable to manage. He sipped at the rich and bitter blackness in his hands, and skipped over the politics plaguing the paper for the leisure sections.

Creativity was flourishing in the city. In the off seasons most people take up the arts, and hobbies, or even home businesses. Anything to pass the time. Charlie couldn't create anything, or at least anything noteworthy. Instead he would spend his time wandering the city attending the theatres, or slowly walking through museums and galleries taking in others creations. He'd have to go alone as Andrew's terms were still different from his. That was likely to change, but it didn't matter now. As for reading, it was his sibling who was his primary source of literature, always passing on a new favorite Charlie would dive into second hand, and almost always find just as enjoyable as the person prior found it. And so it was that Charlie knew how to pass the time, during his terms. But the books needing to be read were stacking up, and plays and galleries would come and pass downtown without being seen. Interest was being forced and ultimately lost on him.

Speaking of the sibling, the phone rang, and Charlie answered to find her on the other end. "Hey sweetie," Frankie said, "How are we doing today?"

"Still waking up," Charlie answered back.

"Well, when you pull yourself together do you want to come over for some lunch? Bobby misses you." The phone was moving away from its speaker. "Say hi, Bobby." A tiny giggle was the supposed form of greeting given by the other presence. Frankie's one-year old. The phone returned to the parent. "See, he wants to see you."

"I wouldn't want to disappoint. I'll be by around eleven. Sound good?"

"See you then," she hung up the phone. Frankie was

always the kind of person to keep in touch with the family fairly regularly, much more than Charlie at least. She was more insistent lately of that trait than ever, a combination of baby craziness and sympathy toward Charlie's situation. The latter she didn't make apparent, and Charlie was grateful for this. He returned to his paper, and finished his coffee.

Located near the heart of the city, Blackstone was a private equity firm where Charlie worked as an analyst. A lot of bitch work, but Charlie worked hard and flourished under the stress it provided insistently. It was where he first met Andrew. It was Charlie's first evaluation that Andrew saw over, Stym-jacking, legally, into his performance and ethics. Whether or not they dove farther, or if their mods were even capable, is left to question, but what was known was how Andrew saw something in Charlie he liked in contrast with every other employees he monitored, or the people he encountered outside the work force. They went out for drinks several nights after work; saw each other in both genders, which lead progressively into dinners out, and soon into nights of physical gratifications. They were dating lightly for a little over a year before they officially took on the nomenclature of 'couple.' Marriage was brought up once in conversation, but the hassle wasn't worth it. Marriage was an out-of-date practice, but still something couples could do. It no longer carried any benefits, tax or otherwise, so the point was losing out, reserved for those of various religious practices that were also falling out of date. Charlie and Andrew still didn't rule it out entirely, liking the official title it brought, an act of pure dedication to one another.

Charlie's boss called him into his office one day. Not a regular thing he did, and an odd thing Charlie remembered of the event was his relief that he dressed as a man that day. He had a whim the night before he didn't follow up on, and that luck proved constructive. Or at least more appropriate. Just over ninety percent of the office went to work that one way, reserving the female gender to inopportune scheduling or a refreshing change of pace. Something you could do, but dressing as a woman was never very popular, or rather nobody took you as seriously on days where you looked the fairer. Studies have been done testing gender to job performances, results differing from situation to situation, but regardless of the benefits of wearing the female brain to do a job

better, looks won out over aptitude and carried more weight when it came to job growth, if only just slightly. Working was primarily a man's job.

Charlie sat down across from his boss and received two pieces of good news. First of course, concerning his past accomplishments with the clientele, he was being promoted to associate. That alone was an achievement worth celebrating, and Charlie knew for damn sure that he deserved it. The second came as kind of a shock. Just half a year ago, and no doubt brought about because of Frankie's recent approval of motherhood, Andrew and Charlie applied for parenthood as well. It was due to Charlie's clean record, living stability, and of course the very recent promotion that the application passed. Charlie was approved. Andrew, even though the "significant other," was not approved, but only because legally one parent is granted the right. This of course carried with it a very important implication. Charlie was the one assigned to bear the offspring. The honor was his.

Of course Charlie had put enough thought into raising a child, and liked the idea very much, as did Andrew. The two of them had been getting into too steady of a routine with each other, and a child would have shaken things up nicely. But it was the timing that came as a bit of a surprise. Frankie applied for parenthood six years before being approved. Many others commonly have to wait longer, and many more are never approved at all. He didn't know what to say at the time. Since it was his boss giving the news, a few strings must have been pulled in his favor from the man himself. The man, he thought, Charlie having never seen his boss in the feminine before. Charlie put on his best face, shook his boss's hand, and left the office to let the news sink in properly.

Things went pretty quickly from there. Andrew took him out to dinner the next night and proposed. She got down on her knee in front of everybody and offered the gold ring, which Charlie accepted. Charlie got Andrew a ring the next day, bringing her with to make sure it was fixed perfectly. Fit just as well on the middle finger when Andrew was a woman and the traditional ring finger for the man. The friends and family were all informed, leading to even more dinners and social evenings of elation. And just a week after the announcement, Charlie found himself at the doctor's office. He forgot to set his Stym-comp the night before,

and felt embarrassed showing up as a man for his check-up. The other women in the waiting room kept glancing at him, and he had to stare at the floor until he was called back. The doctor informed him that it didn't matter. All that was needed was a draw of blood to analyze the genetic makeup at this stage. Pills were synthesized, and all Charlie needed to do was make the final gender swap for about the next two years, pop the pills for fertility, and allow Andrew to mix in his final ingredient.

It was all happening much faster than Charlie could keep up with. He really only had time to think about it all as a whole when Andrew was gone. They had a fight the night after the party was over. They had had fights before of course, well before the final one, usually over this or that. In retrospect they spent too much time together. At work, at home, they barely had time for themselves. It was Andrew who was always the one to storm out, never Charlie, but if it wasn't Andrew that did it, it would have been her. It was a necessary problem couples just have to face. Give each other sometime alone; let the absence help the heart grow weak and fonder of what is waiting for them. And never more than a week later, Andrew would either walk back into the apartment, or Charlie would call him and ask him to come home. Then it was like it never happened.

That last fight they had was nothing acutely extraordinary. They had both had too much to drink, so the exact details were foggy. Charlie tried to recall anything that constitutes important or specific details, but there wasn't one. There were only the standard quibbles, absolutely nothing substantial standing out. Funny how it was all those little, meaningless things that ate away at Charlie. What did Andrew say exactly? Didn't he want to be a father? No, that wasn't it. But Charlie kept focusing back on that for whatever goddamn reason. Andrew wanted to be a father.

Traffic was slower than normal on his way to Frankie's apartment. Charlie nudged his car bit by bit through the city, stealing a glance out the window when he could to see what was holding things up ahead of him. No obvious signs of road construction, blinking lights from a cop car, or any of the standard delays. The buildings towered over him as he sat and looked around, trying to distract himself from the idleness and the noise from the complaining traffic.

The sidewalks were cluttered by foot traffic from both the business ready travelers to the many sight seers and shoppers either from out of town or suffering through their terms off from work. An outfit in the window of the corner clothing store caught Charlie's eye. Since his promotion most of his clothing purchases were in the form of suits, or business casuals. When was the last time he bought a dress for himself? It was so much harder to find a good dress than a good suit. Andrew had gotten Charlie into the habit of going out for a girls only spree every once in a while. They'd try on pretty things, needing the other near to make sure they looked fine, neither of them capable or competent enough for shopping alone. Definitely easier to purchase a man's suit, and no new dresses acquired for Charlie since the absence of a reliable girlfriend. A dinner out with Dillon and a few of his friends a few months back brought up a conversation related to Charlie's lack of clothing purchases, and Dillon even went so far as to offer a day out to remedy the situation. Charlie should have taken him up on it. And still the traffic remained stagnant. What was Dillon up to lately? He hadn't called him in the last couple weeks. Charlie decided to fix that, and reached for his Q-Drive-Mini to call him.

"Hey there," she answered after a few rings. Charlie was a bit surprised to hear the feminine voice so late in the work week.

"Hi Dillon, did I catch you at a bad time? Are you working?"

"We're sitting around talking about the Stym-2 conference actually. Greene just got back and is telling us everything he heard. It's absolutely amazing technology, and we're expecting some commissions in the future. I probably shouldn't stay on the phone much longer I'm afraid."

"That's perfectly fine. You want to tell me everything over dinner tonight instead?" Charlie heard himself saying this, immediately regretting the offer, forgetting his night was already booked for another jacking session. His other gender wouldn't have made that mistake. His subconscious clearly had its own plans in mind, having not seen Dillon in so long, and wanting her company. The male mind is a basic animal.

"Absolutely. Have anything in mind?"

"My place. I haven't cooked in a while."

"Sounds great, want me to bring anything?" Her voice rang out like Christmas bells, oddly sing song. It suited Dillon's

bubbly personality beautifully, and Charlie wished he could hear it more often. Circumstances always favored Dillon's one skin over the other.

"I don't have any good wine, but I could pick something up," Charlie said.

"Oh don't worry about that, I have something lying around. What should I wear?"

"Come as you are if that makes you comfortable. I haven't seen you in a dress for some time." Dillon really did look good in the feminine; her form carries itself well, and had a fluidness about it that always reminded Charlie of a child at play. As if at any moment she would start wiggling around for no good reason. She was adorable.

