Miscellany
XXXIV 2014

The Literary and Art Journal of the College of Charleston
Miscellany is the student-run literary and art journal of the College of Charleston, founded by poet Paul Allen and his student John Aiello in 1980. Miscellany is dedicated to showcasing the creative art and writing of College of Charleston’s undergraduates. Miscellany’s staff of students invites all undergraduates to submit their work for consideration each year. Aiming to create a platform on which students may share their talents, Miscellany strives to be a publication of tolerance and integrity.

All submissions are read and judged anonymously. The ideas and opinions expressed therein do not necessarily reflect those of Miscellany, or the College of Charleston.

Miscellany is published annually in the Spring Semester and uses one time printing rights, after which all rights revert back to the author. Miscellany XXXIII, printed by Creasey Printing, is set in Minion Pro Text.

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Aubrey Moore

I Don’t Know How I got Here

What Not to Write a Poem About

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Oh, California

Out West

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Exciting Club news: Jessica is engaged! And more news: Jessica is out of the Club! If you joined the People United for a Greater Erica, know that, first of all, Erica... is pretty great; secondly: STAY AWAY FROM THE BOYS THAT ERICA MAY LIKE! We love that you make progress in your lives. We encourage it. Terry: good job on that A. Erica got an A+, but an A is very good. Danielle: congratulations on your painting being accepted to the Halsey. Erica makes experimental mixtapes. She has broken free of the confines of conventional art; Erica colors outside the lines, in tones that only she can see. Lindsey: I’m better than you.

The last meeting was a huge success! We’ll be renting out the Radisson banquet hall again. Stay tuned for updates. Suggestions for the next time: a chocolate statue in the shape of Erica? A praise-off? Some have suggested that the last meeting was “too patriotic.” Was the mural of Erica as a D-day soldier holding up the World Trade Center towers appropriate? Is Mint Chocolate Chip ice cream delicious? Erica says: YES! Erica news: Call it a crush, or call it true love? Erica has met a mysterious stranger on her bus trip last weekend. Tall, dark, with a classic grunge look and smell that would make Kurt Cobain jealous. The older man held Erica’s seat for her as she stood up to criticize the bus’s driver. He can grab more than that, says Erica about the stranger. And she said so directly to the man’s face on the bus ride. Coyly and playfully, he wouldn’t look in Erica’s direction again except to cough. Were there secret messages encoded in those coughs? Yes. The man said: “I love you.”
I want a woman with big hips,
a tiny waist,
Barbie Doll lips,
and a made-up face.
Give me watermelon tits
and emotional sympathy,
the looks of a super-model,
and the skills of a Mommy.

Give me in-control sexy,
give me submissive secretary,
give me every fantasy
that pornography has implanted in the male subconscious.
Give me wild sex, but in public, someone elegant.
Give me: Baby, this is my hot lesbian friend,
do you wanna experiment?

Well, fuck what I want.
You wanna know the equation for perfection?
Add up your weight, multiply your body fat index,
and divide it all by the sum of “who the fuck cares?”
Fuck what I want,
because beauty begins with a preference, but can become a person.
Fuck what I want,
because maybe you’re what I wanted all along,
and no, I don’t believe in soul mates,
but I believe two kind-of-straight people
can still fall in love — hard.
Do not live up to my expectations, 
fuck my expectations, 
explode the speculations I make for future lovers, 
and never let another person define you. 
Refine your person until you glow in the dark, 
until you set fire to the stage, 
until you may show another person what beauty fucking looks like.

Maybe men will always want you to be something different, 
so I’m sorry. 
I apologize for calculated approximation of beauty, 
that boxes in that word until it means nothing, 
apologize for every photo shopped portrait, 
for every bullshit Cosmo sex tip, 
for every sexual harassment suit, 
for every time a man called a lesbian too butch, 
because you’re just butch enough. 
We’re all just butch enough. 
We’re all enough 
so that when life empties us out, 
there are galaxies of selves in these worn-out bodies, 
bundles of TNT cells exploding to be.

I want a woman with a voice, 
who can sing me sweet melodies of poetry, 
but still stick it to the man, 
who can straddle the stage without a stripper pole, 
but still look so damn sexy. 
I want a woman with a voice. 
I want a woman.
Insanity for Gregory Kusterbeck

who works as a bar promoter in Charleston, SC, bottling Southern girls and their quick daisy feet. hide me behind your head

gregory who writes a book on the confederacy, on the rights of states to self-destruct this is your ploy to legalize weed and i hate you in the future tense, i always do

gregory who runs for brews in Charleston implicit beer belly California eyebrows in ugly staccato you country songs please wipe the Jersey off your vocal cords (try) gregory who coagulates with blonde dolls in a queen-sized bed the rent is sweet and low your boys want to kiss you, country-like gregory who works until seven AM people pay to drink with you and people pay to drink with you again you the forever-teenager ladies suck on your cross necklace (picture a despondent Jesus. anyways you are marginally seduced) and i am writing to say that i have been writing about you:

in dreams i fly a small plane into your chest i rip your bottles in half, i die of a hangover and reincarnate and die (of a hangover) and reincarnate into the kind of woman you might take home; that is, into a thoughtless agreement i wrap little daisy feet behind your heart gregory who is a stud amongst the Hooters’ girls beer breath tiny criminal record (you tried) faux-Southern stranger seduced by moving objects i am writing to confess:
i love you in the present tense. keep me inside a bottle gregory who bottles mad women.
hide me behind your head (try; please try).
Sunshine Florists was located in a shabby strip mall, growing through the cracks in the cement between two bulky competing Mexican restaurants that perfumed the surrounding area with the strong stench of queso and cheap beer. A little further down was a condemned video rental store, and beyond that was an alterations shop run by a Chinese widow who was blind in one eye. Desperation clung to the area, cloaked it and covered it like a sheet draped over a dead body. The whole place was dying, slowly being eaten away by a number of different cancers (online movie rental, bad culinary reviews in the local paper, uneven stitches). So they sat there, wasting away under the carcinogenic winds of time and evolution, being left behind by all those people who had better places to go, better things to do.

Every day, around twilight, a dry breath seemed to rattle through the empty parking lot, whistle through the barren sidewalk and whisper to the desolate storefronts. The sky would turn a rosy purple under the emerging stars, and the moon would cast a sickly yellow glow from the heavens. The whole place would rattle with uncertainty as the ground below it seemed to shake, deciding whether or not the forgotten place was worth swallowing whole. The wind always stopped, though, and the earth made the same decision each night. No. The measly place wasn’t worth the trouble, its inconsequential being not even important enough to do away with. So it went on rotting, the slow decay rolling on into the summer like a wave.

Ophelia Thomas worked in Sunshine Florists. She was seventeen and didn’t believe in love. She believed in hard work, logic and the Red Sox; but not in love. It didn’t exist. She saw hundreds of people buying flowers, motivated by some strong misplaced emotion, a rope looped tight around their midsection that pulled them into her path to ask, with unfocused eyes, for a dozen pink roses (grace, love, happiness) or a bouquet of orchids (beauty). But flowers weren’t forever. They withered, then died, leaving behind a brittle crust of former perfection—the perfect symbol for love. At least that’s what Ophelia thought.

After all, she had never seen any proof for true love. And it wasn’t as if she was a battered child of divorce, or the product of an unholy union. She was just realistic. Just because her parents had been together for twenty years didn’t make them in love. It made them practical. Life was easier when there was a partner; humans had long ago found this to be true, evolutionarily ingrained to mate for life. It helped them find food, make their young have a better chance, and ward off predators. It made them more successful, and bettered their chances of their own genes making it through generations, which is what all organisms are primed to do.
She had been working for the florist since she was fifteen. She worked by herself, and the owner, a pudgy woman who seemed sweet enough, was rarely there. The longest amount of time she had ever spent with her was when she was interviewed. The lady had been haggard and upfront. No one wanted this job, and even if they did, the owner didn’t have the money to pay more than one person. In fact, she barely had the funds to pay one. But it had been her grandfather’s shop, so she was determined to keep it open. Even if Ophelia could only work from four till nine on weekdays. Her parents didn’t want her working so much, but she loved it. Her friends thought she was nuts and needed to spend more time socializing with people instead of blossoms. But the shop was like a siren’s song. She was enchanted.

So, everyday after school she would come and open up the shop. All of the flower deliveries to the shop were taken care of, so long as she took careful notes on which flowers were top sellers. She would send a report to the owner and every Wednesday the trucks would roll up and two burly men would unload the flowers into the freezer. They were Mark and Tom and they called her Fee. Wednesdays were busy for them—four stops, and all across town. There was a delivery van too—Norman drove that. Norman had been working at Sunshine Florists ever since he got fired from the gas station for begging the customers to buy him beer. He had wiry black hair and a sprawling unibrow. He was unconventional, but Ophelia didn’t know anyone else who could get from one side of town
to the other as fast as him. She had told him that once, and he took that as an open invitation to ask her out to Wendy’s. She refused. She was glad he was usually out of the shop.

She had a thick notebook, meticulously charting and lovingly noting the ups and downs of the demands of particular flowers. Her favorite month was June 2003, when, for some reason, the top-selling flower had been anemones (anticipation). She had barely had enough to go around, and she mixed bouquets of round, dependable anemones and pale, slender heather (good luck).

It was summer on the day that he came in. She didn’t really mind working through the day. Her best friend, Alicia, went to Italy to see her family every summer anyway, and working at the flower shop beat sitting in bed reading Seventeen. Next school year, they’d be seniors. Alicia would come back to school with a deep tan and an Italian accent. Ophelia would come back looking pale and slightly lost. It always took her a while to get used to fluorescents.

