To be perfectly honest, my time with Dialogue has been a beautiful and completely unexpected experience. Working with the magazine was most definitely not in my five-year plan, and never would I have assumed that I would be hired as the editor-in-chief.

If you had met me in my elementary years, my crippling timidity and passion for the seclusion of tree-climbing would have been two of my most memorable characteristics. But it is through my ongoing attempt to break away from these isolating tendencies that I have learned to listen, and in listening that I have discovered the privilege of community.

While cleaning out the office to make room for this year’s team, I took some time to explore the shelves. Above one of the desks sat numerous issues: Dialogue stretching back to 1974, complete with pieces from Professors John Timmerman, Donald Hettinga, and Ken Brett, among others. To the left of those tomes are issues of Loci and Literary Review, precursors to the publication we have inherited.

My point is this: Dialogue is a tradition, with a past that reminds us that we are just one piece of something greater, something bigger than me--than all of us. That idea terrifies me, but it also makes what we are doing here all the more important.

We get to join the conversation, for better or for worse, and in doing so to recognize that Dialogue is not our own, not by a long shot. Dialogue is everyone who submits to it, regardless of whether or not the juries select your piece. It is everyone who ever picked up a copy and flipped through it. Readers are just as vital to a publication as its editor, and in this case, that reader is you.

Dialogue is what we make of it, and I am excited about what we will do with the magazine this year. Four new issues will find a place on the shelf, building on the tradition and leaving behind something made possible only by your contributions.

~Heather Tills, Editor-in-Chief
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LAKE 16
Leah Sienkowski

Onion, tree, cockleshell.
I undress each one
peeling layers down to single rings
to cells, salt, carbon, nothing.
Naked before time,
I arrive at the germination of the giant
weeping willow
as old as this very barn
and the deforestation of this field.

Here in this unearthing
I think of what I have stolen
and what must be returned:
cockles to their shells
onions to their dirt
trees to their forests
weight to the soil.

Meanwhile, row by row, I knit songs
slung like towels over chairs
soon to dry my swimming body.

Wrapping gratitude and apology
around my shoulders,
I will protect my shivers from the sun.
Yet another crumpled page tumbled off the rim of the chest-high plastic basketball hoop, entirely missing the overflowing bin below and rolling to join the burgeoning paper mountain in the room’s center. Colin shoved his fingers through well-raked curls and huffed, avoiding the accusing stare of the empty page on the desk—tidied in an earlier fit of procrastination-driven fastidiousness—wishing to God that this essay could just write itself.

When it came to late-night writing sessions, he could only go for about half an hour before drowsiness drifted in to say hello. This last exchange had nearly sucked him into a deeply restful conversation with sleep itself. And still the page remained stubbornly blank.

So he threw his pen across the room and got up before he could see where it rolled. He’d find it later, when he needed another excuse to stall. For now, though, he was going for a walk. Colin slid his arms into the sleeves of his well-worn leather coat and pocketed his keys.

“Dude, where’re you going?” his roommate asked from the couch, not looking up from Mario Kart. “It’s, like, midnight. And you promised you’d play a round with me tonight.”

Colin sighed. Was it fair that his roommate happened to be a genius who could run circles around his classes without doing any homework? “Jerk,” Colin mumbled. Then, louder: “I’ve gotta get out of here, wake up a little. It’s either that or coffee.”

His roommate chuckled. “Better walk, then. We know how great you are at focusing when there’s a cup of coffee jittering through your system.”

Colin laughed in agreement and slipped out the apartment door.

The night-cooled streets of the small college town were empty as Colin headed down the sidewalk. His feet traced a familiar path past the last building in the apartment complex, around a poorly lit sculpture dedicated to some decades-dead city politician, along a street lined with aging duplexes, and through a gate in a chain link fence. This was Clark Park, Colin’s nighttime hideout with a chipper rhyming name and a pleasant lack of the typical unsavory characters found in average city parks after dark.

He crossed the open grass beneath the stars and headed for a stand of pines tucked into a distant bend in the chain link fence that marked the park’s perimeter. Nestled at the center of the pines, he knew, would be two newly planted lilac bushes, one old-fashioned black lamp-post, a matching black metal bench, and, in a ten-foot-wide depression, a tiny pond. The pond was usually around only in the spring or after a heavy rainfall, like the one they’d received that morning. But somebody—whatever friend or family member had a particularly loving memory of Mrs. Geraldine Butler, according to the brass plaque screwed to the bench’s back—had found it picturesque enough to place a bench there.

Colin angled his shoulders to slip between the low-hanging pine boughs—and stopped short when he reached the edge of the little clearing. A young woman sat on the bench. The lamppost pitched harsh light across her face, which was turned just far enough for her to catch his arrival with the corner of her eye. She glanced over her shoulder at him, face expressionless.

“If you’re here to kick me out, screw you,” she said flatly. “I’m not moving. If you’re here to mug me, I’m broke.”

Colin stepped forward into the pool of lamplight and shrugged with more nonchalance than he felt. “And what if I’m here to join you?” he asked quietly.

She stared hard into his face. Something—he’d never know what—seemed to reassure her.

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**Marks**

Geneva Langeland
“In that case, there’s plenty of room on the bench.”

Colin approached cautiously. He’d been visiting this tiny, tucked-away clearing for two years and had never once seen another human being in it. For another thing, even though this city was a safe place, people usually seemed terrified of each other, refusing to make eye contact on the street, securing everything that could be locked down. They never invited strangers to join them on secluded benches in the middle of the night.

But Colin chose to toss his concerns into the pond. Tonight, they just weren’t worth it. He slid onto the bench beside the young woman, sitting as far away as he could without feeling rude. That left about a foot and a half of space between them. Just in case.

She looked about twenty-five, with blue eyes and a red-blonde ponytail that streamed down the back of her worn dark coat. A metal stud gleamed in her nose and three silver hoops decorated the ear he could see. She wasn’t beautiful, exactly, but she held a fierce steadiness that helped Colin’s shoulders relax.

The young woman nodded curtly. “I’m Jane,” she said.

“Colin.”

“By the way,” she said coolly, “I do have a knife. But I won’t use it unless I have to. Strictly for self-defense.” Colin stared. She shrugged. “Just thought you should know, in case you were planning to attack me or something.”

Colin swallowed hard. “The life can stay put. I’ve got no agenda. I’m just a lazy college bum refusing to do his work.”

“Oh?” She turned to peer into his face. “What are you avoiding?”

He sighed. “Grad school applications. It’s my statement of purpose. You know, that single document that’s supposed to sum up everything you’ve ever done, everything you’ve ever been, and everything you ever hope to be?”

She laughed. “Grad school. So what’s an ambitious guy like you doing in the park when he should be writing? What’s the hang-up?”

“Everything.” He dropped his face into his hands. “I can’t even start it. I just keep staring at the page, wondering if I’ve ever actually done anything worth writing down.” With a laugh of exasperation, he lifted his gaze to meet hers. “I mean, other than spending who knows how many years in school, what, really, have I ever done? What has the rest of the world been doing while I’ve been blundering around in—in academia?” He smiled wryly. “What have you done?”

Jane looked him full in the face, unsmiling. “Quit college halfway through my sophomore year. Got married.”

Colin’s eyes flicked to her left hand. No ring. She saw the glance and waggled her left hand beside her face. “Yeah,” she said flatly, “no ring. He died. About two months ago. Car crash with a drunk driver. He was in a coma for a while; while he was out, I lost my job and then the apartment, ’cause I couldn’t pay. When he died…there wasn’t anything left. I’ve been on the road since, trying to get a foothold somewhere.”

Jane ran a hand through his curls. “Any luck here?”

Abruptly, she glanced at her watch and stood. “Speaking of, my bus leaves in an hour,” she said. “But there’s something I have to do in every town before I leave.”