"I will. I'll see you at six."

"Bye Dillon." He hung up the phone. The traffic was picking up again.

Little Bobby was still a good two years away from going through chromosomal therapy, but like most parents they dressed him however they pleased, mostly in preparation. Today was a white with aqua organza embroidered polka-dot cummerbund sash, as Frankie described to Charlie in needless detail. Charlie sat on the couch and watched the little one play with his toys, picking one up, putting it down, reaching for another, throwing it, and so on. He was cute in a dress.

He'll grow, and he'll never know what gender he was born as. It's considered privileged information that a family could choose to reveal if they so desired. Most don't. After gene therapy, the gender specific on the birth certificate is removed upon request. Neither Frankie nor Charlie knew what they came into this world as. You learn to live as both.

Bobby stared at his toy intently, processing the remarkable, and all things considered, new thing in his infantile mind. "Boys home in on objects a lot more than girls do," Frankie said. "Girls prefer to have people in on the play with them. They like to focus on faces. It has to do with how their brains and eyes develop. Something like that. The differences are remarkable."

"You read that somewhere?"

"It was on TV. I don't remember what I was watching exactly, but boys and girls are just wired differently. It's nice that we

can benefit from both.”

An interesting thought and it got Charlie thinking. “Does that stay inherent as we grow, despite Stym modding?”

“I don’t really know. It’s hard to tell in adults, but maybe we lean one way more than the other. Why, do you think I’m better with people, or the things around me?”

“I haven’t been paying attention to you in that great of detail, sorry.”

“Oh well,” she said. Frankie was still messing around in the kitchen, cleaning up the lunch mess. Charlie offered to help, but Frankie said he was fine watching over Bobby. Feeling obligated to the task, he picked up the baby and held him in his lap. Bobby took one of his blocks with him, throwing it at Charlie’s chest, having it handed back to him, and throwing it again, laughing each time.

“I took him to the park the other day in the stroller, and let him go down the slide,” Frankie said. “The small one of course. He didn’t know what to think of it.” She makes it a point to remind people how careful she is with her offspring. “Remember going to that park by the church after school? I got to thinking about that. Having to race home because we stayed out too long, before Jamie got home so he wouldn’t yell at us for prancing about unsupervised?” She was smiling at the memory.

Charlie cleared his throat, remembering nothing about it, a vague mist obscuring a clear form of their past. “I, uh,” Charlie started. “I don’t remember.”

“You forgot? I know you have that stored somewhere. Not worth keeping around the old noggin?”

It would of course be saved in a file on Charlie’s stym-comp, which tucks away the thoughts in the subconscious like everything else he knew. “I’m sorry Frankie. I’ll put it back soon.”

“It’s not that big a deal. I was just thinking about it.” The baby in his hands was getting tired of him. Charlie only knew of so many tricks to keep an infant entertained, and wasn’t feeling like using any of them that involved silly faces, or the like. The baby will just have to deal until his mother returned.

“How do you handle all this?” he asked.

“What’s that?” she questioned, pushing in the dishwasher.

“This is a full time job taking care of this little guy. I don’t know if I could handle it.” The block the child still held in his little

grip was thrown once more and hit Charlie in the face. The adult set it out of the babies reach this time.

“You adapt to it pretty fast. It’s really something else to carry a baby around inside of you for so long. It changes you. The bond the two of us created is spooky.”

“How so?” Charlie asked.

“You’ll find out when you-” she stopped halfway through. She covered her mouth as if the words hadn’t left at all, but the damage was done. It didn’t hurt Charlie at all, but Frankie put on her ‘oh my gosh’ face. “I’m so sorry,” she stuttered. “I didn’t mean to suggest anything.”

“It’s OK,” Charlie said plainly. Frankie came out from the kitchen to sit down beside him, taking the baby back for herself. A moment of silence was shared for the time, save for the random noises Bobby made.

“Have the police talked to you lately?”

“Not in a while,” Charlie said. “They haven’t found out anything new, and I’m sure they’ve given up the hunt.”

“So what happens now?”

“I’m working on a few things, but I’m losing hope.”

Charlie of course had not told Frankie about his computer escapades. And usually they told each other everything, having never held anything back from one another before. Though it hurt him to do so, Charlie had in fact jacked into Frankie’s mind and saw the party through her eyes and mind. She was so happy for the two of them, and practically glowed. Charlie had never felt what it was like to glow, and found the experience pleasant. Would he have gotten the same feelings as a mother? He didn’t know, and probably won’t. He would love to have a baby, no denying that, but the idea of the kind of bond the like’s Frankie had developed for Bobby terrified him. It felt like it was a little more than he was prepared to handle. The last fight Charlie and Andrew had was related to this.

Both Andrew and Charlie went to bed with a bad attitude that night. It’s how it usually starts. At such a point, anything could be said, and a fight will happen. Charlie still convinced that they shouldn’t have had the party yet, and Andrew couldn’t see why. Beyond that, all the usual arguments crept to mind, it was hard to determine which was the more recent, or rehashed verbal jousting from other nights. Sometimes he would throw things. Never at

Charlie, but a picture frame, the alarm clock, and the VHD remote all met a violent fate against the walls of the bedroom. The stym-comp was thrown on the last night. Andrew's Stym-comp. Had it been anything else that night, Charlie would have been able to jack into him, but it was the damn comp, and it broke into pieces, the modes, the drives, all gone. "You're being unreasonable," Charlie remembered Andrew saying at some point. The last solid words recalled before a door slammed. He'd said it many times before. It was so hard to keep track, that slamming noise the last echo before unbearable silence. Permanent silence.

Not these thoughts again. Charlie focused back on his sibling. Frankie was no longer breast feeding Bobby, and he took to the bottle just fine. But Frankie had yet to stym over to the other gender since the pregnancy. Nothing wrong with that in principle, but Charlie was starting to miss talking to a brother, as opposed to a sister. Of course Frankie was always Frankie regardless of whatever she was wearing, but there were these subtle differences that Charlie hadn't noticed before until they were gone, maybe forever. Frankie was a mother now, no matter what genitals she chose to wear. Her significant other was the father. He, or maybe she, was at work while Frankie stayed home to take care of the baby, another thought that troubled Charlie. His career was just taking off, and sacrifices would have to be made if there was a baby at home. Would Andrew have stayed in house to take care of their child while Charlie properly established himself in his new job? The answer came clearly. No.

The baby was showing signs of sleepiness, so Frankie went to put him to bed. Charlie followed, and watched quietly as Frankie went through her little rituals of putting the baby down. Humming softly as Bobby shut his eyes. Charlie had watched Frankie very closely since the news of his right to parenthood was established. Trying to picture himself in her body, doing the things she does. It didn't seem like him. Frankie on the other hand stepped into the roll flawlessly. She loved being a mother. His brother was lost to him forever, if he ever really had one to begin with.

Frankie wouldn't understand. Charlie could be massive in pregnancy at this very moment, but wasn't, and was uncomfortably fine with that present fact. He'd have talked with Andrew months before, and told him he needed more time to prepare. They had a

whole year before the license would expire, now only two months left, so this would have been the make or break moment. But since Andrew wasn't around, Charlie wasn't thinking about it, didn't have to as he would have with Andrew hanging around, waiting. They were going to have a baby, and Charlie was going to be the one to provide, whether he was ready or not, whether he liked it or not. Maybe by now all would have been made clear, and Charlie would have turned into something like Frankie, but that didn't happen, and he wasn't really sure if it would. The uncertainties made him numb. Andrew needed to be found, so an answer could be worked out. But maybe Andrew already made that answer for them. If he were to walk back in the door two months from now, would Charlie be relieved or not. Whose decision was this?

The cashier at the store caught Charlie's eye. He made a stop to pick up a few items for dinner, and was now standing in line to check out. The cashier was a black man, and his color reminded Charlie of how rare that color really was these days. It's not an issue people think about that often anymore, but now Charlie was lost in the history of it all. The city was white, the state was white, and most of the country was white. Skin color could also be modified with the Stym-comp, but any one person was allowed a skin change only once every five years, depending on the state.

When the technology was new, modifications were limitless, and that turned into a variety of problems. It's important for a country to have people who have solid identities, and if you could change who you are entirely, anyway you want, as many times as you want, then exploits were just as endless. The law was quickly modified, and Stym-comps pacified. Facial or bodily reconstruction was illegal. Modern Stym-comps don't even give that selection anymore. But we kept the option of gender swapping, as long as the face you carry as a man or woman remains the same every time. It was a fad at first that grew exponentially. It became something more than a fun change of pace, or a fashion statement. It was a chance at equality. Something human kind had been fighting for since the dawn of time. And then there it was. The sexism conflicts of the past could finally be removed from the human condition. We lobbied hard for this change, this right, and won. And now, here we are.

Skin color followed quickly, in its own way. In the world, the benefit of showing up for work as a white individual unfortunately gave a person a better chance of progression than any other skin color did. In this country at least. Though the practice of ethnically preferential treatment in the work force had been illegal for a much longer time, being white gave you that extra edge, like it or not. The black community slowly died away, and back in the day the issue was astoundingly popular and fought over. But people will always judge someone of color unfairly, whether they mean to or not. It's why everybody dresses to work as a man in comparison.