It was that uncertain time at dusk, when the sky was changing, and the end seemed eminent. The door squeaked as he walked in, his footsteps making hardly a sound. She came to the front counter at the sound of the door chime.

He had to be in his thirties or forties, and he stood tall, with a long arching neck, and a flop of messy reddish hair. He looked long and fragile, as if, like a flower, he could be bent and broken oh-so-easily.

“Hello, how may I help you?” she asked, watching him curiously. He didn’t answer. He was too busy taking in the shop. His mouth was slightly agape as the sweet, dirt smell engulfed him, and he seemed in awe of the hanging flowers.

“It’s all very beautiful,” he said, stroking a sunflower petal (adoration). His voice was surprisingly soft, and struck her as very little. “So very intricate.” She stood silent, watching him.

“I’d like some flowers, please,” he said, finally turning to face her. “Crocuses. Do you have them?” There was something about his eyes. When he looked at her, it was as if he couldn’t concentrate on her. His eyes buzzed, looking at the dead space around her but unable to focus on her form. She stared. No one had ever asked for crocuses.

“Do you have them?” he asked again, squinting slightly. Maybe he needed glasses. “Do you?” He seemed intent, and slightly obsessed with getting the flowers now that he’d thought about it.

“Yes, yes we do. A bouquet, sir?” She knew they’d look beautiful with some lavender (silence). He nodded energetically, but he had already moved back to looking at the flowers, and was nose to nose with some roses. It looked as if he was holding a conversation with them, nodding emphatically at one of their points. She watched him as he kept on nodding, bobbing his head up and down, as if he couldn’t stop the momentum of the movement. Delicately, he stroked a rose petal. She turned into the back room, and as the door swung shut behind her she could hear murmuring.

The back room was small, with a worktable and a latticework of hanging tools behind it. The
table was wide and un-sanded; she got splinters when she wasn’t careful. She’d been asking Norman to do something about that. Off to the side, there was a table where the called-in flower arrangements were put. Right now, the table was empty. There hadn’t been a call-in in months.

Next to the table was a large sink. It was old and a little rusted, and the drain hardly worked from being so clogged with soil.

She walked past the tables and pushed into the freezer, where all the flowers were kept. It always gave her a rush to unbol...
What?

He asked for them, “she told him, more sure of herself this time. John Reilly shifted his gaze to the flowers and shook his head.

“My son hasn’t spoken for three years.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth like a knee-jerk reaction. He stared at her again, and then, as if deeming her worthy, gave her a tight smile.

“So he really talked to you?”

“I mean, yes, he just walked up and asked for them. I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“That’s alright,” he said. He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

She thought hard. This wasn’t right. Why her, of all people? It didn’t make sense. She frowned. All things should make sense.

“Did he tell you what they were for?” he asked. She stared blankly at him. Weren’t all flowers for the same thing?

“I’m so sorry, but no.” He pulled out his wallet.

“I’ll take them anyway. How much?”

She rang him up with shaking fingers, and then he left without another word. She could see his family, waiting by a large Suburban in the parking lot. Drew was staring wistfully towards an abandoned gas station across the street, and she caught herself analyzing the slope of his shoulders, the tilt of his head.

Two weeks later, he was back. His father was with him this time, but she was still surprised to see them walk through the door. It was later and the sky was already purpling. As soon as they pushed through the door, Drew went straight to the nearest flower arrangement, falling back into the same conversation as when he had left them. She watched his father, who stood back, hesitant, watching his son.

The three of them stayed that way for a while; Ophelia and Mr. Reilly watching Drew flutter from flower to flower. She didn’t realize it, but she was holding her breath. Once he had inhaled every flower’s scent, Drew walked up to the counter. Mr. Reilly looked surprised.

“I’d like some flowers, please,” he said slowly. She blinked hard, and could see over his shoulder his father leaned back against the wall for support. His face was frozen.

“What kind of flowers?” Her voice came out in a whisper.

“Crocuses, please. Do you have them?”

She nodded.

Mr. Reilly shook his head slowly and took a couple steps toward the counter, staring in awe at the both of them.

“Please,” he said hoarsely, “please make him talk again.”

She stared at Mr. Reilly. His face was pinched. She paused for a second. Drew wavered a little bit in his place, his eyes absentmindedly trailing along the ceiling.

“Would you like some lavender in the bouquet?” she asked. He lowered his chin so that his face was once again facing hers.


Mr. Reilly closed his eyes and smiled softly. She watched them for a second before turning
back into the backroom. She shut the door and let out a breath. She had no idea what she was doing, but the sound of Drew’s voice resonated in her head as she made the bouquet. Crocuses. No one ever asked for crocuses.

This time she rushed into the freezer and practically ran back out with a bundle of flowers. She closed the freezer door and leaned against it. She realized she was shaking as she pulled down a vase and filled it with water from the sink. Calm, she told herself. Calm. One flower goes in, and then the next. It was usually easy to lose herself in a flower vase. Today though, she felt it had to be perfect. She rearranged three times before she felt ready.

Before walking back out, she carefully noted in her book. Two orders in two weeks.

When she walked back out, Mr. Reilly was standing with his hand on Drew’s shoulder. She brought the flowers to the register and placed the bouquet in Drew’s hands. He smiled at her, and for the first time, she noticed a long scar curling from his chin up to above his ear.

“From the accident,” Mr. Reilly said as he handed her an Amex. She wanted to ask. Wanted to know, wanted to know so bad. But she kept her mouth shut. She couldn’t make herself ask the questions, put it out in the air. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know the answer.

So she rang up the flowers and handed his card back. He nodded, and then both of them were gone. She had been looking for someone, someone who would look at flowers the way she did, and here he was. She was puzzled by him and enthralled all at the same time. As they got into their Audi, she found herself hoping they would come back.

They did. Next time, two weeks later, there were two more people with them. Ophelia recognized them as the young man and woman who came into the shop that first time Drew had wandered in. They came in, and Mr. Reilly smiled at her. She smiled shyly back. He muttered something to the other two, and they all quietly fell back as Drew went through his routine. He didn’t acknowledge the audience. He was a cramped hummingbird, fluttering from petal to petal, living off nectar.

“I’d like some flowers, please,” he said clearly once he was finished. In the back, the woman gasped and held a hand to her mouth. The man closed his eyes, and Mr. Reilly smiled.

“Would you like some crocuses?” she asked.

“Yes, please.” He nodded, and once again, she caught sight of his scar, palely curving around the left side of his face. She had a scar too, one on her knee, from that time her older brother Paul had put her on the handlebars of his mountain bike and then had tried to pop a wheelie. She had been seven, and he was thirteen, and she had assumed he had known what he was doing. After all, he was the older one. Instead, both of them had gone flying, and she had ended up with a mouth full of their gravel driveway and a broken knee while Paul had landed on the grassy lawn, a couple feet away. Paul got grounded for a month. Ophelia got a fear of bicycles.

But this scar was different. Hers was smoothed over and almost invisible, a faded memory. Drew’s told a story, and she could feel
her curiosity mounting.

She didn’t realize she was staring until the woman with Mr. Reilly cleared her throat. Ophelia blushed.

“Sorry,” she muttered. Drew didn’t seem to hear her, and stood waiting patiently in front of her.

The woman spoke.

“Ask him what they’re for.” Ophelia watched Drew’s face. If he had heard the woman, he made no sign of it. She felt like she was going too far, like he might get upset and the whole spell of it would break, that quick, like putting too much pressure on a gossamer thin spider web.

Slowly, she asked, “What’s the occasion?”

He stared at her, and for the first time, he seemed to recognize her, his gaze settled, and he looked a little angry. It’s over, she thought. I ruined it. But he surprised her.

“They’re for Lindsey,” he told her, frowning. “They’re her favorite.” The woman brought her hands to her face and exhaled raggedly, and the man put an arm around her. Mr. Reilly closed his eyes, just like he had last time. But he didn’t smile.

Ophelia had no idea what to do. She wasn’t supposed to be there, she didn’t understand what was obviously such a heavy event. This was for them, and she felt sinister for intruding on it. She backed slowly into the back room. She went to the crocuses.

Mark and Tom had swung by yesterday to resupply, and for the first time, crocuses surrounded her in the freezer. In the heavy summer months, they should have been long gone. Their season was over, but here they were. Their beauty took over the little room and allowing the scent of spring to bleed out into the air. She stopped for a moment, inhaled and tried desperately to hear the whispers that Drew did. For her, they were silent.

This time, she added some delphinium (boldness). The flowers were purple, and hung daintily over the vase, their slender stems bending geometrically from the weight of the trumpet.

When she brought the bouquet out, Drew and the two other people were gone. Mr. Reilly stood at the register, looking shaken.

“He, uh, got a little worked up. They’re waiting in the car. I’ll take the flowers though.”

“Here.”

“Thank you.” He handed her his Amex. “Really though, thank you.”

She felt so unbelievably sorry for this man. His gray eyes were surrounded by thick wrinkles, his mouth set in a frown that never seemed to go away, except when he smiled that taught smile. She had never really looked at him until now; she had always been more preoccupied with his son. Standing in front of him, she could see the resemblances. The slant in their nose. The cowlick on the crowns of their heads. For the first time, she imagined what it would be like to have a son that hadn’t spoken in three years.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. He picked up the flowers and then decided against it, and set them back down.