“What’s that?”
She smiled down into his face. “I make my mark.” Grasping his hand, she pulled him to his feet. “C’mon.”

Colin followed her back through the pines, across the lawn, and out the gate in the chain link fence. Jane stopped just outside the park entrance and surveyed the empty, duplexed street. “This is a nice town,” she said matter-of-factly. “Not much graffiti around.” She glanced back at him. “Let’s change that.”

A nervous trembling bloomed in the pit of Colin’s stomach. Shirking his work, skulking around a park after dark, talking to strange women about his troubles—those deviances from the norm, he could handle. But the worst law he’d ever broken was the speed limit. This town’s council enforced its anti-graffiti policies very heavily, even to the point of leaning on the college until it broke up the campus fraternities, which had been prone to encouraging pledges to decorate the streets with naughty slogans.

His concern must have shown on his face, because Jane clapped a hand on his shoulder and smiled. “Don’t worry,” she reassured him. “I don’t want to get busted either. So I always keep it small.” Reaching into her jacket pocket, she pulled out a black Sharpie. “This is our only weapon.”

Colin nodded, still unsure. But when she turned to continue up the silent street, he followed. A minute later, she stopped in front of the bronze statue that commemorated the dutiful work of—Colin squinted to read the inscription in the granite base—Henry Jamieson, City Commissioner, 1948-1962.

Jane gazed up into Mr. Jamieson’s brass scowl and ran a finger down the cigar clenched in the statue’s right hand. Slowly, she circled the statue, paying particular attention to its granite base. Colin’s head swiveled, his senses on hair-trigger alert for any sign of detection. Finally, a spot on the back of the base caught Jane’s eye and, when she knelt beside it, Colin stepped to her side.

Jane slid her hair back behind her shoulder and bent to press the tip of her marker against the smooth granite. Colin held his breath as the ink-sodden felt tip made contact with the stone: too late to go back now. In small, careful script, Jane wrote a message across the base of the stone: Love you forever, Michael. Her face was like flint.

She capped the marker and rose slowly. Colin reached out and took the marker, which was warm and slightly damp. Colin settled to his knees and stared at a spot on the rock just above Jane’s message. The empty stone glared back, as blank as the page on his desk. He closed his eyes. Then he opened them, scribbled three words, and capped the marker.

There. It was done. He rose and brushed gravel from the knees of his jeans. Jane held her hand out for the marker and he relinquished it with relief. The pair looked at each other, uncertain what to say.

Then she glanced at her watch. “I’d better head for the bus station.” She smiled at him, leaned over, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Goodbye, Colin.”

All he could do was nod and lift a hand in farewell as she turned to leave. And when she was out of sight, he began walking back toward his apartment, his roommate, his blank page.

Back in the empty streets, the lamps shone dimly on the single dried leaf skittering down the sidewalk, on the brass cigar in Mr. Jamieson’s hand, and on the fresh inscription at the base of the granite face: I was here.
CHOKE CHERRIES
TRENTON HEILLE

Choke cherries
in a hornet's nest

Here, a Frenchman
sighs taranchular
well into the fifth hour

Choke cherries
smeared across
white cliffs

hieroglyphic
and suffocating
under the weight
of signhood

Augustine
was right, this
time anyway

the Frenchman
agrees - sees a
mountain of
choke cherries,

the minds of
the patristic fathers
and lesser deities

echo of origin
bounded, silent
Tears, and sidewalks. A stitch in my side. Sew me upside-down, my sweet nothing. Funny thing, my darling, was how sweetly you broke the news—tears and everything. How staged. Club-struck nosebleeds bled yellow over my poor lips, gold-clotting and shiny. Hurts like hell, but bruises in twos and threes only fuel me like breath fiery tongues swell to taste, and it slakes me. O sing in me this black comedy.

If only you knew the mark you left. For these songs, sincerely,

thank you.
TEA TIME
JOELLA RANAIVOSON

At the end of the precipitous drive, down the steeply angled driveway, a house emerged out of the foliage and flowers bordering it. Claire’s house: the friend and classmate whose home we were all gathering at for this Mother-Daughter Tea. Each year, a troupe of about five mothers would initiate the planning and carrying out of this Tea for their college-bound senior daughters. This Tea is a commemoration of women who are mothers giving a blessing and send-off to their daughters who are becoming women.

“Bye, Dad. We’ll flash when we’re done,” I called out as I stepped away from our white four wheel drive, whose model and type to this day I do not know. In Kenya, where cell phones and “credit” are sold separately—prepaid plans aren’t popular—every second of a phone call, and each SMS or text, depletes your credit store which must then be refilled; hence, we “flash” or call, hanging up before the other side answers.

I followed my mom toward the front door, and at her nod, I knocked on the door as I twisted open the handle. The hum of ceiling fans and the din of women’s voices in the kitchen greeted us with hellos and welcomes. “Head on to the backyard, Joella, the girls and other moms are there. Hi, you are Noël?” one mother warmly greeted my mom and me. As my mom met this other mother, my eyes glanced around the living room. To the left of the fireplace sat a patterned Turkana basket, oversized and hand-woven by the women of the tribe using the doum palm tree. This basket in Claire’s living room was filled with blankets. In our house, Mom kept a Turkana basket as a toy holder of my baby brother’s play things. You’ll find a Turkana basket in many missionary family homes in Nairobi—their design is lovely and their size makes them quite useful. Turkana is the desert region and tribal group of northern Kenya, a people and culture distinct from other Kenyan groups. Four months earlier in January, I had spent a week in Turkana on a Cultural Field Studies trip with some classmates—it was one of the highlights of my senior year.

Still thinking about Turkana, my mom and I made our way to the backyard. It was beautiful that day, a distinctive Kenyan day—sunshine whose rays kissed your skin without any assaulting burns. The air was a temperate seventy degrees, and the late afternoon sunlight brightened the blooms of the purple bougainvillea buds on their vines. The planted palm trees danced discreetly in the wind’s embrace, and the hanging chimes tinkered their song. The breeze wafted the scents of crumbly spinach quiche and cherry pie, Gouda cheese and grain crackers, and milky, heart-warming chai from the two tables laden with food and drink. It was a Sunday afternoon in May, and the sense of the end of many things approaching hung heavily upon us. As I joined the other women in the yard, I knew in my bones that today would mark the end of something. A sense came upon me that the beauty of the day also held the promise of tears.

Still, there was anticipation in the air—the girls’ smiles were excited, looking forward to what was ahead. I walked over to Claire, and embraced her, whispering a “Thank you for hosting,” before two other friends led me and my mom to our place at the tables. Walking toward the tent and stepping into its cool shade, a smile played on my lips in delight at the beauty of the table settings. White table cloth was graced with white dishes and medium glasses that formed another circle on the round table. Beads of condensation rolled down the sides of silver pitches of iced water, and the centerpieces of miniature palm fronds, scented flowers, and a candle lay
at the heart of each table. A single pink rose with a card attached by a pink ribbon that read *Grace, God’s grace be with you* was laid at each place setting, and a sense of appreciation for the thought and care that went into everything for that particular afternoon washed over me.

The day before, some of us girls had been together, talking about the Tea. “Mrs. Purington asked me if I would be willing to be one of the girls to start the portion of us talking about our moms,” I told Karisa, a girl I’d known since we were twelve, but who I only recently realized was a kindred soul who shared a love of storytelling in music. “And I said sure...I didn’t think it would be hard...but now I’m a bit nervous.” I explained.

“What are you going to say?” Kristiana, another old friend, asked me. For a moment, I wondered about sharing my thoughts, having not yet sorted it in detail, but I went ahead anyway. “I think I want to write a song for my mom and then play it for her,” I said quickly before I could change my mind and remain silent about it. Now I was bound to doing it, with ears as witnesses.