And now here was this individual, much darker than he needed to be, pleasantly greeting customers, ringing up their items, and seeing them on their way with a smile. A brave man or maybe he was just making a statement. Charlie decided it didn't really matter, but couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him, though he wasn't sure why. He let the thought conflicting in his mind pass in the parking lot, and moved on from it.

There were still hours to kill before six, and Charlie didn't find the idea of going home and waiting around that desirable. Being alone in his thoughts was wearing him out, so he decided he had it in him to leave the city for a while. His food would keep for the time in the trunk. It was early in the afternoon, and traffic was lighter at this time. Getting back in would be something else entirely, but the risk was worth it.

There is a field about forty-five minutes away from the city that Andrew and Charlie would frequent in the summer. It wasn't a park, or a farmland, it wasn't really anything. History preserved the space since long ago Indians had been buried there. A few mounds were scattered across the plain signifying their final resting place. Whether they were really down in the dirt or not Charlie didn't know, or care. Trees in the distance and tall grass were abundant everywhere else under a clear blue sky. They would play a game here. One of them would close their eyes and count, while the other went off to hide in the grass. The seeker would look around for the other, while he or she would try and sneak back to the blanket they had set out without getting caught by the other. A kid game, but out here, it didn't matter. Charlie would win most of the time. Andrew was terrible at hiding.

Things made sense out here. Charlie was an adult, and

knew at this age that there was no such thing as the perfect mate. He liked Andrew, but Andrew was not without his fair share of problems. He was pushy, and liked things his way, and Charlie was the same. Teeth would bare, and nips at each other's throats were more than few, but not enough to distract them from the good they saw in each other. Like out here, in the field, where they could step away from their bullshit and just enjoy each other. Nothing else mattered.

The car parked on the dirt road beside the field, where Charlie looked out his window at the wind brushing over the grass like waves. He wanted to get out of the car, to go up there for a while, but didn't. Maybe Andrew was up there, hiding in the grass, waiting for Charlie to come look for him so he could sneak around to the car, laughing when he reached it. "I win," he would say. But Andrew wasn't hiding in the grass, the bastard. The trip was a waste of time, and that's all Charlie really needed. He sat in his car for a few more minutes before turning it around and heading back home.

The girls were getting ready for a night on the town as Charlie drove back through the city. He forgot it was a Friday. The girls always come out on the weekend. The night life favored the feminine wilds, and it was swarmed with short dresses, lipstick, and various chaotic choruses of hair stylings that Charlie wasn't keeping up with. The men tend to be all work and no play, saving that for the other side of themselves. The reasons were sensible. A woman doesn't take as many drinks, has a better sense of style, and options, and can dance. Anyone can dance, but not like a woman. And courtship, more or less, still revolved around seeing the personality you were attracted to in long legs and perky breasts. Andrew and Charlie's true interest in each other was made certain the night they went out to the clubs, seeing each other all dolled up for the first time.

When was the last time Charlie put on her best pumps, hiked up his favorite asset, and let loose? Andrew and Charlie had fairly consistent girl's nights out, especially in one or the others off term. Adulthood crept up on them, and it became less and less. Dillon was now taking her out at least once a month when Andrew didn't return to do so himself. Frankie would hire a babysitter now and then and come out with them, but she always left early to get back to Bobby. That was fine for Charlie. She and Dillon had been

good enough friends to handle being alone with each other. They were much closer now, and Charlie was grateful he was around for him. He wouldn't have made it this long without him.

He showed up with a red wine. The reds ostensibly better on the male tongue than the white, at least as far as Dillon and Charlie were concerned. Charlie was rather disappointed to find Dillon dressed as he was, having been looking forward to the sweet little thing he could have been. Not a tragic loss, and Dillon explained how he didn't know if he'd get the chance to make the switch for tomorrow. He had a presentation in the early hour before his eastern team left for their coast, and wanted to be at his best. He usually didn't work weekends, and Charlie was surprised he even decided to come over, given the circumstances.

Dinner consisted of chicken parmesan, stuffed mushrooms, and a salad with vinaigrette. The wine went perfectly with the meal, and they sat at the table still drinking it as they let the food settle.

"Storage capacity nearly doubles subconscious filtering," he went on, "so essentially a user could nearly triple his desktop. Probably more than most of us ever need, but imagine the knowledge a person can maintain. It'll be a revolution, another revolution." Sweat was starting to form on his forehead, his conversation running a million miles ahead of the both of them.

"There's always more to learn," Charlie said, "I don't think anyone is capable of knowing everything. Even if, do you think there is such a thing as too much knowledge. I have almost everything I'll ever need to run my job efficiently."

"That's just it though, 'almost.' Think if you could do your job perfectly. To have it all, and everything more that isn't even relevant to your profession. We're not there yet, but possibly in the next decade you could still be an associate, but also a doctor, and a mechanic, and a philosopher, and everything else. Time will tell how the government will regulate such a thing, but regardless, we are all one step closer to that absolute perfection."

Charlie had to mull that over a bit. "I don't think a machine could promise such a thing. Too many other factors involved. Yeah it sounds as if the science is right, but a computer can't give someone initiative, or pride, or any of the mess of little human drives that make us who we really are. I got my promotion

at Blackstone because I was more ruthless than any of the others. Because I worked harder, and took what is really basic knowledge dolled out to all of us, and tweaked it in just the right way, as I saw fit. I had something over everyone else competing for that same position. Can a machine teach you that?"

"Maybe the next generation will have actual drives on their drives," he laughed.

"Could be, but I'm not sure I'd like that. Where are we to find individuals? How's one person supposed to get an edge over anyone else?"

It was his turn to ponder this. "I don't know. But no matter what we'll still be people. Human's will always find a way to dick each other over." He finished the last of his wine, stood up to take Charlie's, and brought it into the living room where Charlie would have to follow. Charlie watched how his hips moved across the room.

The couch sat four, but they sat side by side. Charlie could turn his head and smell Dillon's musk, and a hint of perfume. He must not have showered since work. He only would have had an hour to change and get over to his place. A rushed stym switch takes about half of that time, spent sitting in a chair while your body went through the remodeling. An uncomfortable process that's better implemented when a person is asleep during the ordeal. Charlie made special efforts to avoid a waking gender change, hating the pin pricks one can feel, and the slight nausea. Not everyone experiences this.

It was too late when Charlie finally sensed the tension in the air. Dillon cleared his throat, and let the words he rehearsed on the drive over spill forth, not nearly as eloquently as practiced. "I have been meaning to talk to you about something for a while now Charlie, but I'm not sure if you want to hear it." He turned his eyes away from Charlie as he spoke.

"You know you can talk to me. I think I know what you're going to say, and it's something I was going to have to face sometime anyway. I've been putting it off."

"Yes, I know. It's just that Andrew has been gone for so long now. What are you planning to do if they don't find him? Or if they do?"

"Whatever is or becomes of Andrew, we're through. Him, I mean. That much I think I've known for a while now. It's not

something I like, but there it is.” Charlie finished his wine.

“So what does that mean about your license?”

Charlie wasn’t sure how to answer that, opting to swirl his empty glass in his hands and lean back into the couch as he chose his words carefully. But nothing came out. Dillon had to try a new tactic. He leaned back beside Charlie and put his hand on the others thigh. “Then just answer me this instead. Do you like me?” he said.

“You shouldn’t have to ask that,” Charlie said. He turned to look Dillon in the eyes. “But I know what you’re getting at. Don’t be offended if I don’t answer you just yet. I was never even really sure I wanted Andrew’s baby. We never got to discuss it properly, truth told. Or maybe I don’t know. It’s all been so screwed up.” Had Charlie been a woman, he would have cried. Dillon looked like he might.

“Take as long as you need. As long as you know that I’m here for you, ok?” He leaned over and kissed Charlie on the forehead. Charlie didn’t let him get to retreat, reaching for him and bringing his lips to his own. This would not be the first time they’d shown such affection.

Neither was it the first time they slept together. Dillon was a confident lover, and very vocal. If he liked something a certain way, he made sure to voice it. Comforting, and confirming; the kind of bedmate that made you feel like a god. They usually took it slow, but when strength and raw passion was needed, Dillon knew just when to do it. But it wasn’t all Dillon’s doing. They worked well together, no matter what they wore to bed, and the finest moments for Charlie were watching him writhe under his control, or her control. It didn’t matter.

It had only been three weeks after Andrew left when Charlie first slept with Dillon. It was Charlie’s way of getting back at Andrew. Something he should have handled better, but not something he could take back now, and definitely not something he regretted in the end. Charlie did spend a lot of his time alone after their first coupling, basking in what he tried to label as regret and confusion. And it was Dillon who took the next step, calling him up and getting Charlie back into the world, and Charlie was grateful. Now Dillon was a regular bedmate.

They were nervous of each other for the longest time. Expecting Andrew to walk back in at any moment and see them

wrapped in each other's arms. Dillon was more afraid of Charlie than of Andrew, afraid of losing him. He took his chance when it presented itself, and the loss of his prize would be devastating. He'd always loved Charlie. But when they'd first met each other, Andrew was there already.