“Before, he was a lawyer. Lived in New York.” She was startled, and wanted to tell him she
didn’t need the story. But she had been craving it for so long. She pressed her lips firmly together and watched the man keep talking.

“That’s where he met her, Lindsey. That girl was something else. She was a force of nature. When she came into a room, you knew it.” She stared at him. He seemed lost in his own words.

“You always want your son to be happy. You tell yourself, it’s okay he’s moved away, it’s okay he forgets our birthdays. That’s all okay if he’s happy. And he was. They were.” He paused and regained consciousness of the situation. He was in a tiny flower shop, talking to some random girl. She could feel him pull away, wanting to get out of there.

“They were both in the twin towers that day. She worked there, he was there taking her out to coffee. He carried her down forty flights of stairs. Forty damn flights of stairs. Her neck was broken, probably from falling against her desk or something. Not like we’ll ever know. He came out with a head injury-- that scar.”

The pieces tumbled together and locked into a picture that made her shudder. She had been fourteen when it happened. She was a freshman in high school, and the day seemed to lag at school, especially because all of her friends kept on getting checked out. No one told her until eighth period, political science class. She remembered the feeling: sick with dread, chest beating unevenly. It had felt as if someone were scooping her heart out with a frozen ice cream scoop.

Here was that same feeling, as she stood in front of Mr. Reilly.

“Oh,” she said, feeling incredibly inadequate. “Oh.”

“It’s Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Diagnosed him with it two months after it happened. He’s been living with us ever since. Hasn’t said a word.” His last sentence hung in the air.

“Until now,” she whispered.

“Yep,” he said shaking his head. “Until now.” He then picked up the flowers and walked slowly out.

They never came back. Not the two of them, Mr. Reilly and Drew, anyway. Every second week, Ophelia would prepare a bouquet of crocuses for them, ready for them to walk in the shop. But they never did.

For a couple of weeks afterward, the woman came in. She was Drew’s sister, she told Ophelia, and she had come back home to help out. Ophelia had nodded dumbly and handed over the flowers. The sister sensed her confusion.

“He didn’t react well after last time,” she said, blushing. “He, uh, got worked up.” The same exact thing her father had said.

Ophelia squinted at her. How could he not come back?

“We just think it’s for the best if he didn’t come anymore.”

Oh.

Ophelia watched her drive away in her shiny convertible and felt numb. After a while, though, even the sister stopped coming. Ophelia thought about him a lot though. Maybe she was wrong. About love, and all that stuff. She didn’t know the answer, but still, all summer, and throughout
the year, every second week, Ophelia Thomas would prepare one bouquet of beautiful spring crocuses.
Sunlight forces its way through the window’s crack
and a line curves around the socket
of your eye: a streak of war paint marking you
thick and heavy.

I’m not going to wake you – I decide
you’ll leave and never come back.
It’s not often I see little painted Indians
running around in tousled sheets

The glow that forms a white band
should be black like tar.
The color of paint but here is
the window that is fooling me
into thinking you’re something you’re not.
My father nurses a Heineken that he has let go flat and warm
because that is the only way he can swallow it anymore.
He is looking at the blue crabs that lay huddled together underneath the current that the bilge throws across the tank.
The soft shells came into season early this year
and he has come down to the docks often since.
A man tells us that too many are dying,
captured crooked behind their old eyes.
My father watches them as though if he were to look away—he’d die too. They come cheap, the ones that die.
Stills sell for just two dollars a piece.
His hair has only just begun to grow back
and it falls like wet ibis feathers behind his ears.
It is a white like I have never seen it, like the under belly of a flounder,
unlike the wind-spun, sawdust-stained hair of a fisherman that I suppose I will miss.
The tide hesitates between the boats. A blue heron folds away from us.
We talk of the migration patterns of marsh hens
and the inconsistency of Claudia’s soup this year.
I wonder what he knows of the waters off Nova Scotia.
We’ve swallowed the salt from those in Uruguay.
My father is going to die.
He asks the Livingston man for a bag of those little necks he grew.
He gives us too many and he does not charge us.
Above the marsh along Jeremy Creek,
grown men sing to one another through the passing of their cigars.
My father was a Tampa Jewels man until this past November.
To my right the shells of last year’s oysters fall like grey pelican plumes to the dock.
I sit down as the gulls quiet and move on.
I do not know whether he sees these new crabs as fragile, the way I am sure these men must see him or whether the stench of rebirth and wood rot is what draws him here.
I find little hope in the hulls of the shrimp boats that rest in this marina, they are just the Hugo-torn bones of this town that bust along their seams like the crab shells.
My father, waning, his bloated throat timid with wakefulness, hangs over the water’s edge and beckons a dozen brooding swallows from the marsh bed.
Bill Livingston tells my father he can come back anytime, this is after all, a twenty-four hour operation.
A little boy today asked me
if this was a jellybean I had on my ring.
I looked to God to turn that stone
into sugar, but instead He gave me grace
for asking him to do magic tricks.
“It looks like a jellybean”, the boy said.
When you’re that age the world straps
a Kite to your chest
telling you to look downwind.
But when the world put the Kite to my chest
it said blow.
That’s as much wind as you’re gonna get
because each day is darker than the last
and when you can no longer see the
tiny red diamond through the night
you may still know it’s flying.
As a girl, beyond the sun-silked curtains
I saw our grandfathers drunkenly
Stretch full trenches across the yard,
Fighting World War One for the second time.

Their wives watched from the lawn chairs
Sipping laudanum and lemonade.

The men old, and shrunken slightly,
Stood on their toes, eyes peered out

Over the grass, while their spectacles amassed
A glaze of red garden dust. Wrinkled hands
Clasped rusted rifles. An assault of mumbled
Slurs and whiskey saliva marked the morning.

Now at 80, I commandeer my sister’s wheel chair,
While we attempt to sever each other’s limbs for oil.
She sat, head slightly turned towards the window, bony hands streaked blue with steadily pulsing veins clasped upon her lap, long fingers interlaced. The line from the drip beside her chair ran along the carpet and up into the crease of skin between upper and lower arm, aiding the movement of her blood. The low hum of the drip seemed to roar within the empty, low-ceilinged bungalow, it was a hum that had bled into the walls and the furniture, seeping into the dusty lace curtains, laying claim to the piles of old records, neglected books and tired photograph albums that were stacked up in careless heaps around the living room. It owned the room.

Patty watched as her neighbour’s roof top chimney eclipsed the setting sun and the copper sky seemed to cry into a blur of pastel pinks and oranges. Nothing as spectacular as the golds or blood reds she used to watch over that Whitby coastline when the sky seemed to swallow up land and ocean. No, this was a little more fitting to her mellow, watered down life now; the kind of sunset that required an ‘oh, lovely’ rather than anything more profound or life shaking. She had entered the pastel-colored stages of life. Or perhaps she had been in this stage for a while, slowly liquefied into that milky non-substance stuff Barbara was constantly pushing down her throat. But perhaps this weekend would change things. Perhaps this weekend would show her an acrylic sunset again.

Her gate opened and with no exterior change or visible reaction, Patty watched as a woman, slight, mid-50s, hesitantly made her way along the cobbled pathway and then disappeared for a moment from view as she stepped up to the front door. Patty had given her on the phone strict instructions on where the key would be and how to let herself in but it was a few minutes before she heard the key in the lock and the door pushed gently open.

The woman stood before Patty, key clasped in one hand, knuckles tight and white enclosed around the handle of a small suitcase, as if frightened to let go. Wild, graying hair piled atop her head, an ugly yellow bandana struggling to keep the wisps in place and out of deep set, large brown eyes. Framed within the narrow doorway, bent backed and timid looking, the woman looked to Patty a sorry sight. But a sight she was. All of her, from hairline to worn boots, Patty took in. Her scent, which filled the tightly enclosed, musky room smelt almost familiar, although this was impossible. Patty had never met this woman, never seen those big, fox-like eyes, never held those tightly closed white hands, never even knew she existed. She was hit by a deep, devastating undercurrent of loss she wasn’t sure she had earned.

The woman smiled. It was warm and tentative and reassuring all at once and seemed to reach out a hand of forgiveness and regret.
‘Emily.’ She stumbled and went on, ‘that’s what they went for, named after some withering old grandmother, five generations back I’m sure.’ The silence that followed seemed to penetrate the space between them. Patty’s house had never felt so large, so grotesquely spacious and distant. She nodded towards a stool beside her and tried for a smile of her own. Perhaps this had been a bad idea. The woman— or Emily, now as she had proclaimed herself to be— she had always been Robin in Patty’s mind, no namesake, nothing recycled or reused, just Robin. Sunset-Robin. Robin-red. A name all to herself that had belonged to her wholly and devotedly all these years. Emily— tipped her head towards the kitchen, ‘why don’t I go and pop the kettle on? Then perhaps we can talk. Sound okay?’ Patty managed a small nod.

Well. This was it. A lifetime of suppressed desires, of wonderings, of endless guessing and what-ifs and if-onlys. Fifty-six years of mourning a dead child very much alive. She wanted it. All of it, everything Emily could give her. She wanted to feed off the memories that belonged to her, that had been ripped from her world, stolen from beneath her eyes. Her hands gripped a little tighter onto each other. She leant her head back on the floral fabric of the chair and closed her eyes. Was she ready for this? For her world to be broken and shattered before her? In one long weekend she was about to take on something wasn’t sure she was prepared for. And yet— this was hers! What Emily was about to give to her should never have been taken from her in the first place. It was sinful. Inhumane. But could this ever make up for it? Could three days fill in a lifetime? Patty stared down at her hands; rivers, blue and prominent coursed down her fingers, throbbing resistance. Well, it was now or never. She had to get back what was hers. And finally, here was Emily— here was her chance. That devastated sixteen-year-old girl of yesteryear deserved an explanation.