My two older sisters had gone before me at their Mother-Daughter Teas in their respective senior years, so I knew it was a meaningful, emotional, and usually wonderful time for the moms and daughters alike. I wanted to say something heartfelt and eloquent, but knew I ran the risk of babbling if I went unprepared. I pondered to myself in the days leading up to the Tea: *What could I say that my sisters hadn’t already said? That my sister a year younger than me wouldn’t say when her turn came?* Then the thought popped into my head. *Give her a song.*

Beneath the tent, everyone had taken their seats at the tables—mothers and daughters sitting next to one another. Mrs. Bascom, Claire’s mom, tapped the side of a glass with a spoon to call our attention. Looking around at the seated women, I was startled again to behold how many of these girls looked like their mothers. To the left was Haley and Mrs. Compean’s matching copper-red hair that you could spot from a distance; over on the right were Beth and her mom with their near-identical facial structure—if you squinted your eyes, you’d be hard-pressed to tell who was who; and to the center sat Jenni and her mom, with their complemented postures and smiles. And I wondered how much I looked like my Mother—I knew I favored my Dad—but I also knew people couldn’t tell my Mom from me or my sisters from the back or afar.

When she had our attention, Mrs. Bascom and the hosting mothers officially welcomed us to the Tea, expressing gratitude and excitement for the event, and for all the mothers and daughters. Then she invited us to taste and partake in the awaiting scrumptiousness. And we did. As dainty dishes were filled, cleared, then filled once or twice more, and conversation had taken hold of each table and even across tables, the atmosphere relaxed familiarly. It felt like any other gathering of us girls; but this time, our mothers were with us, and the sense that this event was special made the afternoon feel sacred.

As the eating ended, a hosting mother stood up, calling our attention once again, to say that it was time for the mothers to issue their blessing and gift to their daughters. We daughters exchanged glances and smiles across the tent as our mothers rummaged through bags and purses behind them for their slips of paper with their words and their gifts.

Haley and her mom stood up in red-haired unison, as Mrs. Compean held up her page with two hands. Nervous and laughing, Haley leaned on the back of her chair, saying “Mom, I can’t look at you.” Laughter softened the now emotionally fragile air. Mrs. Compean promptly turned to her right, and began to read seemingly to the air in front of her. Her daughter, embarrassed but smiling, listened on.
Each mom took her turn. Some told stories of their daughter as an infant or small child, and many of them remarked on their wonder that the little girl who wanted only to braid her mom’s hair or to run around barefoot outside was already a woman and leaving home. Our moms’ stories about us when we were little made us laugh; our moms’ stories about us now made us cry. Then each mom concluded her own words about her daughter by presenting her with a scarf, shawl, or quilt—a wrap to take with her to college to remind her daughter of the comfort and love of home that would always be with her.

My mom was nervous—she doesn’t like public speaking—but she spoke for this. I listened intently, face pinched with anticipation and straining slightly to comprehend and ponder every Malagasy word. When she concluded her blessing, she wrapped around one shoulder then the other an ivory scarf, traditional and made in Madagascar.

Then it was the daughters’ turn.

I picked up my guitar and fiddled with the skirt of my dress trying to sit with grace and the instrument in my lap. “So, I was asked to say something about my Mom. But instead, I thought I would write a song,” I explained to the now-attentive eyes and ears of moms and friends. “So, Mama, this is for you.” I sang my song.

Eighteen and beautiful/She married her true love/Some years later came four baby girls to speak of/One by one each girl grew up finding her way/And I’m sitting here the third, and here’s what I wanted to say. Not yet having the song memorized, I looked up and down from the page to my listening audience, eager for them to hear and receive this part of our story. One of the times I looked up, I saw Beth’s mom’s eyes shining, and then a tear broke free and ran down her cheek. I imagined what they must be thinking. For some of the moms, I knew my classmates were their last child, their baby leaving home and going off to college. For others, it was their first child. What’s more terrifying? More wrenching? Your first or your last?

I’m eighteen now and waiting for my own true love/Grace and beauty and love are all that I dream of/I’ll be sitting on my porch, counting one by one someday/My own babies full grown and already ready to move away.

I didn’t dare look at my own mom for more than a glance—I didn’t know what would happen—and I didn’t want to risk tears in the middle of singing a song. So I looked up at her once and briefly, and caught her expression of listening intently. You believed in all I could be/You taught me who a woman ought to be/And I know you’ll always be calling for me, come on home.

When my strumming died down, signaling the end of the song, I looked up from the page for a final time. The girls I had grown up with and their mothers’ faces were wet and their eyes shining. Shock at their reactions registered in my mind even as I breathed an internal sigh of relief at not having made any large mistakes. There. You have my gift now, Mom.

Haley went afterward, standing up to indicate she had something to say about her mom.

“So you guys know it’s been a rough year,” she began, alluding to the discovery of a tumor on her pituitary gland, “and I wanted to share something my Mom taught me.”

“Whenever I’m stressed or feeling really overwhelmed, Mom always stops me and says, ‘Haley sweetheart, where’s God?’” Haley paused, letting the question hang. “Uh, whenever she asks this, I always feel stupid, like, I know the answer to this question, I just can’t think of it. Um, He’s here?” Haley’s voice turned upward, imitating her own questioning.
Then she continued, “And she would always say, ‘He’s right here with You, He has this in His control.’ And I go, oh yeah, He is here.” We were all chuckling at Haley’s gesturing and animated face and her mom’s amused expression as she sat listening to her daughter.

“One week, it was especially bad—I missed a lot of class, and I had a ton of schoolwork. Then I had to miss more school to have this MRI done,” Haley explained “And as I’m lying there, I start freakin’ out, thinking of everything I need to do, and that I’m here having this test, when all of a sudden—something stops me and I think—‘Haley, where’s God?’” Mrs. Compean’s hand came to her mouth as a choked cry escaped through her hand. “And this time I knew the answer,” Haley continued, her own voice now short from barely constrained emotion, “He’s right here with me. That’s a lesson my Mom taught me,” she finished. Silence hung in the breeze for a moment—and then we applauded her.

As the afternoon faded into early evening and the girls kept sharing about their moms, a realization of what the Tea meant settled into me. These mothers and families had made a life in Kenya, a life including this daughter who was now ready to leave. We weren’t Kenyan by birth or tradition or rite; but we all loved Kenya: some with an innateness in our very bones, others with a reluctance still being worked out by God and time. These mothers had boarded a plane from Georgia, Florida, California, Amsterdam—Madagascar—as their own mothers and families bid them goodbye. They too had had words poured over them in blessing, a gift bestowed to commemorate their new beginning, and hearts wrenched at their leave for a foreign land, while their own were beating in dream and delight, anxiety and anticipation.

So on this evening, we each stood at a precarious and wonderful threshold—of mothers beginning to say goodbye to children who are no longer children, soon to pack them up and set them on a plane to bound across continents and countries, cultures and people, as they hold onto hope and prayer that their child has everything they will need to thrive. Now it was ours to venture out and theirs to bid farewell. Just as they had come to Kenya, now they would send their children away from Kenya to a land foreign to their children, though not to themselves.

The cord that had tied each one of us for eighteen years to our families, providing support, strength, and life that had sustained us all of our lives—that evening, our mothers began to untie that cord joining us to them. It would be a few weeks more before we walked across a stage and received diplomas indicating our academic achievement. A few weeks more before we would board a trans-continental jet, either with our family or alone bound for the United States or Europe or wherever we were headed. And a few months more before the finality of that last goodbye from dorm floors and college campuses. But right then, we still had time with our mothers. By the time we daughters had had our last word, the lovely of the afternoon day had long succumbed to the beauty of nighttime in May. And for that moment, untying was enough.
And in the noise of zephyric speech, the wane of blithe impediment in a pedantic dance, a laurel of air sedated end to end, confers this round of smoking halo, and hallowed in the dusk-night alone, conferring-empty wreathes its penance of seraphic-soft upon the brow. – O esoteric night!