He lay asleep on the bed beside Charlie. His arms were draped around Charlie's stomach as he fell asleep, but Charlie would not follow, though he tried. She tried. Charlie had set his stym-comp over, right before turning off the lights, and had to suffer through the pricks and tingles of the process when his eyes refused to remain closed. It was over now, and still she was awake. There was no point in fighting it. Gently as she could, she removed Dillon's arms from around her, and slipped out of bed. She stood over him and observed his slumber. He slept like the dead. And the bed didn't look quite like the monster it once was with him inside of it. Dillon had to be up early in the morning, but Charlie didn't. She could get some work done after all. Night owls be damned.

She should have just stayed a woman for the day. She knew she was going to continue jacking, and she learned rather quickly that she did a better job of it as a woman. The man in her wasn't nearly as good at reading people, or emotions, and lacked a slight sense of patience that the work demanded. But the persistent problem remained, more than ever, of the female skin, and how it bothered her. To remain in it for stretched periods of time tore at her nerves. She loved the woman she was, but she loved the man as well. Maybe more. It was so difficult to tell which one was favored. Each had its purpose, its duty. Its own idea of what it was there for. And now the both of them felt like strangers, that neither of them was sure which the real Charlie was. Regardless, it was the woman at the moment that was going to go to work.

The computer warmed up, and the patch was placed on her forehead. Charlie went through the list in her head of the people at the party. Who was left? The boss, the coworkers, most of Andrew's close friends, and Charlie's. All accounted for. Strangers were left, or friends of friends, and some distant family members. None of them was more likely than the next. At the bottom of the list sat Dillon.

Dillon still asleep in the bed beside where Charlie sat tapping her fingers against the side of the desk. Things really did

work out well for him, truth be told. Charlie's trials and conflicts were his profit. Not something she thought about at great length. She wasn't sure why. It was that little kid she saw inside of him. Couldn't help but see. It was distracting her from the fact that Dillon was a fully formed adult with his own dreams and desires. Some of which he wasn't seeing fulfilled, until now. The thought that he could betray her trust in such a way sickened her. It wasn't possible, that was an unshakable fact. She repeated this to herself over, and over again, even as she was loading up his stym on the jacking mod. She knew him, better than she knew Andrew even. She knew what he was, and what he was capable of. And then, she was him.

He took his time getting to the party on that night, and sat in his car longer than necessary before leaving, checking himself in his mirror, and practicing a forced smile to wear first. Andrew greeted him at the door, and they shook hands. "Congratulations," Dillon said to him. "You're a lucky man." Nothing more was said as Andrew had to move on to the next couple that came in behind Dillon.

Sauntering his way over to the bar, Dillon poured himself a drink. The house was full of people, many of whom he didn't recognize, but he quickly located Charlie and worked his way over to her. Charlie remembered the small talk, but didn't know how forced it was from the other end. They had nothing particular to say to each other, besides the typical congratulations, and thanks. All the more lacking when Andrew returned to Charlie's side, wrapping his arm around her waist, which she returned. Dillon mumbled something and left them to their party. He wasted his time talking to anyone who cared to listen. Not being able to stand the constant flutter of praise and excitement concerning the couple, he took over each dialogue and spoke of his work in neuroscience. Most of the interest was forced from the people he spoke with. One particularly dim witted girl by the name of Shawn Worth kept fixing her dress and slipping her gaze away from his conversation. It didn't matter. She was just being used to distract himself until the party was over.

Charlie dove farther into Dillon's head, beyond simply what he was seeing in front of him, but what Dillon was feeling on the inside, where Andrew was ever present. A hideous monster of a man of colossal height, cast in darkness, and recessed eyes to

the point of almost non-existence. A fiend that held Charlie at his side in his ogre hands, gripping tight to assure his power over them both. And in his shadow was the beast's past, or at least the scenes that Dillon was a part of. What got to Charlie was how Dillon experienced the ways Andrew looked at Charlie in those moments. Pricing her, standing over her, pushing her and keeping her just that one extra step behind him. A controller of a man who is capable of love, but a love that he owns, must own. Charlie didn't realize the snares she had fallen into until Dillon showed them to her in his own mind.

There was an incident, when Dillon came upon an open moment to collect his thoughts, when his eyes moved back across the party over to Charlie. She looked back at him, into him, and saw something there. It was as if she knew that a part of him was lacking, missing. That it was there maybe the entire time she knew him. And then Charlie herself, outside of Dillon, remembered the look from her perception. She had felt the same. That it was Dillon that was looking into her, and finding something wanting, an empty space, one in the very near future to be filled with new life. A life that would be hers, and Andrews, and the babies. A life, Dillon thought, that would not be his to share.

The pain was immeasurable. Charlie felt it in full force, as she sat at her computer, his and hers simultaneously. It was more than enough as one person, but as two it was unbearable. Dillon took his sorrow with him when he left the party moments later. He didn't take the time to say goodbye. He drove himself home, kicked off his shoes at the door to his apartment, and went into his bathroom to stare at the mirror longer than necessary. The man looking back at him, and Charlie, was defeated. But he didn't cry. He wanted to, but couldn't. He crawled into bed soon after and hit the lights, the process slow and labored, but mercy found him, and sleep took him.

A quiet washed over Charlie as she let him sleep. She was unable to turn off the jack, to part from him now that she was this much closer to him than ever before. Long past, when she discovered the necessary memory files and programs to the jacking-mod on her computer, she promised herself that when she was finished with her investigation she would erase everything she gathered from the people she violated. Bury it all in the back of her mind where it wouldn't rear its ugly head. She'd done enough to them. They

deserved that. But she didn't want to give up Dillon.

And that was it. No thoughts of revenge, no plots, or scheming with or around Andrew over his escape, absolutely nothing. He had won. Andrew was never going to be found. Even in the slim chance that one of the other unlikely guests made a move, Charlie would never know. She was resigned to his fate, and hers. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep in the chair beside the computer, and asleep inside the Dillon from days long ago.

The phone rang. From his own bed, all those months ago, Dillon woke up, and Charlie woke up inside of him from her present. Dillon switched on the light, and focused himself as he reached for the phone. "Hello," he spoke in a hush. Charlie wasn't prepared to hear the sound of her own voice on the other line. She hadn't called him that night. Had she? She couldn't have had so much to drink that such an event withdrew itself completely from her mind. It takes more than that to make her forget, alcohol lacking the power necessary. She'd have passed out first. But it was her on the phone. Nobody else could know her better. In a daze she sat inside of Dillon's head as the rest of the conversation played out. Dillon hung up the phone when Charlie was finished with him, rushed out of bed to find his clothes, and left for his car, driving off into the dead of the morning.

She let the entirety of the scenes to follow play out before turning off the jacking mod, and turning back to the real, the now. Her fingers stopped rattling on the desk, she could hardly move. The stym-comp the only thing to break her trance when it asked her if she would like to reformat her files. They were in such a disaster since she loaded up everything needed for the jacking-mod all that time ago. Work files, memory files, basics, and a few others. She told the computer "yes," and it organized the mess. She removed the jacking-mod from its file, gathered all the information stolen from her guests, and banished them all to the depths of her subconscious. She kept Dillon.

Her work files were reloaded, unnecessarily. They could have waited until the end of her term, but she danced around her true task. Her old memories from younger days were next. The little things, meaningless in the present, but all stone reminders of what she was and how she turned into the person she is today. Frankie and herself kicking the dirt under the merry-go-round

outside the church, daring each other to go faster, and seeing who would be the first to forfeit and jump off, running home soon after to not be caught by their parents for dilly dallying. A great memory. Frankie was right to be upset that she let such a treasure go, and so many more like it. They were hers again, though they never really left, just simply waiting to be remembered. In the years to come, with the assumed evolution of stym technology, such a disregard could be completely unnecessary, storage capacity nearly unlimited. At least, that's how Dillon explained it to her earlier. If it was then, instead of now, and everything else was the same, the matter concerning Andrew would have been settled.

The last files to return to Charlie were closer to the short term. It didn't seem that it could be so easy to mistake or blend events in one's own head, and instead see them as facts. How is one to know? The fighting of that fateful night had a similar technique to all the others that the exact details were glossed over. Having removed the truth entirely, her subconscious was unable to clue her into an upset, filling in the blanks instead. The itching feeling was always there, but it wasn't enough. There was no way for her to know what happened. Andrew walked out of her life for good, that much was certain. But Charlie knew where he went.

She walked over to her bed and gently pushed on Dillon's shoulders, rousing him from his sleep. His eyes opened half lidded, and looked up at Charlie. "I need you to wake up," she said. He didn't question her, only a slight shiver rushed over him to rouse his body, and he sat up.

"Something the matter?" he asked.

"I need to go somewhere. I want you to come with me." It was just past three in the morning when they left Charlie's house and drove out of the city.

With nothing but open road in front of her, and the lights from the city too distant to notice, Charlie spoke to Dillon. "I switched over my stym-comp." Her voice was dry and plain.

"I noticed that," he said, looking over her form.

"You miss understand me. The last night with Andrew, before I went to sleep, I switched the stym. I thought he was asleep." It took Dillon a moment to process what that meant.

"Were you on the pills?" he asked.

"I was," she said. "Andrew was ready, and we made our

first attempt that night.”

“So then, why did you switch on the stym?”