The kettle whistled from the kitchen and Emily emerged with two steaming mugs of tea, placing one on the window ledge beside Patty and then perching on the stool before her, placing her own on a wobbly stack of old video tapes. – Home videos. Emily paused, ‘may I?’ Patty nodded; at least this would give her a little more time, to gather her thoughts, to mentally stabilize herself for just what she was about to take from this woman seated before her. Emily knelt before the old box TV, fumbling around with the VCR and, eventually locating the hidden remote, pressed play. Patty was surprised how neglectful she had become to the life she had really lived. After spluttering out a few broken sounds and fuzzy images, the screen buzzed into focus and two little boys appeared, mid-mud fight, plastered from head to toe in that thick, gunky stuff the sea used to throw up onto the beach. ‘Sound, sound, sound….’ Emily fumbled around on the floor again, locating the remote and undoing ‘mute’. Laughter and screeching filled the room, sounds Patty had not heard in this house in over a decade. Not from these boys in more than she could remember. Grins emerged from mud-coated faces as the boys ran towards the camera, arms outstretched, clumps of thick muddy sand soaring towards the camera. Emily laughed, ‘They’re
beautiful! These are your sons aren’t they? How old would they have been?’ Patty smiled. She tried to picture that aging face staring up at her only seven years old, caked in sandy mud, laughing and grinning with her boys.

‘Seven.’ Patty managed. Emily’s smiled widened and she turned back to the screen, taking one of Patty’s cold hands in her own. Patty looked down. Her throat tightened. ‘They would have loved you.’ Emily turned back towards her, finger stroking that delicate, bird-like hand, skin softly stretched across bone. She nodded and a hollow, overwhelming sadness filled her eyes. ‘We don’t need to rush anything. My flight back is not until Monday evening, so we have all weekend. No need to rush, okay? We’ll do it in your time, whatever you want to ask, whatever you want to know. Okay?’ Patty nodded. They both turned back to the screen and watched the boys play in the sea and the sand beneath a heavy sun until both fell asleep, hands still clasped together, Emily’s head propped against Patty’s chair.

The Sunday church procession belted out its bells across the Yorkshire countryside and Patty and Emily awoke to the droning buzz of the television screen and a small canary perched on the window ledge, wings fluttering and golden under the early morning sun. Emily decided before anything was spoken or assumed or guessed at, they should take a walk along the beach.

So, mid-morning, bundled up against the salty spring breeze, the two walked, Emily pushing Patty along in her wheelchair, drip attached, down Robinhood Bay shoreline. They walked along in silence, accompanied only by the wind whipping at the crumbling cliffs stroking the shore and the water lapping at their feet.

They stopped at the beginning of the rock pools and Emily turned Patty’s chair to face out towards the stretch of sun-bleached North Sea before them. She knelt down on the sand and followed Patty’s gaze out to where the milky horizon blurred into sea. She turned to her. ‘First things first- I love you. I love you and I always have. I’ve been searching for you for the last fifty years. I’ve never let go.’ Tears pooled in her eyes. She grasped her birth mother’s frail hand, her eyes never leaving that horizon. ‘I’m going to give you my story. Your story. Our story. From the day your father took me and the nurses claimed I was stillborn. From the moment you began mourning my death. I’m going to give you all of it, because it is yours to keep and hold.’

They sat there until Emily’s voice became parched and broken and weak with emotion, until the tide ebbed right up to the rock pools around them, until the sun sunk below the cliffs behind them and the sky closed around them, swallowing up land and ocean and memories; blood orange, vivid gold; Robin-red.
I don’t want to grow tired of writing about Vietnam. I don’t want to grow tired of writing about the same dirt roads my father walked on in loincloth with a crossbow slung over his shoulder, or the same images of elephants crossing through rivers and streams littered with bamboo fishing poles and fishing nets.

I don’t want to get tired writing about my mother and my mother’s mother pushing around carts of food in the Saigon market, or crossing over the Atlantic Ocean, smuggled under the belly of a cargo ship with nothing but a ball of rice to fill the aching bellies of her and her three siblings.

I’ve painted pictures of bamboo forests and trees infested with monkeys and ants, torched with the liquid flames of napalm and hidden under clouds of black smoke - all with words that I tried to keep simple, because a teacher in high school taught me that clutter and fluff was worthless.

I’ve written stories of soldiers humping through monsoon rains with backpack straps digging into their shoulders, rifles raised above their head, hoping to God their cigarettes were still dry and - I’ve written about scouts and patrols diving headfirst into piles of elephant shit to dodge the flashlights of those gooks who spoke too loud and frantic.

Over coffee and French bread every morning,
my Father tells me stories, stirring in three tablespoons of sugar and three seconds worth of half and half into his mug. He speaks of the little things, like how the cold mountain winds would cut at his skin during the winter, or how he scarred his fingertips learning how to play the guitar in too many different cities. He smiles even when he remembers the Tet Offensive, laughs when he remembers how fat his father was - the same man who was tortured until he bled no more.

He drinks his coffee fast, and works down the bread to nothing more than golden crumbs on a paper towel. He looks up and tells me to keep writing stories - to rewrite the novel I had written so poorly as my thesis in high school. He told me he was proud of me then, proud that I had dedicated the book to his father Y-Thih E-Ban Buon Kang, whose body has never been found.

And I lay still and listen to music too peaceful for those images of war and bloodshed - and I write about writing about Vietnam, because that’s as close as I want to get to the smell of fish and water buffalo, to the mountain breeze and clear rivers and streams, to the coffee plantations my father grew up on, torched with napalm or orange gases - that’s as close as I want to get before I realize I’m growing tired and tired and tired.
The grand triumvirate. Leading lady of the Underworld who slums from time to time with us haggard souls above. Even a goddess has needs, but dear lady, have you forgotten? I think that’s Chanel on your heels, even Gucci on your arm, and your cheeks are so skillfully airbrushed…You’re drop-dead-dangerous live in color.

Dear Demeter in pearls is still waiting. Playing house without you, mourning over a TV dinner.

Lest you forget your origins.
In those last years,
her hair was dull, salmon pink.
Arms and chest like soft dough—
I wanted to sink my fingers
into her skin, feel the weather.

I used to laugh when she lost sight.
Called me Grace, and asked for another scotch.

To laugh like that, is to push eggs across a table.
Barely catch them before they fall from the edge.

Then, there was that night
in her room, bathed in the amber
of her dusty lamp, when I found her dancing—
her sagging dough arms softly molded
around her husband who died seven years ago.

Her pink head rested on his shoulder.
From the doorway, she looked younger,
swept away from the crunchy sheets
and puree dinners—the scotch.
I did not wake her.
News of Nana

I was across the
world looking
through the bus
window.
The greenery exploded
throughout
the rippled hills,
only
interrupted
by white
cotton ball sheep
lounging
under the vast,
endless sky
while the sun
nourished
the vibrant carnations
swaying with
the soft stroke of
wind. You
called and I knew.
I knew. I
knew she was
gone.
The hurt in
your voice
splashed my
insides
as I noticed the
rust
lining the window.
Kyle Victory  

Atticus
Kyle Victory

Combinations
Dimpi Patel

Tourist
Keller James

Out West
Kyle Victory

Open Wide
Keller James  

Oh, California
Kyle Victory

Abyss
And the Lord said unto Cain, “Where is Abel thy brother?” And he said, “I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?”

-Genesis 4:9

The motel room contained no light and the shades were closed. There was an oppressive air that stank of cigarettes and mildew. David Low sat on the bed next to his tattered jacket and a newspaper, his cigarette lit and burning down to the filter. He was tired, the type of tired that came from years of shrugging things off that were meant to be done. He scratched his greying beard and stared blankly at a poorly painted picture of birds, which hung above the television. A minister on it spat hell fire, words David had heard all his life. He ignored it easily; having spent years in prison forgetting the things his mother’s family taught him. His thoughts drifted to his mother, and then to his father, who he had hated. He jerked as the cigarette burned down to his fingers.

The burn reminded David of why he came. He got up and sat at the small wooden desk in the room. He lit another cigarette and opened a half-drunk bottle of whiskey. Taking a quick drink, he slammed the bottle down and coughed as he brushed away his greasy, unkempt brown hair. He rubbed his eyes as he leaned back in the dilapidated chair, his thoughts drifting. He remembered the wheat fields of his father’s Mississippi farm. He saw his younger siblings, Charles and Phyllis, standing amongst the swaying stalks. He smiled, swallowing down the same tears he had been swallowing for over twenty years. Placing his hands behind his head, he bent downwards, biting his bottom lip. His body shuttered; the swaying fields of wheat held memories for David that he felt were better left buried. His head bent backwards as he swallowed and let out a long arduous, breath from his nose. Placing his cigarette in his mouth, he opened the drawer of the desk and removed from it an object bundled in tattered cloth. As he began removing the cloth from the object he could hear the minister on the old television rambling on.

The minister spoke in his heavy southern accent; “And I ask you my friends; does the Lord not know all the secrets in our hearts?”