The descented black commedia... One can not but touch the petals skin-white, folding their youth upon a musaic coronation, announcing tendril reach upon the reticent nothing. Sheathes of coherent dew, cuppings filled with the shaded words, convey the lucid ear to hear of its symphonic gray:

Nighted breath does well to bear this song of songs, concurrent sighing, and the sensed wind flowers upon notes returning high, dwelling akin among them. Pour la première fois, continuez.
When I first met him, he didn’t know he was a god. Naively, he assumed that everyone could see as he could. He thought all eyes could puzzle out the intricacies of relationships, or the golden thread of a stamen, flexing, pliable and weak, coiled around every person. He didn’t know that other eyes were blind to the thoughts of the trees, that other ears were deaf to the song of the spheres.

I asked him what his name was, but he didn’t know. He knew mine well enough, though I couldn’t understand what he said when he uttered it.

That’s not my name.

“Well sure it is.” His voice throbbed with his own almighty conviction. “It’s the truest name you can ever have.”

He said it was the name of my soul. He said it was my Name of Names.

I said my name was Mary.

Sometimes we would lie on the dew-soaked grass, watching the stars disappear as the sun trekked across the sky. He would tell me about the chariot that pulls it and he would speak of the sun as though it were an old friend.

He could coil around my deepest desires like smoke. He could wrap around my core like a cocoon. He could open the petals of my soul.

He knew me in so many ways; I would fall ill thinking of the subtle plethora growing like a cancer inside me. He would touch those tumors and tell me how fallible I was. There was little that amazed him more than how solid I was, when he alleged that I was so intangible.

He didn’t believe me when I told him he was a god. When I whispered to him that at night I could feel his wings brushing against my flesh. That no one could talk to the dead like he did. That no one could travel across the Styx and come back like he had.

Where had he come from? Where was he going?

He fell like ash from the volcano of Olympus. He rose from slumber like a somnambulist. He walked the world like a manifestation of the Enuma Elish. He trembled with every breeze; he bled with every breath he took. Every cool bliss entered him, raised his hackles, and left, leaving the moist residue of prayer behind.

“If I am a god,” he said, “what does that make you?”

A shadow, I told him, meant to follow you everywhere. Meant to be bathed in the noonday sun. Meant to disappear beneath every tree.

I am a shadow in the shade.
Tyler Minnesma, *Seeping*, Digital Photograph
Tori Haugen, *THE ONE LEFT BEHIND*, Photography, dimensions
Asheligh Vandekopple, Evening in Roma, Digital Photograph
1. muscovite
2. flying wedge nametag
3. coffee grounds, lid off
4. wet rock
5. sweater
6. elma chai
7. action figure
8. coffee grounds, lid on
9. screen shot
10. bandanna
11. dalmy's nametag
12. buckeye
13. swedish scarf
14. heart pot
15. tiny cards
16. broken drumstick
17. screenshot 2
18. bottle cap
19. tigers pin
20. cuff links
21. sweater 2
22. binder
23. jackknife
24. keffiyeh
25. laptop
Stephanie Kang, STUDY OF HARAJUKU GIRLS, Digital Drawing
Stephanie Kang, STUDY OF HARAJUKU GIRLS, Digital Drawing
Jonathan Lin, UNDERCROSS, Digital Photograph
Ashleigh Vandekopple, VICTORIAN LADY, Mixed Media
Scott Rodger, Frye Island, Dictionary on masonite support
Stephanie Kang, *Maybe You Shouldn't Be the Bunny*, Mixed Media
Asheligh Vandekopple, *European Arm in Arm*, Digital Photograph
Anna Hanchet, UNTITLED, Sharpie on paper
Anna Hanchett, UNTITLED, Sharpie on paper
Unknown Buck Friday Carnival Participants, Pencil on paper
The Duck Story

May 21, 2012

Some days when I'm writing a paper and being like WORDS... GRRRR... Come to me you little things, you! And I'm trying to round up the little suckers in my head and make them behave...

The last thing I need is to hear Nicki Minaj's new hit single blasted from the third floor.

"I'M ON THE FLOOR... LALALA! HOOP HOOP TWINKLE, CAN'T STOP!"
Or a call from my mother wondering if I can Skype her and tell whether her outfit looks *OK.*

Or to discover the excitement available in the simple activity of blowing the dust out from between the G and H keys on my laptop.

Or... to realize that my friend is knocking desperately on my window with an expression mixed with equal amounts of confidence, confusion, and delight....

IT’S LIKE ENOUGH ALREADY! GET A FREAKING DAY JOB, WORLD and let me think about the effects of the Second World War in peace, dammit!
But alas. The latest distraction is successful in capturing my every emotion not already occupied in response to my other minor distractions.

Mostly due to the fact that I am thoroughly offended, I go to talk to him.

Before I can get a word in edgewise, however, he says with excitement:

He leads me to the back door of the dormitory where five of the most cutest, littlest, motherless, shivering baby ducklings are huddling.
After a quick glimpse my heart melts, and all previous agitations at poor lyricism dissolves. Fluffy and huddling on the doorstep the creatures are apparently unaware of the nasty habit some doors have of flinging open without notice and giving way to monstrous stamping feet.

In a single bound I plaster myself against the door and prepare to wage war on anyone who dares to hurt them.

For a moment... We are heroes! I name them after my right hand: Pinky, Ring, Index, Middle, and Thumb. We are a family and we will be happy forever.

But suddenly, it becomes clear just how little we know about ducks. Do they have rabies? What can they eat? Do they have a sense of smell?

I feel like a new parent in the middle of her homework with no time to deal with a brood of five.

My friend leaves and returns quickly with another friend, a cardboard box and a towel.
DUCKS! Says the new friend, excitedly. “Ducks....” we echo, with a sense of futility and overwhelmedness.

The three of us decide that joint ownership over five ducks is not only mathematically complex, but emotionally impossible: none of us is ready for that kind of commitment.

We decide that the only course of action is to find the mother duck.

We enlist the help of some of our good Biologist friends in hopes that they might have a few tricks about neglect and abuse among the duck family, or perhaps know at least a bird call or two.

Turns out nobody knows shit about ducks. The added company only serves to magnify the collective guilt and probably decrease our chances of returning the ducklings to a broodless mother. The scare of seeing five small warm bodies hatch from those innocent porcelain eggs was probably shock enough.
Our next state of emotion is that of empathy for the mother duck. Quintuplets! What a burden! Feeling the full responsibility of parents, we sheepishly head over to the Nature Preserve to ask for some advice.

However, this doesn’t go so well. Instead of advice, we receive a lecture ripe with condescension.

You don’t understand, we are all thinking. You don’t know these ducks, you didn’t name them. You didn’t save them from the cold, shelter them from being sideswiped by the door, sacrifice your bath towel, or search the campus for their mother. We are the only Jesus these birds will ever know....
Then somebody realizes that ducks can’t get rabies, and our role play comes to a halt. Instead we celebrate the fact that rabies is a pain these poor creatures will never have to experience.

Then somebody chokes back the words: “But ducks don’t have a sense of smell.” And again, we are all brought to tears.

Suddenly a van drives by. The driver waves.

“Dave Warners!” We shout. “That man is a Savior,” somebody says.
“That man is on my resume!” somebody else chimes in.
We tell him we’re thinking of letting the ducks go in the Pond by the Seminary, but he suggests the coyote lair in the back of the Nature Preserve. I clutch my right hand until the blood runs out and hope he is kidding. Dave smiles. “I’m kidding.”