That wasn’t the question she needed to answer, and it didn’t matter. But it was the catalyst for what was to come. Andrew turned in his sleep moments after her action, that night and saw the green light on his others comp, the wire’s connected into her arm. The cycle was beginning. He threw the sheets off the bed and demanded an answer. Charlie stalled, taking too long to weigh her responses. Andrew took hold of her stym connectors, and yanked them from her. Charlie’s stomach lurched, and the pins became razors.

Charlie was speaking to Dillon. “We fought, obviously. I felt things were going too fast, and he or course disagreed. That wasn’t the problem. It was one we both had to address one night or the next, but it was that night that he let something slip in his fit. I couldn’t believe him.” The recalled memories still carried a bitter taste in her mouth, and her words tasted like bile as she spoke them. She took a moment.

Her car parked in the middle of the dirt road, outside of Charlie and Dillon’s vehicular confines grew the tall grass in that familiar field, Charlie and Andrew’s field. She had taken Dillon here only once before, and never will again after this night. Its splendor was lost in the hour before the dawn. No wind touched the grass, and everything was still. Charlie got out of the car, and Dillon followed close behind, slower and unsure of their destination.

“What are we doing here,” he said, looking around for something to identify with, finding nothing.

“Andrew and I used to come here to escape from our world. He was a different person here, and it’s how I saw him. How I liked to think of him. I couldn’t see who he really was back home, in our real life. When I finally did, or maybe when I actually saw him in your eyes, it was too late.”

Uncomfortable, nervous, and a little scared, Dillon was out of place. The little child in him was cowering, but the adult stood strong despite it, for Charlie’s sake. “I don’t know what you’re talking about Charlie. I know you’re troubled, and I want to help, but I need to know what’s going on.”

Charlie shook her head and smiled. “No, that’s OK Dillon. I just needed to come out here to get it all straight in my

head.”

“What did you learn?”

That biting truth again, but it was starting to hurt less. “When I found him out, he didn’t deny it. Our boss got word that Andrew was the one to be approved for parenthood. Not me.”

“He was,” Dillon took a step back. “But, then how did it fall to you?”

“They had a meeting in private to discuss the matter. Andrew was more important for the company to have fall into the trappings of pregnancy. They both knew it, and I know that Andrew had no preference for the burden. I was promoted, and that gave me the extra nudge needed to be accepted for parenthood. They were able to pass the approval onto me.”

In the back of his mind, Dillon knew the entirety of this story, having heard it all once before, but the facts were buried. They both buried the events that followed the night after the party. Charlie had located Andrew’s hidden illegal jacking-mod system requirements the morning after. It was part of the plan. They both removed the truth about what happened to Andrew. But unlike Dillon, Charlie couldn’t let it pass so easily. It was better that Dillon didn’t know, and Charlie was going to have to accept the fact that she will bear the knowledge for the rest of her life.

Maybe she thought she could have lived in the ignorance, but there were too many other aspects involved that kept questioning her, eating away at her. The pregnancy. For the first time in Charlie’s life, she was challenged with living with a single gender, to be the woman, to be the mother. But was Charlie a mother, did she want to be? Those were the questions that stayed with Charlie, and lead her to find Andrew’s illegal jacking mod for the second time, and learn the answer to those questions via the flawed search for Andrew.

In Andrew’s last moments all those months ago, he was ready to storm out of the house like so many times before, the both of them blinded by rage towards one another. “You’re being unreasonable,” he had said to Charlie. “I know what you are. I’ve been inside your head. But would you ever even consider taking the time to get into mine? This is for the best. I have made this decision for the both of us and you will live with it.” He turned to leave.

Charlie reached for the closest object she could find. “You

don't know anything about me!" she screamed, still the woman, the stym having not taken over. Andrew's stym-comp crashed into the back of the head, and fell to the floor, Andrew beside it. That slamming noise she remembered hearing. But more was to come. She stood over Andrew, as a small trace of his blood started to fall to the carpet. The stym comp was still intact as she picked it up once more.

It wasn't something you think about, growing up this way. The man one day, the woman the next, some stints maintained longer than others as cultural tastes dictate, but identity never completely relied upon just a single gender. Not anymore. But we are man, or we are woman, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. For some, the inherent biological coding is stronger than other, despite the physical adaptations. It's not something anyone can decide for you, it's just who you are. And you can choose to ignore it if you must. But the choice is yours.

Words could not describe what was racing through Charlie's mind in the seconds prior. She remembered it mostly as a piercing white noise, but a decision was made out of the chaos. The only decision. It wasn't just a conflict against Andrew, but that of the conflict between the Charlie's. Andrew merely became the contract she made with herself, signed in blood. Hitting him over, and over again in the back of the skull until nothing remained of the stym-comp. Dillon was called on the phone not long after.

The two of them now stood on a mound in the middle of the field, in the exact same spot they stood once before. "Do you love me?" she said to Dillon, the man and the woman staring out into the night.

"You don't have to ask that," he said.

She turned to face him directly. "I made my decision. I want to have a child."

"I know you do, Charlie." He let out a sigh. "I'm sorry it wasn't with Andrew." He went to put his arms around her, but she held him back.

"It's not just about Andrew. I'm letting my contract expire in the next month and a half. Afterwards I'm going to see Andrew off as legally dead. I want you to be with me for this. After that I think we should talk about marriage, but not now."

"I.I'm with you. But the baby, I thought you wanted one?"

"I do Dillon, I really do. I want to be with you when we

have the child. But I have to make one thing clear, right now. When we have it, it will not be as we stand, here, in this place.” The wind started to pick up, but very gently. Dillon listened to her and looked inside himself and at her. He knew what she had meant by that, but the true outlook regarding that was only just sinking in.

“You have a clean record, and with the new stym technology coming around, you’ll be getting more commissions than ever before. If we apply for parenthood, I see no reason why they would refuse you. It might take a little longer than it did for me, but we can wait. This is the only way it is going to be Dillon, or it’ll be nothing at all.” She stared at him with open, unblinking eyes, attempting her best to read his thoughts as he considered the proposal. A little bit of that beast she now saw Andrew as was taking a shade on herself. It has to be that way, but Dillon won’t know the true monster inside of her. He had forgotten what they had done on this hill. She will make sure he never remembers, but deep in the back of his mind, he’ll have something of an inclination of the truth. Will he still be able to accept her despite that? He will make his choice here and now.

Dillon looked to the ground. Maybe beneath them were the remains of a dead Indian from days where personal conflicts such as the one he was now facing were unimaginable. Maybe nothing was there. So many thoughts were fighting with each other in his mind, but a victor was found, and very slowly Dillon nodded his head to the one he loved.

“I’ll do it,” was all he could say, just above a whisper. She took the only step needed to wrap her arms around him, and he let her hold him. They stayed in each other’s arms in the middle of Charlie and Andrew’s field as a light hue of violet rose in the distance, creeping its way towards that shade of orange only the morning can express in its perfection. The dawn was upon them. They left the field without uttering anything further to one another. They had time to get comfortable with the decisions they had made that night. In a few months, Andrew would be officially dead according to the state. At her job, Charlie would make damn sure she really did deserve the position questionably placed on her by a boss that didn’t want to lose one of his greater assets, but lost none the less. She would be ruthless in her position as she had always been, and her next promotion would come without question.

Dillon would apply for parenthood, and sometime later they would be approved. Of course Charlie would be patient with Dillon if he needed the time to get comfortable with his position in the relationship, but deep down Charlie knew that Dillon would make a great mother, better than Charlie would have made. This was the way things were going to be, needed to be. But that was all still a long time from now. For the moment, they had to go home, and Dillon needed to go to work, and Charlie needed sleep. They left the field behind them forever, and Andrew would evermore remain hiding in the tall grass, buried beneath the earth in a place that kept its secrets, and remembered its dead.

PUSH

Chloe Zwiacher

Corey and I are sitting on the couch at Clint's house. Corey has one foot on the floor and one up on the couch. I have my arms wrapped around his bent leg, my chin on his knee, and no memory of my arms snaking around his leg, no recollection of how I got into this position; I'm only aware he's been asked by Clint to go play darts in the garage.

"I can't, I've got a Chloe on my leg." He's smiling at me, that James Franco smile paired with drunken eyes, glass-blue and inviting. My face is warm, but not red. I checked in the mirror earlier. I smile back. I've had three beers and a mixed drink on an empty stomach, and I don't drink. I'm the only girl here, and the boys are enjoying watching me become ever more disoriented and giggly. Garrett is a fat, married native. Clint is newly separated from a girl named Constance. Corey just went through a bad breakup this spring, and can't decide whether or not to surrender to my charms. I am always lonely. We need this.

I'm at Clint's house on Corey's invitation. I had gone with some girlfriends to a CD-release concert for a local band, but it was crowded, and I lost interest. It was about 9:30pm, but being summer in Alaska, there was still plenty of daylight left to burn- it wouldn't get dark until midnight, when the sun would slink behind the tree-line for a few short hours before rising again. So I called Corey. He was having a beer with some friends, and invited me to join. I headed over.

Last week, Corey and I had had the DTR conversation- "defining the relationship." This was our second go at it. Corey and I had started hanging out in the first few weeks of summer. We met through mutual friends, a group of college-aged Christian kids he hung out with in high school. He'd strayed from the group for several years when he moved down to Anchorage with his girlfriend, but after a messy breakup and moving back in with his parents, he reluctantly reconnected with his roots. We met at Thursday-night soccer, a weekly ritual for a bunch of us twenty-something's in the valley.