The proclamation made David laugh to himself. Turning his attention back to the bundle, he discarded the cloth and placed the object on the surface of the decayed desk: a small, unloaded revolver. He stared at the revolver for some time before placing his index finger on the handle. Slowly, he spun the weapon in a circle, the lit cigarette still burning in his mouth. His memories drifted again to his mother. She had been gone for many years, having killed herself when he and his siblings were young. David had a difficult time remembering her appearance. She sang often; that he remembered. Her favorite song was something that stuck with him throughout his
sordid and usually violent life. He sang it as the revolver spun:

*Will you miss me? Will you miss me when I am gone?*

David remembered his father far better. The man had struck him and his brother so many times that his face began to tingle simply at the memory of the old man’s fist. The old man had doted on his sister Phyllis; perhaps because she looked so much like the dead wife he had driven to suicide. The patriarch had been a drinker; violent and hateful, placing his anger upon his two adolescent sons. The violence grew worse after the day his sister had disappeared in the wheat fields. The old man found her body that night, naked and violated. David and Charles had stayed mostly silent as the Sheriff and his deputies filled the Low’s farm. He remembered his words to the Sheriff when asked where they had been when Phyllis disappeared:

*We was out back, at the old willow-tree where our Mommas buried. We didn’t see nothin’, sir.*

The old man blamed David. He had sent his son that day to find the two younger Low children. David returned only with Charles, not knowing where his sister was. His father’s strikes grew more forceful after that day, until David used his father’s hunting rifle to put a hole in the old man’s heart. That was the first time David went to prison. Charles was sent to live with their mother’s sister, a highly religious woman. Charles went to a seminary, became a reverend, and married. David became a product of the state penitentiary system, and a dirty mark on the Reverend Charles Low’s otherwise clean and pious life. Theft, Assault, Rape; David Low was as drunk, violent, and hateful as the old man he despised so much.

David stopped spinning the revolver on the desk as his thoughts returned from the depths of memory. He hadn’t thought about any of this for many years, burying it as deep as he could. He removed a box of bullets from the desk and loaded the revolver. He got up and placed it into the inside pocket of his jacket. He looked at the newspaper on the bed. It was from a few weeks before David had arrived in town. The headlines read about the murder of a young girl named Ruth Morris. David had seen the paper at the halfway house he had been residing in for some time after his last prison stint. A picture of the girl sat in the top corner of the article. He remembered how so much had flooded back into his mind when he saw that picture. Ruth Morris bared a striking resemblance to Phyllis Low.

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David was taken aback as the sunlight beamed into eyes. Shutting the door to his motel room behind him, he placed his hand in his jacket pocket, firmly holding the revolver. The winter air bit David’s malnourished body, but he paid little attention to the weather. He made his way to the front desk of the motel. A slovenly young girl occupied the space behind the desk, flipping through a woman’s magazine David had never heard of. He smiled at her as he entered, not bothering to greet her.

“Got a telephone I can use? Room ain’t
got one.” David asked the disinterested girl.

“Behind you,” the girl pointed to a payphone. David smiled again. “Ain’t got no change darlin.”

The girl rolled her eyes and got up from her chair behind the desk. David eyed the girl’s sloppy form as she rummaged through her purse. His last visit to prison had been for being a little too rough with a prostitute in Jackson. Best keep your hands to yourself, Davie. He thought to himself. You ain’t here for that.

Walking over to the phone, the girl looked up and gave David a suspicious look. He returned her look with a smile and winked at her. Clearly uncomfortable, the slovenly young girl stood up and left the room. David laughed to himself as he pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket and picked up the receiver.

David put change into the phone and dialed the number he had written on the paper. “Providence Baptist Church,” a woman’s voice answered.

“Hi there. I’m lookin’ for Reverend Charles Low. This his church?” David asked.

“Oh yes, yes it is. I’m his wife, Sarah.”

_I forgot about his fuckin’ wife._ David thought to himself. “Sarah. This is David. I need to talk to my brother.”

Silence hung in the air as David waited for a reply. “Give me a minute please,” Sarah replied nervously. David stood waiting on the phone for what felt like hours before he heard a voice he barely recognized.

“Whoever this is, your sense of humor is not appreciated.” The voice was stern and monotonous.

“Fuck, Charlie. I ain’t dead,” David said with a slight laugh in his voice. “It’s me, little brother.” For a second David thought his brother had hung up as silence followed once again.


David cut Charles off. “You didn’t think you’d ever hear from your shitty big brother?”

“No. Honestly, no I didn’t. I didn’t know you got out of prison. Where are you?”

“In town. Got outta the pen a few months back. Been a good while I know.”

“You should have called before you came here,” Charles voice sounded concerned and frightened. He had not seen his brother in over ten years. They had loosely kept in contact over the years, but after David’s last misstep with the law, Charles had made the difficult decision to lose touch with his brother.

“And why’s that? I know I’m the big bad motherfuckin’ wolf and all, but I’m still your brother.” David’s voice had no laughter in it.

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. I just didn’t expect this. Listen. I can’t talk now. Come over to my house tonight. Sarah will make dinner. I’ll give you my address.”

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David coughed violently as he walked along the road. The sun had set and the air felt cold and wet. The neighborhood where the Reverend Charles Low resided with his young wife Sarah
was quiet and simple; the type of wholesome environment where a man like David felt removed and foreign. His hands stuffed firmly in his jacket pockets, he walked as swiftly as he could to his brother’s home. He counted the numbers of the houses as he passed them, eventually coming upon the address written on his little slip of paper.

Charles’ home was small but clean and seemed well maintained. David took notice to himself of how different it was from the home in which they had been raised. He walked onto the front porch and hesitated for a moment before knocking on the door. The front door opened quickly and Charles stood before his brother for the first time in more than a decade. David had grown older since he last saw his younger brother, but Charles had still retained his boyish handsomeness. David still saw the same little brother he had spent so many nights comforting after their father had come home drunk and eager to vent his woes upon the boys.

“David!” Charles bright blue eyes were filled with excitement. His wife Sarah, small and pretty, stood behind him. She had a frightened look upon her. She had never met her brother-in-law before, and he made her uneasy. David smiled back at his brother, not really knowing what he should say. They stood in an awkward silence for a few moments, Charles too excited to realize his rudeness.

“You gonna let me in? Or am I gonna freeze my dick off out here?” said David, breaking the silence. Sarah became visibly uncomfortable at David’s vulgarity. Charles snapped out of his daze and moved aside, waving his brother inside. Sarah maneuvered her birdlike body behind her husband as David entered their home. He smiled and winked at her, finding amusement in her discomfort.

They spent much of the night at the kitchen table rehashing old stories from their childhood. David was careful not to bring up their parents or their sister, and Charles seemed to only care to discuss the exploits of their boyhood. Sarah stayed silent. She spoke only in reply to questions from Charles. David noticed this almost immediately. The humor he found in her earlier slowly began to dissipate as he sat smoking at the table of Reverend Charles Low. Time to get this over with, Davie, he thought to himself as the reality of the night sunk into his mind.

“Terrible shame what happened here few weeks back. That little girl, Ruth or somethin’.” David had noticed his sister-in-law become visibly uneasy over the course of the night. She now looked as if she wanted to scream. Charles’ head lowered and his voice became solemn. “Yes, Ruth Morris. Poor child. It was a horrible tragedy. The Lord saw fit to let harm come to her, but he protects her now.” The last sentence struck David; a forgotten memory rushed to the front of his mind.

“That’s what Momma’s sister said. When Phyllis died. You remember that?” David asked his brother.

“Of course I do. How could someone ever forget what happened to our sister?” Charles eyes now met David’s. David thought to himself how much his brother resembled their father, except
for his eyes. Charles’ blue eyes were warm and filled with life. Their fathers’ were pale and searing. David resembled their mother, skinny and frail with dark eyes. Charles was still like the little boy David had tried so dearly to protect. A pit formed in his stomach. They sat in silence until finally David turned to his sister-in-law, who was nervously biting her bottom lip.

“Sarah, honey. Maybe you wanna get me and Charlie a drink or somethin’?” David’s voice had a tone of sympathy in it. He saw both tension and fear in the young woman’s body. She looked to Charles who nodded in approval. As Sarah stood up and walked through the swinging door to the living room, David put his cigarette out on the table. Charles laughed slightly and gave his brother a look of confusion. David leaned forward and motioned for his brother to come in close.

“Tell the bitch to leave,” David said forcefully to his brother.

“W-What?” Charles replied with a laugh and a slight stutter.

David leaned back in his chair and reached behind him. Putting his hand into the pocket of his jacket, he took his revolver and placed it gently on the table. Leaning forward again, slightly pushing the gun forward, he repeated himself. “I said tell the bitch to leave. Get your ass up, and tell her to get the fuck out.”

Charles’ previous look of confusion was replaced with a look of realization. He got up slowly, his eyes never leaving his brothers, and walked into the room where Sarah prepared drinks. David leaned back again, letting out a sigh of relief. He found no joy in his actions. The pit in his stomach grew tighter and he swallowed. He needed Sarah to leave. Poor girl don’t need to see this, he thought to himself. He could hear voices coming from the room. Charles’ grew loud and stern. Charles said something about cigarettes for his brother. David could hear Sarah, quiet and compliant. He sat there tapping his finger on the table, putting thoughts out of his head that told him to just leave and forget this. Charles returned after David heard the front door open and close, his face serious.

He spoke with the same monotonous tone he had earlier on the phone. “What is the meaning of this David?”

David stood up, leaving the revolver on the table. He walked slowly over to this brother. “Ruth Morris looked an awful lot like Phyllis, little brother.”