There is a sigh of relief.

“I think you guys are doing the right thing,” he says.

We swoon and walk over to the Seminary pond and survey the area.

Our pride and wounded pride, anticipation of great grief, initial excitement, embarrassment, and realizations of the hard truths of nature give way to raw sentimentality.
I murmur my goodbyes, and feel as if someone is shooting off my fingers one at a time.

We choose the more natural landscape as the ducks' final resting place, and the boys let the little guys tumble out of the cardboard box and onto the cold earth. Motherless again.
She slept in the passenger seat;  
I slept at the wheel, dreaming to the  
rhythm  
of the road,  

but as we crested a hill  
we opened our eyes to a new sky  
spread out like banquet table  
where wine has spilled.  

A thousand cherry trees  
in bloom--too early--  
tomorrow was Easter Sunday  

"Can you blame them?" she asked.  

I was lost, somewhere in that sky  
wondering about the stain.
Down the street—and down on luck, I supposed—Frankie sputtered, sidestepping back and forth on the tree-plowed, splintered sidewalk. There he was, like a jogger doing a broken two-step in place. He does this thing with his lips too, like he’s a horse with an exasperating thought, his fat lips slapping his gums continuously. Poor Old Frankie.

When I first saw him he was doing something like this, and so, I stopped. It was then that I became aware of a small lump in my chest, my right nipple singing—stretching and aching and hard enough to cut diamonds (I would sometimes say).

I left my car, its ding-ding ring telling me that this was a mistake and that I left its precious door open, and stopped him near a willow tree. And he was sore. I went as far as to touch his shoulder and offer a tentative “Sir?” before he shucked the whole thing off. He looked at me with those tired, lion-growl eyes and gave a forward “F--- you” and hobbled past on what must have been legs bowed by horses, a regular old cowboy with Brillo Pad hair and a pouting lip.

Gosh, I was embarrassed at this point. I know you can manage for yourself I didn’t mean to say that you couldn’t live like you are: a well-adjusted body to normal society. I did my own frightened shuffle toward his waning shadow.

“I’m sorry sir, but, excuse me?”

He looked down, accusing the sidewalk saying, “Don’t touch me, alright?”

I think of Rocky Balboa screaming Stella out of his stroke-slouched mouth, a slurred speech that Rocky got from fists and Frankie got from I don’t know where, and my nipple feels the prick of needle, the doctor’s shot that I close my eyes during.

I follow at a longer distance. “I am so sorry. I thought something was wrong. I’m so sorry sir. Really I am.”

“Just don’t f---ing touch me, alright?”

That was the night I had my first visions, my first real moments of terror and awe.

“I’m so sorry.”

I slept strange. I operated on a binary sequence: flip flopping onto my left and right side, mirror positions to be sure. I moaned “Sleep please” as one of those half awake, half baked good ideas, a mantra for sure. I prayed to God and asked for a minute or two this one time. I have to wake up in three hours. Please, I need this.

Sleep was not my friend, though. It only offered a small relief.

I woke up—I don’t know when—to see my bedroom ceiling ripping at the seams. If only homes were that organic. The hand of God peels my home like a ripe banana, and I realize I cannot move. My brain tells me to move this way and that, but my body stays rigid and I know that this descending thunderhead is God in a shroud: His secret hold by a Cumulonimbus incus cloud, my body in terror of anvil-shaped puff stuff that I somehow know is the Lord.

I am writhing, I tell someone sometime. As my eyes let loose, a movement that mimics a wild roll of sarcastic exasperation, I catch in my sight my sin. How do I understand this? I know I know. I see it: a blue glow spot on the bed sheets, a horrible presence. And I arch my back to cover its wet puddle surface.

Maybe I knew sin by shape, a dark semen-stained mark caught in the fibers of unwashed sheets.
At parties, I tell this joke for the fourth time, “My nipple can cut diamonds.” Ow I think. I feel a lump.

I wake up a second time—the setting, my unbroken room; the sky wound, cauterized and all put back together like it was nothing at all.

***

There were some words I could never wrap my arms around—slippery, foreign words that required me to roll my tongue or make use of these bass nasal thrums I somehow reserved. I mimicked understanding. I pointed to a college friend I particularly disliked and uttered the words “faux intellectual” like he was a Vulpine species and I was that know-it-all, whiz kid.

I thought of the Russian propensity for eagerness for the Kingdom of God. There is Tolstoy of course, I feel embarrassed to even draw the conclusion, the obvious answer signifying none of my own value. Persistent utopias persisting in my mind. I switch to Robert Owen: a man after jobs refined like tailored suits, those dirty boys of his town loving trash, he thinks, those dirty boys could be garbage men of course. I switch to the land of Cockaigne, the medieval peasants’ hardon, somewhere, a place with no jobs and easy sex, a place where pigs with knives in their back run amok—the 12th century prophetic dream of fast food. The serf sees a young nun with, what he suspects is, a giant rack under her habit and turns to his buddy and says, “In Cockaigne nuns go wild” and licks the V he assembles with his dirt-crust fingers.

I pronounce the word “Cacaine” in my ignorance.

But my thoughts can’t stay away from the Russian Kingdom of God, austerity, and spiritual fortitude; and I think of Dostoevsky and his here and there episodic epilepsy. Yes, my nipple can cut steel maybe. And there is Dostoevsky with, quite possibly, a little lump that’s not supposed to be there, a tumor on the brain, and a euphoric unannounced state. It’s an Easter night when he first convulses. He looks for words to speak and there’s nothing. He falls to the ground, a limp cry, his body for first time revealing the conscious mind through uncontrollable limbs and foam at the mouth. God have mercy, he can’t die. We know he doesn’t anyway, we hope he doesn’t.

Dostoevsky gets up and says, “My God, a moment of bliss.”

He wipes the foam from his mouth. He feels the Siberian winter, his exile, the House of the Dead.

“My God, a moment of bliss.”

This is what he calls prison—the House of the Dead.

“Why isn’t that enough for a whole lifetime?”

***

I ran into Old Frankie again as he brought in groceries. I didn’t mean to. Really I didn’t. I saw him walking along, sputter-free with white-plastic bags, hanging loose and heavy like they gave the intentional dead weight of a child tantrum. The sidewalk and he and I were a path that bore itself to a variation of a phrase about an unmovable object and an unstoppable force. Sort of. I knew I could be moved. I was embarrassed though. I felt ashamed about wanting to jump the curb and riding the street over. So, I didn’t. I looked down, left, right, and all over. There was nothing to look at and I knew it then.

He was a barrel rolling down, he seemed to be.

I went to pass and offered a tributary smile, a courtesy hello barring back the risk of rudeness, a flash of acknowledgement of being that I think we all want. There were his grocer
ies again. What could I do? I passed and then offered to help.

He said, “Yeah.” He paused. “Take this,” he said.

He extended an armful.

“C’mon,” he said.

We walked a block to his house and were silent all the while. I liked to imagine his life, shuffling from here to there. I told a friend once that he could be German. It was a nice thought. Maybe he contained Habsburg blood. Maybe his slur resides from the steppes where he grew up as a child, a continental mix-up on my part for assuming I live and eat and breathe as I should. His childhood could have been feral. He could have been raised by wolves.

I voiced limp, obligatory outrage. I said the body was not at fault. I did not look for synaptic jumps.

The house rushed me and I entered through its teeth: a craggy yard, uncut and unkempt. I took note of the lawn ornaments, a burst tire and a Hawaiian shirt you only see Elvis Presley fanatics wear on conspiracy television. In high-def you see how disgusting their set clutter is, and you give a solemn nod to stage design. Elvis is screaming Jailhouse Rock at low-level, laptop volume while the cops and the man in the Hawaiian shirt solve their thirty minute murder. It’s in the blood says the fat man.