I had seen Corey before. He was a musician, and looked the part, with shaggy brown hair, some facial scruff, and

cloud-blue eyes that looked like he was somewhere else. He had played a couple shows at Cafe Neo where I had worked the year before. Corey's music was murky and eloquent, his fingers were articulate on guitar strings, and he had good taste in covers. I had immediately been attracted, but we'd never had a real conversation. I'd seen him with his girlfriend once, and noticed the way she consumed his space, how he oriented himself towards her. Then this summer, there he was at soccer, single and flirty. He was a good athlete, but took breaks often. I couldn't figure out why.

Our relationship progressed quickly, especially when he learned I was leaving for rowing camp in mid-June. The night before my departure, a group of us went to "V-Ho," the Valley Hotel, a local hotel/24-hr diner. After noshing on chili cheese fries and burgers that shone with grease, people began to leave, one by one. And then it was just Corey and me, talking until after the sun reached its nightly hiding place. He asked about the University of Iowa, where I was on the crew team and studying English. He said he might check out some schools near me; he wanted to go back to school to become a music teacher. It soon became a semi-confessional conversation; the things he was telling me most everyone knew, but he said them in a way that made me believe he didn't share these details directly with many people. Last year, Corey had lost his job fixing copiers. Then, he had had a heart attack, due to some unidentified heart defect; he got sick, and fell into an unemployed stupor. Then, this spring, his girlfriend left him.

"I lost my girl, my job, and my health, all in one year."

I was hesitant to fall for a fixer-upper, but he was pretty, he made me laugh, and he was paying attention to me. Besides, he was getting his life back on track. He had recovered his health, and was going back to school this fall. There wasn't much for my raging Messiah complex to feed off of. Best of all, he had initiated this relationship. I didn't have to do any of the work. So why not?

After I left for rowing camp in Madison, we talked on the phone every day for at least an hour. It was easy. Somehow it turned into a sort of interview process. Starting simple, I asked his favorite color.

"Usually it's green, but sometimes, I'll see something, like a sunset, and I'll be like, that's my favorite color."

Then we got to bigger questions: if you were a tree, what

kind of tree would you be? What's the meaning of life? About two and a half weeks into it, we had our first DTR conversation. It was a bright, humid day, and I was wandering around State Street alone, window-shopping.

"I was talking to Megan yesterday, and she was like, 'So I hear you and Chloe are talking on the phone all the time. What's up with that?' And I was like, I don't know."

"What is up with that? Why do you like talking to me so much?"

"I don't know. I mean, I'm not gonna lie, I kinda like you."

"I kinda like you too, I guess."

"But I'm not really in a place where I'm ready for anything."

I paused. "Ok."

The conversation ended shortly thereafter. I was strangely ok with things. I was disappointed, but I understood. He had gone through a bad breakup. I had stepped into his life a little early. It was fine, because he was being honest with me. I didn't need any more. But he wasn't so sure.

He called me back an hour later and insisted on explaining how I'm everything he looks for in a girl- genuine, grounded, driven. I savored those words. It had been a long time since I had been anything to anyone, and now a beautiful boy was telling me I was everything he wanted- the timing was just wrong. But it was fine. This would give us a chance to get to know each other as friends. Things could change.

After I got home, things did change. He saw how I oriented myself towards him, how I looked at him, and it was too much. I felt clunky in his presence- he was only slightly taller than me, and, being an athlete, I had a bit more muscle than a girl should. I could feel his hesitation, and I began to lose the confidence, always so effortless on the phone, that had attracted him in the first place. Things came to a head when he was dropping me off one night after a movie. I lingered in the driveway a little too long, waiting for a kiss that would never come.

I received a text later that night. "I can't be who you want me to. Currently I have nothing to offer. I know what you want and I'm sorry I just can't." I didn't respond. I hate that kind of emo bullshit.

The next day we were driving in his car, the windows

down, sunglasses on, he in aviators, I in my fabulous brown “fashion shades” from Target.

“What is it you think?” I asked.

“A kiss.” This caught me off guard. I hate that word, “kiss.” It makes me cringe, the hard k, the way the s’s scratch my eardrums. It’s too harsh a word for something so soft. There’s no way you can say it that doesn’t seem loud.

“I don’t know if it’s cowardice or what, but I’ve just finally found some solid ground to stand on, and I don’t want to lose that.”

“I don’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for. I just want to be there for you. And if it means just as a friend, then that’s what we’ll do.”

Over the next few days, I wasn’t as generous with him. I didn’t call as much. I wouldn’t hug him anymore. He seemed confused, upset even. I was holding back, trying to act like a friend, but his behavior didn’t change. Then I got invited to Clint’s house.

When I arrived, the boys were playing Frisbee on the lawn. Corey stopped and leaned up against his car, sipping a Henry Weinhard with a lemon in it, already buzzed. I went and stood next to him, started sipping a honey beer that Clint brought out for me.

“I feel like we never talk anymore.”

“Cuz I’m hurt.”

“Why?”

“Cuz I like you.”

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

In a stupor, the boys and I went out to the garage to play darts. My view of the world slowly shifts sideways, then jumps back upright, over and over. My balance is just as bad as my vision. Drunk as I am, I’m still pretty sure playing darts in this condition is a bad idea, but I’m reassured once I get into the garage that no one’s going to get hurt, even by my stray darts. The dartboard is tacked up on an indestructible wall, and the things around it are of little consequence. I won’t break anything important.

As we play, the boys give me pointers; teach me how to line myself up. When it’s not my turn, I sit on a stool they’ve brought out for me, and lean up against Corey. About halfway through, they put a hat on me, Indiana Jones-style with a feather in the band. Corey

says he likes it; so I keep it on, play with it, use the prop to my advantage.

My third turn comes up. I'm still working on the whole aiming thing. Corey comes up behind me, presses his body into me to show me how it's done. "Like this?" I giggle. I push back into him. I tilt my head back to see out from under the hat. When I finally throw after countless feigned adjustments, it's a good shot. Bullseye. Almost.

After the game, it's clear no one is driving home. Garrett takes the couch. Clint shows Corey and me to a guest bedroom. It's a twin bed. Corey begins to spread blankets out on the floor next to it, and takes a pillow for himself.

"You don't have to sleep on the floor."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't." Corey has never touched me so much as he has tonight, and I don't want to lose that now. It's a small bed, but there's room enough for him to lie next to me, to keep his arm around my waist as we sleep, holding me against him for the little dark the night has left to offer.

"You're making this harder for me. Why do you make things harder for me?"

I don't press the issue. I just watch as he finishes arranging his blankets next to me. When he finally lies down, I do too. I curl up on my side, facing him, though I can't really see him over the edge of the bed.

I'm ready to sleep it all off, to shed the night like a snakeskin. I blink my eyes, try to shake it off. I scoot my body closer to the edge and look over. There's Corey, on the floor. He's flat on his back, his head turned away from me. He is already asleep.

GOOD MEMORIES HERE

Rochelle Liu

Sips of bitter tea, smooth, lukewarm, and unfulfilling. But good, nonetheless.

Come sit with me on the porch swing. We'll leaf through yellow, coffee-stained letters, stiff and delicate and heavy with memory. It makes life feel no different from what it was five, fifteen, fifty years ago.

The crinkle of pages keeps the eyes open, but the mind wanders. It wanders past the darkened hallways of old houses, past the busy streets of the highways, up into the sky of clouds, clouds, and more clouds. A rusty emergency key rests on the arch of the Victorian doorway to children running about, but I can't remember what it is there for.

A familiar silver-white car drives up to the weed-spotted driveway, but I cannot place it. I've seen it before. I feel as though I should know it. A family steps out of the car, a lovely woman, a man, and the wind feels nice today. It's just that time of year to sit outside and enjoy the weather with some tea.

"Mom, what are you doing outside? You'll catch a cold-is Mindy out here with you?"

I look up into a pair of brown eyes. The girl is wearing a lovely pair of purple glasses that frame her sharp chin and modest cheekbones. Those glasses remind me of a dear friend. Oh dear, I believe her name is Daisy. I can't remember her last name for the life of me.

"Hello, Daisy, dear."

"Mom, it's not Daisy; it's Jan. Your daughter."

"Oh, don't kid around, Dais. You know Jan Brett is busy writing those kiddy books!"

"Sophie, what do you say to your grandmother?" A strapping young man has his arm around my Daisy. He's tall, with a good deal of firm meat on his bones, but a bit flabby around the belly. You know what they say about men like that-they like their couches frumpy, and their sandwiches meaty. I've seen men like this with her before. I can never tell if it is because she finds these sorts of men attractive, or if it is because they can sense her vulnerability. These men are like rotten apples, soft on the outside, and wormy on the inside. Or like a dog infected with rabies.

No one is good enough for my Daisy.

"Hiya." The little girl with bright blue ribbons in her hair, holding a grey, horribly patched cotton-ball with a matching ribbon around its neck peeks out from behind the man's boot cut jeans.

"You remember her, don't you, Mom?" Daisy musters a smile.

"Oh, what a frowny face you have on. Live life to the fullest, dear. Carpe diem and all that. There's no point being Daisy-Downer!"