Charles’ face filled with anger and he lifted his finger at his brother’s face. Before he could speak, the back of David’s hand swung across Charles face. Charles fell backwards and slumped down against the wall. David walked quickly over and picked his brother up by the collar of his shirt, slamming him into the wall.

“What? You think I fuckin’ forgot ‘bout all this? You think I forgot what you did to Phyllis?” David screamed into Charles’ face as the pupils in his brother’s eyes dilated.

“David. Calm down. Please.” Charles had a whimper in his voice. The pit in David’s stomach turned into throbbing pain. He slammed his fist into brother’s stomach. Charles’ face contorted in pain. “How long has it been? Huh? How long since that day I found you bared ass on top of our
Memories flooded into David's brain: his hands brushing aside stalks of wheat. His eyes witnessing his brother on top of his frail, birdlike little sister. A rock covered in blood next to her motionless, outstretched arm. His hands pulling his brother off, and then striking him in the face. His brother kneeling half naked on the ground begging his forgiveness, begging him to not tell anybody.

“Almost twenty-four years,” Charles face grew calmer as he replied. The exactness of the reply made David even angrier and he threw his brother to the ground. Charles lay on the ground coughing in pain. The throbbing pain in David’s stomach became a burning. He felt like he was about to vomit. He knelted down next to his brother, placing his hand on the back of Charles’ head. David turned Charles’ head and saw the eyes of a terrified boy. He swallowed his tears, as he had more times than he could remember.

“I want to hear you say it. Tell me you killed that little girl, Ruth.” David said, his voice no longer angry. Charles look at him like a scared animal, his breaths labored and his body shaking. David’s hand squeezed and pulled Charles’ hair. His voice grew serious again. “Say it, Charlie.”

“Do I really need too? You knew the second you saw her picture. So why do I have to say anything, David?” Charles voice was shaky. David let go of his brother and stood up. He shook his head in laughter. Charles stood as well, fixing his shirt and his hair. David put his hands on his brother’s shoulders.

“You meet me tomorrow at Mamma’s grave. Round ‘bout sundown. Understand?” David’s voice was hoarse. Charles nodded. “Don’t make me come lookin’ for you. This don’t need to be ugly, got it little brother?” Charles nodded again.

David grabbed his coat and the revolver, leaving the house quickly. He walked as fast as he could towards the motel. He had to stop several times; the burning in his stomach had become unbearable. He had purchased a bus ticket that morning to the town closest to his father’s farm. He had not been to the home where he had been born since the death of his father. David Low sat in his motel room that night smoking one cigarette after another and drinking what was left of the half-drunk bottle of whiskey

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Struggling to ignore the pit in his stomach, David sat on the bus watching the road pass. He had only brought with him a pack of cigarettes and the revolver safely tucked into his jacket. Having not been able to sleep in the dingy motel room the night before, he had slept some on the bus. He dreamt of his mother and his sister. His mother’s long fingers ran through his little sister’s hair as she brushed it. They sat against the old willow-tree that had long been a fixture of his childhood home. They were content and he sat listening to them sing:

*Will you miss me? Will you miss me when I am gone?*

It was late afternoon by the time the bus arrived in the town near the farm. It had been some time since he had been in the small Mississippi town. He had little desire to see if anything
had changed, and knew it was best to avoid the chance of being recognized. Upon leaving the bus station, he immediately made his way to the familiar road that would begin the long walk to his family’s farm. The road was isolated, and David smoked and took solace in the quiet. The cold passed through his tired body as he counted his steps. He whistled the song from his dreams to himself.

The day was almost over as David reached the dirt path that veered from the road, continuing onto to the farm. The path was deteriorated and overgrown with weeds. Much of the plants seemed crushed and there were tire tracks in the dirt. David assumed that his brother had arrived some time before him. Dusk began to fall as he began to feel his body shake. He felt frightened by the prospect of being home. By the prospect that a place that held such bitter and violent memories could be the only place he felt was home. He moved along the path until he could see he could see the decaying house. The once bright and white farmhouse now stood rotting and twisted; a construction of decaying memory.

He could see a nondescript car near the front of the house. He began to move towards the house, memories overwhelming him. The crops his family had sown lay long dead; the surrounding woods overgrown and beginning to reclaim the fields. He looked out towards the fields; the memory of what he witnessed bore upon his aging shoulders. Faint singing could be heard. He began to walk to the opposite side of the home, doing his best not to pay attention to small details of the house that would remind him of childhood. As he walked around the back, the willow-tree appeared to him. It too had decayed, its bare branches screaming outward in a cacophony of dead wood. Three small tombstones lay in front of it. Charles, dressed in a long black overcoat, stood over them, his face mournful and devoid of the bright personality David had seen the day before. He stood there, singing their mother’s favorite song:

*Will you miss me? Will you miss me when I am gone?*

“Charlie,” David called out to his brother.

“Hi David,” Charles replied, not looking up from the graves of their family. His voice contained neither joy nor animosity. “Momma always loved that song. One of the few things I remember about her, to be honest.” David did not reply. He walked closer to Charles and looked down at the tombstones.

“Place looks like shit,” David said to his brother, transfixed on the graves.

“So do you.” Charles turned to his brother and smiled. David laughed. He thought to himself about how despite the warmth of his personality, Charles had seemed rigid earlier. Now that rigidness seemed to have left him. David turned from his brother.

“Never actually though my ass would end up back here.” David stared off into the fields, feeling the pit in his stomach once again returning.

“I’ve been coming every year, for a while now. For Momma’s birthday.” Charles removed one of his hands from his pocket and pointed slightly to his mother’s grave. “I’m not scared, David. I know why we’re here. Our whole lives have been
building to this moment, you know. Everything both of us have done. Everyone we’ve hurt. This moment is our punishment, I know because I prayed for it. This is where we belong. We should have never left, we should be there in the ground with them, you know. I never forgot. I never forget the type of person the Lord made me. I’ve asked him every day, ‘when will I suffer?’ I did my best, David. I prayed. I tried to live a pious life.”

The tone of Charles’ voice became considerably darker. “But my hands. They would not listen, David. When I saw her they would not listen to me. Just like how they didn’t listen when I hurt Phyllis.” Charles pleaded with his brother as he had once before many years ago.

David swung around violently, pulling the revolver from his jacket. Cocking the hammer back he placed the barrel to his brother’s forehead. “Shut the fuck up, Charlie. Shut your mouth. You’re a goddamn animal!” David’s voice shot out through the empty fields. His brother’s eyes stared directly into his. The bright blue eyes now seemed pale and sad. David lowered the gun. Tears welled in his eyes. Charles stood motionless, solemn and wounded. “Whip that look off your face Charlie.” Charles looked upward into the sky, closing his eyes. David stepped backwards, his arms dangling to his sides. Charles looked down at his feet. The two brothers stood apart from one another, the world around them slowly growing darker. Charles looked upward again, this time with his eyes wide open.

“Do you want to know what she said to me, David? Our sister? The day she died?” Charles’ voice was distant and hollow. David let out a breath from his mouth, his eyes strained and beginning to swell. “Tell me.” “She asked me how far away heaven was. And if Momma was waiting there for us.” “What did you tell her?” David’s voice was undeniably strained.

“I told her it didn’t matter. Because God hates us.” Charles lowered his head as he spoke. The brother’s visions met, and David saw his brother’s eyes without the façade that Charles had long since held over himself. They were pale and hateful. They seared through David. Charles had their father’s eyes.

David let out an animalistic sound. A moan that contained decades of suffering that had been buried into the deepest recesses of his thought. Tears poured down the man’s face. David Low wept for the first time in as long as he could remember. His brother stood emotionless, a fixture in David’s blurred sight. He fell to his knees, hunched over moaning and screaming. He pulled at his dirty hair and pounded his fists into the ground. Charles stood staring, barely moving a muscle.

David felt his body begin to calm as the evening set in. He stood up and looked at his brother, motionless and staring downward into the ground. The pit in his stomach had ceased to tighten. The world around him completely ceased to move as muscles in his body seemed to move without effort. Holding the revolver in his left hand, he raised the arm. The barrel directly faced his brother’s forehead. Charles looked up at David. He pulled back the hammer as Charles’ pale
eyes seemingly saw past his brother.

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The dilapidated house sat silently as the sun set. An emaciated dog emerged from the dead fields. Sniffing around the base of the house, he became startled by the sound of yelling nearby. The animal cautiously moved forward, terrified but driven by hunger to continue his search. The sky grew darker as the animal climbed onto the front porch. An explosive and deafening sound made the pathetic animal’s ears ring as he ran from the porch, hiding behind a nearby tree. The dog crept forward, slowly sniffing and determined to continue its search. As night covered the house, the dog was terrified by a second thundering that rang throughout the night sky. The animal ran as quickly as it could through the fields. The house of the Low’s stood in the dark, decaying and deteriorating as it continued its journey into nothingness.

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand.  