I watched my side glance. I didn’t stare at the rotten porch or the Frankie dig picking his nose. I didn’t look inside at the attic trash in the doorway: piles and sets of twelve month period National Geographic of the year of my birth, year sets of National Geographic from my brothers and sisters too, all bundled in twine and occupying a dirty couch. There was no bloody floss rolled up like a ball of that baby kitten yarn hanging, splayed, on the windowsill. There were no crushed Cheez-Its stomped into the carpet by Carhart boots and a heavy gait.

He gave me this look.

“You did a real shitty thing the other day.”

“I am so sorry sir. I really didn’t mean to—”

“What are you doing going around and touching people?” He took the groceries from my arms not ungently. He did not brush me with completely unwelcoming digits.

There was a rock expanding under my nipple, making me unsymmetrical and all lopsided. Frankie did this pull down twitch with the side of his mouth. He motioned for the last bag.

“I thought you were seizing.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

He was sliding through the door and I was an uncertain waiter. “You were being a shit you know.”

“I’m—”

“What? Sorry right?”

“—sorry.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, I know. Tell me something though. Do you like it?”

“What?” I wanted to cry maybe.

“Feeling sorry for people.”

“I don’t think so. I feel like I should, though.”

“Sympathy right?”

“I guess so.”
“And you’re going to let me treat you this way because of it?”
“I’m sympathetic.”
It’s in the blood says the fat man.
“That’s not the point.”
I joke at parties that my nipple can cut diamonds. I see the Lord my God descending in a cloud.

***

This was the third time I saw Frankie, and I felt more sure of myself then. We walked down the same street where my memory fades in like film nostalgia, all grain and black and white, and something I could swear I’ve seen before. Where had I gone?
I was sleeping when hands were laid on me. They pressed down flat on my stomach and sat on my chest and I couldn’t move again. I prayed Jesus, Jesus save me. I sung Hallelujah to the Lord of Heaven and Earth. When could I stand? When could I push Old Hag off my chest and breath and say,
“My God, a moment of bliss.”

***

I told a friend in confidence about this and he gave it a name, Sleep Paralysis. He told me to exercise more and not sleep on the couch. That should do it in.

***

I would pass Frankie’s yard because I secretly hoped he will come out, my do-gooder streak feeling embarrassed but kicking me around there nonetheless. I had seen the Veil again the night before and was still recovering. I met him calmly, or at least calmer than other incidents. I remember nodding and slurring and not understanding what I said.
I was trying to be nice. Really.
“What do you do?” I said.
He gave me this sideways look as we sat on the curb, and he had come to accept my existence, my mouth and it’s leaky words a background, maybe—I don’t know really.
“What do I do?”
“Yeah.”
“What kind of question is that? I live, I breath, I take a dump.”
“You walk. I see you walk.”
“Yeah, I do that.”
“Off the street though, you’re coming from somewhere. You’ve got groceries—so that’s the store—”
“I come from the Korean church down the road too. Don’t forget that one.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah.”
“Religious?”
“No.” My nipple saw it coming, offended, cutting through Redwood timber.
“What are you doing at church then?”
“What?”
“You sit in the pews? You bow your head?”

***

I had visions of mushroom clouds too. I laid motionless as waves of microwave heat rolled over my body, bubbles pop-pop-popping my skin, although, I knew that it didn’t work like that. That
psychedelic cloud branched outward, growing like Biblical tumors, covering the sun and giving my desert bed shade, its radiation cloud scooting in my direction, my awe completely awful in its capacity to overwhelm all of me.

A jet-puff anomaly trickled out the root and lends itself its creator, the sad face of old Oppenheimer. A genie in a bottle. He spoke with his tongue hanging out and lolling, the anesthesia of a funny dentist, resorting to words already tonguey and muscle bound. I didn’t know much of him then. He cried smoky tears as he spoke,

“Now I’ve become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”

He ran hands over his head, bled by radiation of what was his remaining hair. He touched his throat and felt a goiter lumping along. (They say it’s from all his years smoking, but he knows it’s not that.) He sung a little song in the back of a café, in the middle of the night, and it soothes him. Lord, I’ve been changed, Angels in heaven done signed my name. Oppenheimer touched his throat. Angels in heaven done signed my name.

***

“What do you do?”

“I play ping pong. I play on one of their five tables with one of their billion children.”

I turned to him, but I knew it was too late for talk now. My nipple cut diamonds and I saw that we both were falling now. He got stuck rocking back and forth, doing flex crunches and screwing his eyes shut, and I couldn’t move. We both fell back, but only I saw the Lord.

My God, a moment of bliss I said.

It’s in the blood says the fat man.
**Starry Night**  
*Sarah Bonhuis*

I heard a theory that Vincent VanGogh
Well, he might have suffered from vertigo.
But, misunderstood, they called him crazy

Instead. And he took a knife to his ear
Dizzy with pain; a churning world masked his fear.
Thick, deep, blue: his strokes, swirling, filled the page.

And we stand in awe—and call it divine,
Beautiful, quintessentially sublime.
Isn’t that so true? That beauty nearly

Always results from our pain—starry night;
Sleepy town; spinning orbs of yellow light,
Tells us of comfort, hope, peace; and yet it

Came at such a price,
Cost a man his life.
AN INCIDENT IN GEORGIA
Libby Stille

I didn’t understand. First, she convinced me to go on this hare-brained excursion, and then she expected me to eat this?

My gaze followed hers to the Corn Nuts. Four flavors? Really? The Pop-Tarts in the next aisle were worse. I picked up the apple streusel and scanned the list of ingredients. Michael Pollen would not approve.

Then again, any so-called “fresh” item would probably give me salmonella.

My stomach growled. The hummus and celery were long gone, and I would need sustenance for the last three-hour leg of this road trip since it was my turn to drive.

Viola approached me with an armload of cellophane packets. Barfy pink Snowballs, ranch-flavored Corn Nuts, the largest Snickers I had ever seen in my life – just how soon did she want to die?

“Hey, Dan, what flavor of cappuccino should I get?” She bobbed up and down a little, anticipating the sugar high.

I glanced at the machine. They make chocolate cheesecake cappuccino? Who would buy that?

“Never mind. I know exactly what I need: the chocolate cheesecake.” She bounced over to the machine and grabbed a Styrofoam cup. Pushing the button, she watched the muddy sludge spurt into her cup. “French vanilla? For the weak!” she cried out joyously.

I looked over at the handlebar-mustached clerk, trying to apologize for her behavior with my eyes. He stared blankly back.

My angry stomach reminded me to feed it. I gave up. Grabbing the Pop-Tarts, I edged toward the line. “Michael, forgive me, though I know exactly what I do,” I muttered.

She joined the line. I stared at the tile floor, pretending that I was not in a Cowboy gas stop in the middle of Georgia about to spend money on Pop-Tarts.

“Jeez, I love road trips.” I looked up to see her blow into the cappuccino cup and then take a slurp. “Dang it – I burned my tongue.”

“Don’t you know how bad that is for you?”

“Dan, it’s a road trip. When else can you allow yourself artery-clogging indulgence?”

The middle-aged woman between us in line glared at me while swatting her daughter’s hand away from the king-sized Reese’s.

“Next.” The clerk with the mustache from 1986 looked at me. His eyes were dead. Mine would be, too. I handed him my gas receipt. “Those too?” He pointed at the Pop-Tarts, which were still in my hand. I threw them on the counter.

“Yeah.”

“$38.53.”

“Wow, do gas prices suck,” I said, grabbing my wallet out of my back pocket.

He didn’t reply, biting his toothpick like a cow chewing cud. I pretended I hadn’t said anything and signed the receipt. The pen on the counter had a Wendy’s spoon taped on the end, as if someone might want to swipe a priceless gas station BIC.