"Sophie, why don't you go and play in the yard with Daddy? Mommy is going to talk to Grandma for a while." Daisy directs them off the porch like an usher. How I miss those theatre days. I was quite the actress. I wasn't famous, but I knew famous people. If you promise to keep a secret, I'll tell you Plummer's phone number. Blast it, what was his first name? James? Crum? No matter. He was a marvelous kisser though. He's got a right set of smackers that can send a girl wheeling into-

"Mom, where's Mindy?"

I do enjoy a cup of minty tea occasionally. I grew mint leaves when I was a little girl, thinking that they would bloom rich purple flowers. My darned Uncle Tom told me that they would bloom flowers. And not any old flowers. Secret flowers. Minty, secret, magical flowers of such royal purple that even the King of England would be jealous.

"Has Mindy been around?" Daisy's voice seems louder.

"My dear, there is nothing wrong with my hearing. You needn't shout. Did you lose a dog?"

"What?"

Poor Daisy. Looks like she's going deaf. Listening to that stone-boulder music of hers at top volume. And look what it's done to her hearing. Now, don't call me a worrywart-there are some things you should always be on the lookout for. Health, for one, and go on, guess the second.

"You're talking about looking for someone. Did you lose a dog?"

"Jesus Christ."

Christopher! Christopher Plummer was his name. Yes, a mighty fine gentleman, and a mighty fine kisser. Not a bad romancer, serenading women by moonlight. Such a shame we never became lovers. I regret that now. Damn that stubborn dedication to

my husband. But hush, he's in a better place now, and it'll be better for him not to know of these dirty thoughts I've had.

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it. Mom, I know that we haven't been around often enough to take care of you, and I'm real sorry about not visiting often. And-Jesus, Sophie! Don't scare Mommy like that."

Jesus. I remember a time when I loved Jesus. I was such a young girl. Somewhere along the way, I stopped believing. Maybe it was because he didn't listen to my prayers. Maybe it was because I was unfulfilled by him. I know that my frightfully Christian mother - God bless her soul - is cursing me right now, at that spot in Heaven, right there. See it? She's sitting on the cloud shaped like a large frown. Yes, that's it. Right there. Oh, ignore her. She does those hand gestures all of the time. It doesn't hurt to wave. She appreciates it.

"What is it, Mom? What do you need?"

"Sweetie, don't you think that we should just bring her home with us?"

"Please, Paul, I don't want to force her."

"She doesn't even remember us."

A man is important in any woman's life. The wrong man means hell for the lady. I don't want my Daisy to have to deal with a man who adds wrinkles to her cute face. What woman needs a man who is only an overgrown, potty-trained baby?

"These men don't know a good thing until someone forces a diseased rat into his mouth and sews them shut!"

"What?" Daisy pulls away to put a hand on her hips.

Why, those hips are like my mother's when she was angry with me. Isn't that the silliest thought? Let me tell you something about my mother: she's a hard woman. A hard, hard woman, but I can't blame her. One's got to be hard to survive in this world. She told me when I was a girl that women who cry are worthless. Because tears never helped anybody.

"Listen to me," he has his hands on her face. Like the way my husband used to when he wanted me to listen to reason. "She can't help it, and we can't help it. It's better this way. She probably won't even know the difference."

"But I need her to say yes. Just one yes. That's all. You understand, don't you?"

"Jan, please. Look at her. She doesn't recognize us. She

doesn't even recognize her own house."

"I'm not going to force her to do anything she doesn't want to."

Daisy's always fighting with her men. It's a wonder she never broke. Never came to me the way I went to her when my husband.well, the past is the past. The way she spit words of anger have sunk into regret and hurt. It's dirty the way it works. But she's always fighting. She never stopped.

"You want her to make a decision when she's incapable of making one?"

My husband was incapable of walking. He was the clumsy one of the both of us. He's been to the hospital seventeen times; at least four times due to his two left-feet, twice from falling off of a ladder, five from bicycle-related incidents, another five from being in the kitchen, and once from the dog we adopted. But every time we ended up at the hospital-the nurses were so nice-I tied a blue ribbon around the chains of the little toddler swing we hung from the old oak tree in our backyard. They are no longer blue, but they are still there. I suppose I should take them down, just as I should sweep up the leaves gathered in the corners of the yard, or pick up the pieces of the sparkling limestone lying broken and dreary at the foot of the back shed.

My husband's a good man, let me tell you, but he's not the gentle fuzzy-feeling-in-your-stomach type person, and I still remain faithful. Always faithful. Sure, there are temptations-after all, I haven't met all the men in the world, and how is it fair to say that my husband is the handsomest?-but they never come to fruition. I cut him fruit every night before bed. He said it settled his nerves and helped him go to sleep. God bless him, but death means nothing to two people who lived the course of their lives respectively and with devotion. It is a road, my friend. An inevitable new adventure that awaits us. I can't be sure that this adventure is safe or pleasurable. It's like one of his weekly business trips-he says that you never know if you'll come out of the meeting in success or failure, but it's a trip that has to be made. And it's not like you're gone forever.

"Let's try something else: Mom, let's talk."

Talking is a waste of time. It's thinking that gets you places. That's what my mother used to say. One of the rare things that mothers say that sticks with you until you've got kids of your own.

She says it's thinking and acting upon those thoughts. All you do is talk, talk, talk. The talking ends up in whining, and the whining ends up in hurt feelings and tears. When has talking gotten anyone anywhere? Now, now, listen here and listen good, one has to think before one speaks; it's true. But talking's become an instinct. You say what you think people want to hear. I do it myself. You hear someone say something and your mouth runs on something different. The mouth is becoming quicker than the brain. It's not surprising, and there's no use in feeling shame about it either. You just discipline yourself. Take control of your body. And fortune comes to you in one of those cheap fortune cookies that come with the Mooshu pork. With fried rice.

"We can't afford to keep Mindy and Taylor around to take care of you."

That Mindy's a funny girl. Always got a bright smile on her face like she woke up in love with the world. Ah, like my Daisy used to do. Daisy Sunshine, her father called her when we were little. My father never called me anything like that, working like it was the only thing important. My husband was the same, too. Working late. Working weekends. Working holidays. They worked hard to provide for their families, and did a mighty fine job at it, too. But you would think that with all the extra time and effort they sacrificed we'd be far more well-off than we are now.

Her cousin, Taylor, is a dark little thing. Eyes like a raccoon, fingers like Mother Nature's, long, languid, delicate, and as soft as damp soil. But he doesn't like it when I tell him that. I don't see anything wrong with complimenting a boy on graceful fingers-after all, aren't they the fingers of a gentleman? Why, the little boy scowled as if I had killed his pet puppy and strung it up in a tree for the ravens to peck at! After that, he stopped helping me garden, and the peonies and wildflowers wilted under the sun.

"The wildflowers need some watering tonight."

"Are you even listening? Mom, listen to me. Listen, okay? We're family. You need to be with your family!"

I heard the Chinks had a family system that involved immediate and extended family living on the same plot of land. There must have been five, six, seven generations living together! It must be nice and all, being near family, seeing all these damn generations running around like wild Indians, but how's an old woman going to get her peace and quiet? My husband-expired,

poor soul-told me once that he wanted to live to see his great-grandchildren, and that meant we had to get down to business. We did. Like jackrabbits. But neither of us expected life to get in the way of living. You never really know until it hits you, and when it hits you, you're left with a bruise on your face, and a slice out of your ego.

Speaking of egos, Jean-Pierre had the most inflated ego of any human being I've ever met. Especially for a landscaper. It's charming, you understand, when he's a dash of cockiness, a pinch of good looks, and a generous helping of nice buns, but you can't expect a man like that to understand what it means to be a good man. Most he can be is a great lover, but great lovers satisfy only so much before you start looking for the next majestic thing. But if all you need is a talented body in bed, you just let me know, and I'll see what I can do for you.

"Mom, you remember this, don't you?"

What a pretty, little trinket. See how the sun hits those charms just right? Why, will you look at that-they're little diamonds.

"This is the hairpin you gave me for my sixteenth birthday. Remember? Grandma gave this to you when you were sixteen. You wouldn't let me touch it when I was little. It was our little secret. You said that it was because I had grown up."

Secrets. This world is full of secrets. Good secrets, bad secrets, secrets of desire, secrets of sin, even secrets of sinful desire. You know this. I know this. What's the point in digging up these secrets? Some things are better left in the box in the attic. A box in the attic. A phone number in the pocket of his business suit. It's when secrets are no longer secrets that things fall apart, disintegrate, and become false. Promises underlined with secrets can become weapons, and one little trigger vaporizes the past, present, and future. It is better not to know these secrets.

"Mom?"

"What was that, Dais? I must have been off in my own little world again."

"Mom, please. Just say you'll stay with us?"

"I'm fine here, Dais. Good memories here."

There's a path that leads from the front of the house to the back, where Jean-Pierre laid the flat, sparkly stones, one by one, as

if with one misplacement the whole world would come crashing down. It's not the end of the world if it's an inch off, Jeanie, I'd tell him, but he would shake his head and place the stone down as if it was a treasure, one of those treasures you'd find along with the discovery of Atlantis. It's not the end of the world, I'd tell him again. But it was. And it was the end of his world when that last stone cracked in two when my husband threw it against the dilapidated shed.

"Mom."