-Genesis 4:11
What Not to Write a Poem About

My father’s penis. My fascination with puss.
How I’ve always thought that menstrual blood smelled like thick red wine.
The way red wine smells too much like the boy John.
The fine, pink, vertical stretch marks on his hips and the heavier ones, horizons beneath his arms. Puss at all.
Feeling hungry, animal hungry, every time Zach came inside me.
The fact that I am quite sure, that his coming inside me, and our not using condoms, is most of the reason I fell in love with him so fast.
How badly I want this list to turn into a poem about feeling full.
The way I felt full, with Zach’s fistful of dick inside me.
My mother’s abortion.
The time I shook hands with the first man she ever loved.
What it would have been like if he had been the one to raise me.
My grandfather’s penis. Shaving Mathew’s back.
That time last summer when we drank tequila and club soda.
The water bottle we drank it out of, while driving, to the beach.
The blanket we sat on, that I stole from Roper when my dad was there, one of so many times. Cancer. The processed cheese that fell too hot onto my chin when Mathew forced a fried pepper into my mouth, piss drunk,
at the Sonic on Folly road. Falling in love in a Sonic parking lot.
The fact that I told him he was my soul mate, in June. For a lot of reasons.
How badly I have to pee. The kitchen crew at work: Sage and Sam and Eric.
My dog. My brother or his stutter because I’ve done it enough already.
Tricycles. Do not write about tricycles.
I could write a book with all the things we didn’t talk about on that last ride to work together. May sound silly, but it was always a dream of mine: Me at the typewriter with a bottle of whiskey; her in the living room whistling and ironing my shoes. But she would never have it. On the way to the arena, us in the Volkswagen, she just stared straight ahead. I regarded her baggy pants. In the book I’d make her less frumpish. I changed the radio to a country station and she changed it right back to rap. We had been like that lately, opposites. If I put on a smiling face she would don a frown. Maybe I was the one acting funny. Ever since I started hanging with the Gomez Brothers late nights after performances. Did helium really change a man like they said it did?

She kept adjusting her wig in the mirror, re-situating her life without me in it. I tried flittering my tie, yawning excessively, anything to get her attention. I even hit myself in the face with a mallet, which can be dangerous while driving. She just stared ahead, stoic as a trapeze artist. In the book, I’d make it so I told her about Candy, the chimpanzee trainer, and our rumpus love affair. In the book I’d lock the dressing room door. In the book she wouldn’t have had to find out for herself. The stadium drummed and our tiny car pulled up right in front. I turned off the motor and we listened to the cheering from the fans inside. A shaved poodle yapped and yapped from the backseat. I steadily removed my nose and went to give her a kiss, reaching with my big hands toward her orange and green afro. Turning away from me she stiffened, and then pulled down the rearview mirror to fix where tears had streaked her make-up. She was right anyways. My long form was cow pie; I’d never finish a stupid novel. And worse, no one wanted to publish a collection of short stories all about clowns. I sighed, giving her one last longing stare, and then we got out of the car. All fifteen of us.
Hearing of my small stature and freckly complexion
shook my hand, and, offering a smoke tucked behind his ear, decided on me
walked us downtown, to a place that tried to be posh
closed his tab to close the deal, turned the bedroom lights off.
Nights came and went, all going according to plan,
I slipped on his charm, disregarded his baggage, pieces of me starting to melt in his hands
At first he seemed pleased, till pleased turned to sickened
and that sickness turned potent
shoving us past midnight drunkenness
and forcing within me a sober acknowledgement
of my calm demeanor and his angry fears.
Darling I see those nights still-
shallow friends and fancy shirts and a man capable of depth,
you coward.
I can still remember my dinner date with Nebuchadnezzar. Or was it Methuselah? Either way they were a frightening bore and refused to pay for the bill. My date insisted on the blood of the innocent as his drink, and I had to help the Olive Garden kitchen staff with the sacrificial rites. The rites were rather simple, just a few glam rock songs played backwards, a recitation from the Necronomicon, and some blood from one of the chefs - I think his name was Pierre.

My complaint isn’t that he didn’t pay the steep fee for the drink, help out with the rites, or anything petty like that, it’s just that he never really said thank you. But then again he might have, but I’m not really fluent in ancient Aramaic.

Even worse though, all he ended up talking about was his stay in Monaco during the plague years. “The Gyps really got it I tell you, I saw them walk two-by-two up and down the boardwalk rubbing their boils and coughing up blood. Disgusting sight, and right outside my apartment. You know I never had this before what do you call it, Lasagna?” and he gulped the food down, with purposeful eye contact and a skeletal hand on my thigh.

I remember the date ending, the exchange of phone numbers, though I later learned the number he gave me was to a pay phone in an abandoned bus station in Queens. We promised each other we’d do this again except we’d see a movie, an opera, a live surgery; something fun and theatrical. When I went home I deactivated my eHarmony account. This time for good.
After six months
of only being hit (on) by
flying shrapnel

I sought to tend to
what
everyone seemed to need.

And I tried to enjoy it,
I really did.

I tried to lose myself in
this stranger’s ecstasy,
sense it in my own ignorant, tight
muscle.

But, when I saw her embarrassed breasts,
her wet opening,
the anonymous stranger
imposing himself

I started to shake,
weep.

For I had since been informed of
all your exploits since.

I had only ever bloomed for you
and I fear never again
will I be soft.

For here on out,
I am calloused
and you carry with you my first layer
of epidermis
(as you crash into the facelessness of the night).
Those who ride in airplanes
are either searching for God
above gilded clouds
or attempting to earn enough
Frequent Flyer points to upgrade to First Class.

We all want First Class:
extended leg room,
an inflated sense of self-importance,
and unlimited booze.
The drinks we could use when barreling
in a colossal aluminum can
30,000 feet above the Earth.

Sometimes, we mistake the sunrise
for angels heralding light,
but maybe there’s not major difference
between divinity and normality,
just point-of-view.

Manmade flight both terrifies and delights me.
For one, we’re fucking flying!
On the other hand, our engines might burn out,
our wings torn from the plane chasse,
then plummet to certain death.
We will fall for so long, we may still
think about falling.

Every time we hit turbulence,
I grasp the armrest and fight the urge
to scream, “I love you! I love you! I love you!”
to no one in particular,
just so that those trapped with me
will hear those words at least once in their life.
When they retrieve the black box
from the wreckage off the coast of the Atlantic,
that’s all they will hear: no screams, no gasps.
Just an overwhelming burst of
“I love you! I love you! I love you!”
that they might mistake
for the voice of God.
Alligator Spotted in Lake
Wylie, SC

My baby’s a fighter she got the fight all around her. It’s a wool blanket she throws off in the dark when she’s not punching cause she likes the cold. My baby’s a gator. She got that snap; that scale, too. Our beds all swamp during nights she feels too warm, too worn. My baby’s a monster - I ain’t kidding. She’s got her own mirror only I can see it ain’t real. It kisses me, though. My baby sparkles black. My baby’s a leech that heals in heels. A different pair of claws. She got that swing. In the mornings, my baby’s got sores on her sore shoulder. On some knuckles from the sway. My baby’s got no fat, just rock just rock that I rock in my arms, in the tunnel, in the dark. My baby waits leaning like a pimp cause she can’t stand the posers. She says she’s the only Queen. At night it’s so black she sees it’s just us kicking ourselves up out of the bog. My baby knows popcorn on the surface is nothing sweet just a trap with cameras and a cage she don’t know how to win in. My baby won’t surface once she’s got me. Nobody wants to cut open a queen and see what’s tucked inside. Gloves laced, I’m purple as a beet just harder to cook.
Say: fine, busy, but fine. Start
to feel old and very grey like a news-
paper. Let your room get messy,
replay the scenes in your head, over

and over, until you can
convince yourself they are something
else-- try to unplug them, to give them
away. Read Lawrence Ferlinghetti, try to be sexy

and slow, keep reading
and guessing. Have dreams, hot
nightmares-- wake up to an early sky
the color of chalk. Take

out the trash on a Monday.
Let the memories change, distort when
you reframe and force them into the
background of your new

life; like gas they expand to
fill the space. And you will
say-- always--
fine, busy, but okay.
I turn on the radio. Shot-gun, front seat of a once grey, silver-painted Lexus 4-wheel drive, platinum-plated wheels; inside that new-car smell. Fuzzy station, tune in, woman’s voice, Newsreel.

We sit back, heads leaning on firm headrest, held together before the blaring station as news of death and murder and shootings and tragedy and lost sons and broken mothers and prison sentences and appeals and battles for justice and fighting for revenge bleed into our ears. Incessant.

Silence collects in the car as we slice pieces of our exhausted ears from the misted window panes; fake glass- protect us with your plastic pretense so that when we fall and scatter into the river below our faces will not shatter with the very panes that protect us.

I feel the comforts of our brand new car as we race over Charleston’s bridge blue sky promising a day removed from the tragedies that blurt in hateful torrents from this damned radio station.

We shield ourselves in desperate conviction of our own safety, our own detachment
from the horrors of the news, separation from
the people that lost their loved ones, their sanity,
their livelihood, their lives. We sit guarded in our
arrogant knowledge of safety, of blessed immortality.

Fuzzy station, tune out, rapper’s voice
drags us from our unified struggle between detached
sympathy and wretched thankfulness
At least for today, we’ve finished our duty to the
10 o’clock news.
Last night I dreamt of mom. It felt important like she was dead but she’s not. In the dream I was in the tub I was a girl she was the prettiest kind of lady. I don’t know how else to describe it but it was as if the world was covered in gold. Covered in buttered popcorn. I think you understand. I’m trying to tell you how angry I am at you for finding a home that isn’t filled with broken suitcases and discontinued catalogues and plastic silverware. In my dream the only thing she kept was making sure the temperature stayed warm and she didn’t worry about losing me losing things losing you. When we were kids I thought it was a sin to not answer the payphone at our neighborhood pool. Now I know better but I miss the production of answering collect. Are you aware she has a different kind of sickness that accumulates in shoeboxes. In pitchers of tap water. I’ve seen it. I’m only calling because it would fascinate you the way Legos did. It’s similar really it just builds and builds and builds.
You buried yourself in a woman behind the big white church on my block—her back against a headstone, her legs splayed open, like a cut.