I stepped away from the counter to wait for her.

“Hey, kid, you forgot something.” He held up the Pop-Tarts.
I snatched the packet and stuffed it in my pocket. As I turned away, I caught a glimpse of the magazine racks – a Kardashian sister had done something stupid again. I decided it would be better to stare at my TOMS shoes. This was a bad idea.

“You really bought Pop-Tarts? Children are starving in Africa!” my shoes wailed. I tuned them out. They reminded me of the children that were starving in Africa whether I was buying a shirt at the thrift store or honey from the local farmers’ market. If they had it their way, I would have sent all of my money to UNICEF and would be living under a bridge.

She paid, stuffed her snacks in her bag, and bounded out the door. I trudged after her.

“Want some, Mr. Grouchy Pants? It might make you feel better.” She looked back at me with a plastic grin.

“Doubtful.” The word oozed out of my mouth, sounding much snarkier than I had intended it.

She halted and whirled around, sloshing some of her cappuccino on the asphalt and on me. I winced as the hot liquid came through my shirt to my skin.

“Yo, Oscar, we are going to have fun whether you like it or not.” Her voice snapped like a rubber band.

She had said roughly the same thing three months ago, when she was planning the trip. I would have gone home for break, but she insisted on the road trip to Florida.

“Come on, Dan. Everybody will already be there, and Jack has an aunt with a condo that she’ll let us borrow for the week, so we could meet up with them there. And hey, who doesn’t love a good road trip? Music, food, dumb road games... Anyway, have you ever done anything fun for spring break?” she had said.

“I went to Colorado to ski once…”

“When? With who?”

“Eighth grade. With my family.”

“That’s not spring break.”

“Yes it is! We had a lot of fun!”

“And all you drank was hot chocolate.”

“Yeah, so? I like hot chocolate.” I did like hot chocolate – so long as it was made with fair-trade, organic chocolate. None of that Swiss Miss crap.

“Come on, Dan,” she wheedled. She had that face. I had no choice. Once she put on that face, everyone caved. She was Viola Matthews.

I was lucky enough just to be her friend. Really, to have Viola Matthews wheedling to me was an honor. She was not a wheedler; she was a glowing orb around which we all revolved. Though I occasionally felt that she was rehabilitating me as a kind of charity work, this did not make me want to spend less time in the light of Viola Matthews.

Like the sucker for the face that I was, I caved.

“Okay.”

“Awesome! Just wait. We’ll have fun, whether you want to or not.”

At the time, I had thought that it really might have been fun, and not driving with Jack meant that we wouldn’t need to skip classes. My TOMS, of course, had nagged me about the extra fossil fuel we’d be wasting. I tried to appease them by donating money to a carbon offset fund, but they still scowled at me as Viola and I loaded up the car.

However, the last ten hours had not been fun in any shape or form, and I had had it. I took the Pop-Tarts out of my pocket and crushed them in my hand. The bag made a dramatic pop
ping sound. The crumbs squished in my fist. It smelled surprisingly good – like my grandma’s apple pie.

Ignoring the chemically engineered odor, I dropped the crushed packet and ground it with my heel. It felt good, though I was reminded of the time in fifth grade that I jerked my chair out from under the kid who wouldn’t get out of it. Viola reacted differently than the fifth grader, though.

“What the hell, Dan?” Her eyes shot fire. “Can’t you ever just loosen up?”

Now I was scared. Viola swore only when emotionally traumatized.

“Pick that up, Dan. Pick that the fuck up!” she hissed. Half of the Cowboy’s parking lot could hear. The mother who had been between us in line glared at us from beside her gas-guzzling Suburban. She covered her wide-eyed daughter’s ears with her hands while trying to open the back door.

“That’s not grammatically correct!” It was the only thing I could think to say.

“Really? Really, Dan? Do I look like I care?” She threw her cappuccino to the ground. It exploded in a million droplets and she didn’t even wince as they hit her legs. “I have had it with this attitude! It has been ten hours of you griping, and for God’s sake, can we stop listening to NPR?”

It probably would have been smart not to answer her. But I did. “If you knew what was good for you, you’d care more. You should give a f—frick.”

“F—. You can’t even swear. Can’t you ever just let go? Let go, Dan! We’re not at school, we’re here to have fun.”

I stood there. She exhaled deeply.

“Dan.” Her voice was even. “Dan, listen to me. It’s your last spring break. Your last spring break as a college student. College is when you can be a little stupid every so often. You don’t have to wear a tie and represent a company and request a week’s vacation to take a road trip.”

I blinked.

“I don’t think you’re getting it.”

I blinked again.

“Wait here.”

I waited. The mom, who had gotten in her Suburban as soon as she could throw her kid in her car seat, honked at me because she couldn’t get out of the parking lot without running me over. My TOMS didn’t budge. I looked down at them. They didn’t say anything, for once.

Luckily for the mom, Viola returned shortly with two cappuccinos in hand and we walked to the car. “Here.” She thrust out her right hand. “Don’t worry, it’s French vanilla – for beginners.”

I tentatively took it.

“Take. Drink.”

I raised it to my lips. It smelled good, like graham crackers and frosting. Imitating Viola, I blew in the hole, and then slowly sipped the steaming liquid, drawing up just enough to burn my tongue. “Ouch!”

“That’s part of the experience.”

I was going to remind her that burning your tongue kills taste buds, but something stopped me. Maybe it was the way she was looking at me, unblinking. I blew again and took another slurp.

It was good.
Strictly Tectonic
Chelsea Tanis

peg leg pig
the programmed paraffin symphony
top buttons on the front flap
after burning captain backpack
her righteous hypnosis searing ratty lentils
raucous pennies, high entitlements
past the crafty fairy culprit
and the Holy Roman reprobate
silently discussing the endless pottery
trapped in T-Pain’s radiator

Moriah
Tyler Slamkowski

Peace batters every divorcing
soul—impressions creamed
over velvet ink and charcoal frescoes.

Mark the tolling bell: a wayward
shot cautioning the inevitable volley
rises from God’s rafters,
a door ignored in folly

demanding sacrifice. And one way or another
a delivery will be made.
AFTER MANY YEARS
Katerina Parsons

She is small and stooped and sits on the couch as if she was dripped there and is now continuing to ooze slowly down, like glass. She is my grandmother. Next month she will be 88 years old.

It is my grandmother’s eyes that most strike me. Her eyelids have drooped around them slowly over 80 years so now all you can see peering out of the loose folds of her face are her pupils, bright and smooth like river pebbles. This is the fifth time I’ve ever seen her. Perhaps the sixth.

I am sixteen and baffled with what to do with this woman. I remember the last time I saw her, when I was still young. I remember climbing her orange tree in the California sun, perching myself in the branches and gnawing on the sweet sunny fruit. I remember running out back to play in the rusty drained pool because I didn’t want to go inside where it was dark and cluttered and smelled like mold and pine nuts.

She had huge bags of them, pine nuts. One of the few times I was alone with her she offered me some and I bit into them but they were soft and their taste was so sharp that I couldn’t finish them and swept them into my hand so as not to be rude, and I don’t think she saw because she could hardly open her eyes. Even when I was young, she was very, very old.

My grandmother was born in 1923 and her mother was named Irene. I like to imagine Irene as slim and graceful; laughing and rubbing shoulders at parties. It is easy to imagine because I have never seen a picture. I only know that Irene played the organ for her church and the piano for silent movies and her husband approved of the first, but not quite the second. Irene had four children, and her oldest was Frances who would someday have river stones for eyes and sit on a couch on a hot day in Michigan a million years after Prohibition and World War One.