What happened to those days when children addressed their parents with 'mommy' or 'ma'? I called my mother "mummers" until she told me to "stop it already, you little sissy" on her deathbed. We laughed, and then she was gone. Just like that. The Angel of Death is always around, you understand, but there's nothing to fear. She is a friend. He is a friend. Angels are friends, and Death, too, is a friend. It's hard to believe. And you think you understand, that Death is an enemy, that Death must be feared and avoided, but then all of a sudden, Death becomes an ally. Once you get to sit here, in this seat, on this porch, this porch that holds memories of the past years of your life, it's beautiful, like a miracle. And you are no longer afraid.

My mother used to abuse her award-winning pumpkin pies with Miracle Whip, at least, she called it Miracle Whip. It was simple whipped cream, as far as I knew. Though now, I think Miracle Whip is mayonnaise. But my mummer's Miracle Whip made pie into magic. She never let me have a piece until I told her that I had been a good girl at school, that I knew my multiplication tables. I told her that I knew every bit of it, and she never asked me to prove it. The pie never tasted good after that. I never did learn to make that pie. I've got the recipe, gathering dust at the bottom of my recipe drawer, but haven't got around to it.

"You would stay for a piece, wouldn't you?"

"A piece of what?"

"Why, a piece of pie. You like pie, don't you, Dais?"

She looks at me, like when we first met at church when we were younger. I saw her bouncy brown curls from the pew across from mine, and we smiled at each other. She called me JJ, the first nickname I ever had, and she my only dearest friend.

"Yes," Daisy smiles. "I like pie."

"Oh, good. You liked Mummers' pumpkin pie with that

Miracle Whip, don't you?"

"JJ, can I entrust you with a secret?"

"What is it, Dais? Of course you can."

There we go again with secrets. But let me tell you one of my own, my friend: I love hearing her secrets. Hers and mine and yours. Secrets that are only between us. Secrets that float on the wind, that rattle the wind-chimes, that creates hurricanes in the South Pacific, and settle deep in your stomach in the middle of the night, weighing you down as you dream.

"Jan," The man is back, but his eyes are gentle now. They are different from Daisy's regular lovers' eyes.

"Paul, please, I really think-"

"Look, we don't have time for this. She's not going to give you the answer you want. If she comes, we'll take care of her. We can even hire a nurse once or twice a week. It'll be cheaper than having Mindy here all of the time and still paying the mortgage on this old house. The best way would be to just have her move home with us."

Home is where the heart is. There's a plaque my mother bought at a yard sale, years back, with this little quote, decorated all around with the prettiest little bluebell flowers, and she hung it on our door, thinking that it would convince all of us that this was our home. This house, painted a faded lilac color, with its porch swing creaking from the roof, with the constant squabbling between children and adults, was our home. Our home sweet home. The place where our hearts are.

But our hearts were never here. Never was here. Never will be here. But can't a woman be sentimental?

"Paul, I need to hear her say yes."

"We don't have time for this. Sophie's got her ballet class in half an hour. You have fifteen minutes."

The little girl stands in front of the row of tulips that line the porch, the only flowers that look alive, and she watches, fascinated by some insect. She stands, and then is looking at me, eyes wide, like Daisy's, holding mine. Now don't you laugh, but connections happen at the right moments, with the right people, and you feel it in your gut. Right here, between your stomach and the intestines. Like when a mother first meets her baby.

"Fifteen minutes is not enough."

"Sweetie, I understand what you want from her, but-"

"No, you don't understand! I can't be sure that my mother will be happy living with us if she doesn't say yes!"

Conversations are nice. When two people speak and hear each other. They learn to listen, and they learn to talk. They tell each other of their expectations, of their needs and wants, of their desires and their flaws and worries. But what happens when one side isn't being heard? Women need to speak. Life isn't all that simple, I understand, but that doesn't make this any less important. Little girls growing into big girls into women into old crones-it's our voices that need to rise, rise, higher than the seagulls, higher than our secrets, that surpass clouds and soar past the sun. Our voices can reach the stars. But we need to speak.

"Fifteen minutes, Jan. That's it. That's all we can afford."

Ah, look at the little one, dear friend, she's picking tulips. Tulips. I never liked the name 'tulips.' Two lips. A pair of lips that touch to signify a start of a new life as man and wife. A sign of some sacrifice the first time around to symbolize giving a special part of yourself to a person. Two lips yelling obscenities at each other when the other touched his lips with someone else's. Lips spitting out words of hate and scaring the children, riddling their minds with fears and insecurities. Our poor children. Poor, poor children.

I think of little Taylor-Tyler?- his pudgy hands digging deep into the ground, caressing worms and beetles and ladybugs. His beautiful little fingers pushing deep and making the flowers grow. The most angelic thing you'll ever see, when a scowl turns and becomes a smile. It's what every human being wants in the world, to see simple pleasures light up the faces you love. Daisy's husband looks angry, poor boy, but, look! Look! The little girl is holding up those bent tulips, and there it is. Right there. A miracle. Magic. A smile.

I can remember pattering feet of children. Little bursts of energy that drain your own. Like it was my own. My own children.

"I need more than fifteen minutes!"

The little girl turns toward the tulips and picks some more, and the sky is lightening up. The clouds are moving away. You see that? And do you see her? The way she holds the tulips, little muddy hands grasping those thick green stems, and I am entranced. Like the day I came home with my first baby. My only baby.

Daisy's face is in front of mine, and I feel her hands on my cheeks.

“Why, what’s the matter, Dais? Why are you crying?”

I take her hands. Can you feel them? They are so cold. But the sun is warming them up. Warming us up. Can you feel it?

“Mom?”

That’s my Jan, eyes always full of tears, but she’s all grown up now. When did that happen? Life happens so quickly. I’m sure you hear that from other people all of the time. Life passes you with the instance of a shooting star, and all of a sudden, you’re old, graying, and your children are no longer children. It’s enough to break a heart.

“For Grammy,” says the little one. Her name is Sophie. The light brown hair that shimmers of copper in the sun brushes against my arm as she places the tulips in my lap. They smell of tulips, grape juice, and a tang of gummy bears.

“Mom, come home with us.”

The clouds pass over, shrouding the houses and the streets and the grass and the flowers in shadow.

“Dais, I’m fine here. Good memories here.”

VILLANELLES

FROM THE WRITING CENTER

This semester, the Writing Center's poetry group discussed writing poems in traditional poetic forms. Besides serving as good practice for elements of poetry such as meter and rhyme, the challenge of coming up with lines that fit within the strictures of the form can push the writer to come up with ideas, images, words, or phrases he or she may not have thought of otherwise.

At one meeting, group leader Peter Small gave members the first three stanzas of a villanelle. Then, it was up to each poet to write his or her own version of the last three stanzas. Below are the first three stanzas the whole group worked from:

It's in for a penny, then in for a pound
There's no going back, no slipping away
Once you've committed to fate's spinning round

You awake in the morning to the tolling sound
of a clock's steady pulse beat come by just to say
It's in for a penny, then in for a pound

Don't wander off lightly, stick close to your ground
lest you lose your place by the end of the day
Once you've committed to fate's spinning round.

What follows are three poets' interpretations of this exercise.

FATE'S SPINNING ROUND

Peter Small

It's in for a penny, then in for a pound
There's no going back, no slipping away
Once you've committed to fate's spinning round

You awake in the morning to the tolling sound
of a clock's steady pulse beat come by just to say
It's in for a penny, then in for a pound

Don't wander off lightly, stick close to your ground
lest you lose your place by the end of the day
Once you've committed to fate's spinning round.

Nighttime approaches the edge of the town
to where lovers, impassioned, might wander astray
All in for a penny, then in for a pound.

Add your bets, boys, to the high money mound
don't take back the cash you've laid down today
Once you've committed to fate's spinning round.

It's not just any word, another verb or a noun
when destiny's the name of the game that you play.
It's in for a penny, then in for a pound
Once you've committed to fate's spinning round.

FATE'S SPINNING ROUND

Laura Jackson

It's in for a penny, then in for a pound
There's no going back, no slipping away
Once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round

You awake in the morning to the tolling sound
Of a clock's steady pulse beat come by just to say
It's in for a penny, then in for a pound

Don't wander off lightly, stick close to your ground
Lest you lose your place by the end of the day
Once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round

You cannot escape from the teeth of the hound
When he nips at your heels and gives the warning bay
It's in for a penny, then in for a pound

Beloved toys, lovers, friends, careers will compound
On the fading of the last Earthly ray
Once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round

Your words and deeds will always resound;
Once you choose a path, you cannot change the way
It's in for a penny, then in for a pound
Once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round

FATE'S SPINNING ROUND

Brett Brinkenmeyer

It's in for a penny, then in for a pound
there's no going back, no slipping away
once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round.

You awake in the morning to the tolling sound
of a clock's steady pulse beat come by just to say
it's in for a penny, then in for a pound.

Don't wander off lightly, stick close to your ground
lest you lose your place by the end of the day
once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round.

Don't set aside all the good luck you've found
despite your hesitation, you're in all the way;
it's in for a penny, then in for a pound.

It can be overwhelming, don't let that get you down.
Even standing still can be a form of play,
once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round.

Some days will pass where you feel like you've drowned.
That feeling will pass (did you 'wake wet today?)
It's in for a penny, in for a pound,
once you've committed to fate's spinning 'round.