That woman used my name only once, and she used it in a lie, so that a boy I called mine would bury himself in her too.

You apologized to me for this later, for that boy’s choices, and I bought you breakfast. You called his lies ice sheets, or bergs. You called a girl I know too well, wonderful. You said that you spotted her from a life raft. You told me that you would like to break wine bottles over her back and christen her hips like the bow of a wooden ship. You told me that every time you came inside her you felt like you could conquer a small Nordic country—cock in hand.

I wrote a poem years ago and compared that same girl’s body to a barstool and those same hips to a steam engine rather than a ship.

You and I, we only talk about sex by the ocean. You always mention the smell, West Vaco and cord grass.
You say that you have been broken more times than I have.
You like to remind that I am twenty so often.

You whispered love under my tongue
last week and six months too late.
I was drunk on German beer. I believed you.
You said, I would like to kill you now,
to keep me here, at my peak,
the way they do with shellfish.
You talked about a doctor in Florida
who fucked his dead Mexican maid’s corpse for a decade.
You said Plaster of Paris like a prayer
and reminded me of Robert Browning
and I wanted to tell you about Porphyria and her lover
but you had me too tight by my hair.
God was a boy too once.
Young and brazen we slouched
In the back corner of that one
Window bar, like lost rum runners
In a Missouri wood.

Drinking cheap beer,
He told me a story
Of beautiful Indian elephants
And shining back alleys
That ended in dismembered
Dribble.

With evening, we stepped
Out into the desert. The wind
Torn sand cascades brushed
Across us for hours.
Until even the mountains

Gave in to the desert’s
Slow, eternal breath.
Outside the Fancy Steakhouse

You wake up on a park bench. It’s mid-afternoon and you’ve been asleep all morning. The sunlight beats on your dry eyes and you can barely see. Your parched mouth tells you to find some water. Your stomach screams for food, but hates you for what you constantly feed it. The playground is rather empty for this time of day. Maybe because you’ve been sleeping there on the bench.

You slowly stand up. The world spins around you violently, until you finally gain hold of it, burping. Your last forty from the night before lies empty in the dirt next to an anthill and your vomit. You leave it there on the ground and make your best attempt at stumbling away. Another day in the life, you think to yourself.

Reaching into your pocket, you find a few things. Luckily, your empty wallet is still there in the back left. Your ragged old jeans aren’t looking too bad you think, walking past the laundromat. The sidewalk warps and waves as you drudge onward. Your front pockets muster the caps to three forties and your last five dollar bill. Ten minutes later you have two dollars and a receipt from McDonalds. A large water brings you back to a functioning level. The corner store gives you another forty in a brown paper bag.

Now you’re out of money, so it’s time to make the two-mile walk downtown. The sun hangs low in the sky as the tourists sit down to eat their dinners. You sip the forty the whole way there, drinking half by the time you reach the fancy steakhouse. You went over your scheme in your head. The trick is to be charismatic and to pick the right people. If it all goes according to plan, you’ll be set on fast food and forties for another week.

You can only stand outside the fancy steakhouse once a week, or the owner gets mad. He’s alright with it once as week, as long as nobody complains. When the people leave the restaurant, you talk to them. It’s always best to get them right after the meal. Early on, when you are still somewhat coherent, you make the most money. Some of the regulars get to know you, and they give you a weekly allowance. You pick the tourist with the nicest suit and ask him about his dinner. He gives you a few bucks to leave him alone and walks away as the lights turn off at the fancy steakhouse.

It’s time to head down the street towards the bars. The same bars that you partied at in your younger days, before all this. Cracking your third forty, you notice that the people there are just as drunk as you are. It’s a Saturday night; there are people everywhere. The young people at the bar buy you drinks and give you money. When the bars close, they leave chanting your name, laughing. You’re a local celebrity, for what it’s worth.

You try to find a bed to sleep in, but never succeed anymore. You end up making the two-mile walk back towards the park. The stroll
back consists of counting the week’s money and drunkenly budgeting your purchases. You know you’ll have to repeat yourself in the morning, but it makes you happy, so you do it anyway. You wonder how things even got like this. You think how at least you’ve got money for some extra booze, and keep walking towards the playground that’s become your home.
If I were to list out the nature of my newest obsessions, it would begin with plastic storage boxes, as full as the black, leaf stuffed trash bags left fat and lonesome on my curb.

Mom shouts from her position on the swinging porch, “Honey, they aren’t coming until next Sunday!” And I, in response, “Who’s counting?”

I keep on remembering the day my friends found out I had a brother. They hunted your gangly frame down, recognized our noses—similar in the way that an upside-down strawberry would seem in shape. Unlike I, your nose was a bridge of freckles, like someone sprayed your sticky sweat-glossed face in light dirt.

Speaking of, I garden now, too.

You would be surprised at the size of my tomato bushes, reaching almost my collar bones. Oh, and before I forget, the truck is now broken as a result of a bolt of fierce, ungodly lightening. I tried, but the engine only sputters and hiccups, and there is no one here to fix it.
My Father has been Away Twenty Years but is Not a Mythic Hero

Elizabeth Sochko

I try to remember when
I started emulating
his loneliness
or when I started
noticing the difference
in his voice over
the telephone.
Unlike an epic
I don’t feel
his presence
in elements
I feel it in phrases
like “unemployment”
and “olive juice”
which is code
for I love you
which is actually
code for I don’t
know how to
say anything else.
Girl Found
Eating Herself

In Crib-
Turned-Cage;

Parents Charged.
Her bones

are home.
Her tears

are ritual.
Sister sings

hunger under
the porch,

red clay
mumble. Even

the dirt
don’t listen.

Some eat.

Others: meat.

Mother is
pure computer,

father, “goes
to church

and everything.
Manages accounts.”

One night,
police discover

her stuffed
between boxes

of expired
baby food,

all tangle
and snarl.

Readers Scan Newspaper
find tragedy lacking
by Some Body

Lauren Bradley
The aquamarine radial is the electric steel
Of a substance that your mama said not to try.
It turns you into an unruly cartographer, neglecting to draw
the
Correct lines of latitude to where you are in the world,

Your environment is your canvas, as you embellish the bor-
derlines
That keep the pearly glacial regions and the, dry dessert on
the opposite
Sides of you as if you are washing away the cities of the
world.
Leaving nothing but a strange empty wasteland as if to
wizen all that you know
Or ever knew

As a plume of smoke rises past your head, your life is gone
And from your palm it is rebuilt,
Reshaped into something that will never be the same

The world looks different now through the Windsor shades
of your past,
Looking upon the new landscape with a kaleidoscope vision
With the with the tectonic plate shifting and changing
The earth bore me
of stone. She made me a strong,
sturdy mountain, pieced together
with layers of rock that
dig down deep into my core.
But my center, though
surrounded by might granite,
is now my weakest point,
as that is where they stab
at me, and tear away my heart and soul.
Their hammer and chisel eat and
gnaw at the purest part
of me, granting me face and
body; a sickening disguise. They
place me alone, where passersby
may look and watch as time
and weather erode me, the earth's
own child, until I am no more.
Scraps

After “At the Illinois State Fair” by Brittany Cavallaro

Pray for reprieve. For
a Lucky scent. Pray for
old friends and no broken window.
Pray for Alabama men lynching
innocent families whole, who lived with ours
as we wanted for new foundation—
pray for the brindle bulldog’s
skin and the girl who discovered
the velvet candle. For our corridor
held near the chain-link fence. We’ll cradle
our yellow-winged fey and toss them
with the extinguished lights. I’ll tie
my shoes so they’ll curl
around my hands; you’ll follow soon
from the top bunk. They know we’ll resent
the Scorpions, so pray for spongy
oak. For fallen leaves. For
the soft wood to point upwards still,
into the sky. We’ll cling to its
topmost branches. We’ll turn away
from Natural Light. Pray for softened
sandpaper. Pray for flat-bottomed boats.
Pray that tonight, when our mother
crawls from her Pepto-Bismol bathrobe,
hers ceremonial Tylenol PM, from her bed
crying like left over yarn, when
she looks into our now empty rooms—
pray for particle board dressers,
for the old plaid mattresses. Pray for
her hands, then. Pray then
for the suitable ending.
And it came to pass while my father was having a heart attack he spoke about America.

Jennifer Across an Ocean

In the grey coating over Dublin,
in the dumb-drum of Abe’s music next door
-- pictures of my picture of our picture,
transubstantiation in a bowler hat,
tiny-brimmed frames. All of us
in cold, cold water,
if any of us are. All kindred spirits?
Pixels of drips on the hard-shifting car;
in the mirror of America.
Home. Home? Home. Home?
In the mirror of Bobo’s Burgers:
My face drips tension and blood,
gravely off the world’s left side, into
a vellum page, guarded for ages.
The mirror builds an illicit cairn
around kindly Irish eyes – Jennifer –
-- across an Ocean –
Jennifer in zeroes and ones.
The very best rare burgers ™ when you can get them.
Unglamorous legs, colorful belt buckles, sexy
sexy minds, still that plump bowler hat,
sing a legendary song:
Ulster will fight; drenched in nylon.
Ulster will be right: whiskey-sick by 12pm.
Jennifer across an ocean. Jennifer
in the deepest cairn. When the IRA
drops a ladder among your stone prison,
our heads will simply swirl.