Frances was a sensible girl, goodhearted but naïve. She had few friends, unlike her younger, brasher, brighter sister Barbara. After high school, Frances became a drafts woman. She traced blueprints of ships for the war. She was a flirt in the office and was fired for wasting time. They waited to fire her until after the company skiing trip so as not to spoil her fun, but she fell on the hill and forgot a coat and thought they might as well have fired her before she had to spend the day alone in a ski lodge.

Frances was a fair looking woman, endearingly simple. She would go to dance with the servicemen at the USO and had dates almost every night. She decided she never wanted to be a housewife, not when dancing was such fun. And this is the impossible image I have of the woman on my couch. In a long-ago time the white-haired absent-minded granny was a silly flirt and she danced and she maybe broke hearts. But that time didn’t last for very long.

Robert was a young army pilot, loud and crass and full of life. He chose Frances as his wife and told her as much after two months of dances. She hemmed and hawed but Robert pushed and before she could say no he was sent to India. When he was in India they wrote regularly. Maybe the notes were coy, maybe newsy, I’ll never know, she lost them after moving so many times.

She tells me of these times with a note of wistfulness. “Of course I wrote him back,” she said. “They said we couldn’t write any Dear John letters, it wasn’t good for morale.” So when
Robert proposed marriage and wrote about the life they would live she wrote back coldly and politely, but she never said no.

Frances joined the army herself and drew more drafts. She lived in Texas and continued being silly and sensible all at the same time. Then Robert wrote and told her they were going to Iowa to visit his parents. I don’t know what transpired on the trip, but she never returned to her drafting job. They were married in his parents’ living room, she in her smart army uniform because there wasn’t a white dress to be found, not in the 1940s, not with rationing.

And there she was, baffled, no doubt, in a little home with a family. Her oldest son Ralph was born a year after she and Robert were married. Then came Curtis, named for the host of a barbeque the family had attended the night before Frances went into labor. Then there was David.

Robert was controlling and harsh. Popular among his buddies, he didn’t know how to cope with a family with little children. War had hardened him. He demanded lobster for dinner, baked potatoes, pepper-fried steak. The little old woman on the couch tells me this matter-of-factly. “He would get very angry if things weren’t exactly right. One time the potatoes were cold and he yelled and wouldn’t eat the meal.”

Robert flew supplies to Korea, and then to Japan. The whole family moved out to Japan and Frances didn’t mind very much at all because she played cards with the other servicemen’s wives and was able to buy strings of pearls at brilliant prices. Then there were years that are muddled. Maybe they moved to the states, to Florida. There was another boy, a fourth, named John because, she said, they had run out of boy’s names that they liked.

Frances lived in Alabama when the state turned upside down. A woman refused to move to the back of the bus, and suddenly the streets were filled with people boycotting the buses, walking to work, proud and defiant. Frances drove her boys to school every day and watched the people walking and something tugged on her to stop and open her doors and say, “I will drive you where you need to go, you may sit in my front seat!” But she had her boys, her children in the car and that wouldn’t do at all. “That would her husband think?”

Even when she shrunk to the age of 88 she would remember the people walking, steadfast, and think she should have done something. “The army wouldn’t have liked it,” she tells me, “we weren’t supposed to make waves.” And she nods her head to convince herself.

Then it was in the 1960s and times were changing. Frances had a girl at last, Nancy, and they all moved to Germany on assignment where my mother, Linda, was born. Her three boys went to boarding school from then on out, even though David was only 10 years old. It wasn’t hard for her to send her children off to school. She felt guilty about that, a little. She had never quite known what to do with her children. Someone told her later, years later the reason why Ralph had learned to talk so late. She never supposed you should talk to a baby or a small child. “What would I say to a baby?” my grandmother asks me. Ralph got polio and was always getting sick. I gasp as she tells me she used to throw away his pills, deny him his medicine. “I thought he was faking,” she explains and she isn’t defensive.

Later she washed and fed and cleaned her children and I suppose loved them in her own silly, sensible way. After his deployment, Robert’s military career was over and they moved to California where she grew up. A last child was born there, Debra. The woman on the couch tells me frankly, “I only wanted two or three kids. I wanted at least one girl. After Nancy was born, I wanted to stop but Robert, Robert wanted more.” My mother excuses herself.
Life went on in California for thirteen more years. Robert tumbled into the alcohol he had always drunk and got lost in it. He was an old man, then. He drank and he swore and he smoked and Frances bore it resignedly. Her boys went from boarding school to college and they rarely came back home. And my mother and her sisters grew up.

Robert died when Debra was 13, when my mother was 16. Frances played the widow, but deep inside her unknown even to her, she was content. She never married again.

When I was younger, after the orange trees but before today, Frances and her sister Barbara came out to visit. They bickered like schoolgirls and argued over everything. But one night, almost in reverie, Barbara spoke seriously about the death of her husband. “He was very sick,” I remember her face, in another world as she spoke. “And one night he fell out of bed onto the floor. This was at the end. And he was too big—too heavy for me to move him.” Frances looked on, but it was hard to read emotion in her old face. “I lay down next to him on the floor.” Barbara looked down. “It was too late then, so I pulled our blankets down and we slept together that last night.” Frances nodded, and I’ll never forget the way she calmly added, “I waited until Robert was gone before I called the doctor.”

And now so much has changed and I sit beside her; all 4 feet, 10 inches of her; that silly, darling puddle of grandma on my couch and I ask her what was it like in World War Two. What was it like in Vietnam, to live in Japan, to live in Germany, Grandma, what was it like, and she doesn’t answer. She talks to me for hours, and she tells me about her church choir, about her favorite type of pie, she tells me entire plots from Everyone Loves Raymond and talks about Jay Leno, Jimmy Fallon, and Dancing With the Stars. She has had a fascinating, varied life. But somehow she managed to stumble through it emerging with nothing more than a good recipe for chicken salad.

What was it like? It was hard I suppose. You know, last week I got my hair permed again. My friend recommended the hair dresser and I think she did a good job, only…

One night we were up late, my mother, my grandmother and I. And my grandmother reached her hand out to my mother in a rare gesture of affection. “Your husband is so good to you,” she says. “That’s good,” she tells me. “We must be good to our husbands.”

She repeats the odd line to herself, “We must be good to our husbands.” Before either my mother or I can reply she’s asleep. Her head is sprawled backwards and she sags over the couch, like glass flowing slowly, like a thousand secrets, like a silly little girl who in her heart of hearts has no idea where she is or exactly how she got there.
DROPPED CALL
LINNEA MCLAUGHLIN

Already language has become something slippery and cold;
it hangs limp between us like a dead fish.

In these halls I study it, reading page after page,
scribbling line after line of definition. And yet
already it has distanced me from you.

Months of silence hang
like miles and miles of telephone wire;
Time has swelled into a great fog and I cannot tell
If you still hold the other end of this rope between us.

Once we both looked at the same world
From opposite sides of the glass;
Read the same words from opposite
sides of the page. But now

All our bottles of memories are sealed with corks,
Our blue-green oceans turned to stone.
All the words I wrote you I wrote for no one, and every
message I send
Is like letting go of a helium balloon
And watching it float all the way up
Into nothingness.
Coat
Mary Snook

I don’t wear it for warmth
It’s my hiding place
Surfacing in Time
Leah Sienkowski

No one could deny the elegance
of metals forming in the earth
of buildings rising up from the ground
a shovel sinking into cold dirt.

I am thankful
for wrinkles in an old shirt,
for the atmosphere,
its sweet and heavy insides,
its tight skin, like an orange,
and for everything that has an edge
to rest on, like this one,
my feet hanging over new consequences.

Cave Diving
Meg Schmidt

We all jumped in, the world swallowed us slowly.

Deeper

Deeper

We were swimming in cold
Careening in gravity

And the walls of the cavern
Sung past us

As we imagined wings
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