



Diverse Voices Quarterly
Volume II, Issue 7

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Editor's Note

Read about two fruits duking it out, cigarettes rebelling against humans, and all the other quirks surrounding relationships—plus so much more!

Keep writing (and keep warm!) during the autumn months turning to winter,

Krisma

Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 2, Issue 7

Cover art: *House* by Ira Joel Haber

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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Myra Bellin has published essays in *Slow Trains*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Rambler*, and artist profiles in *Ceramics Monthly*. She practiced law, has a Ph.D. in educational psychology as well as certification as a lay analyst, but has decided she prefers the writing life. Myra lives in Philadelphia with her husband, their son (now all grown and away at college), and their dog Charlie, who is constantly interrupting her work on a book about Isabella Bird, a Victorian travel writer, to play ball. More info can be found at <http://www.myrabellin.com>.

Mark Conkling lives in Rio Rancho, New Mexico, where he manages a real estate company, writes, and walks his dogs in the Bosque by the Rio Grande River. Years ago, as a University Professor (Ph.D., Philosophy, Psychology), Mark published several academic articles in existential philosophy and psychology. Mark frequents the recovery community (AA), reads fiction, and seeks daily peace of mind. After a 20-year career as a homebuilder, he completed his seminary work at St. Paul's School of Theology, and now, as retired pastor, he fills in at a local Methodist church. Recently, Mark launched a new career as a fiction writer. Currently, he's looking forward to the publishing of his novel, *Prairie Dog Blues*, a story about family transformation in a wealthy Albuquerque neighborhood overrun by prairie dogs (Sunstone Press, 2011). His short fiction is forthcoming in the *Minnetonka Review*.

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Ira Joel Haber was born and lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is a sculptor, painter, book dealer and teacher. His work has been seen in numerous group shows both in USA and Europe, and he has had 9 one-man shows including several retrospectives of his sculpture. His work is in the collections of The Whitney Museum Of American Art, New York University, The Guggenheim Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum & The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. His paintings, drawings, and collages have been published in many online and print magazines including *Foliage Oak*, *Softblow*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Backwards City Review*, *So To Speak*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Lilies and Cannonballs*, *The Tusculum Review*, and *The Mom Egg*. Over the years he has received three National Endowments For The Arts Fellowship, two Pollock-Krasner grants and most recently in 2004 received The Adolph Gottlieb Foundation grant. Currently, he teaches art at the United Federation of Teachers Retiree Program in Brooklyn.

Michael Hart has worked as a writer and editor for a variety of publications and organizations and is currently a student of psychology. A Chicago native, he presently resides in Louisville, Kentucky, but prefers life on the road and travels whenever opportunity greets him. His work, which includes a series of collaborations with **Anoush Rima Tatevossian**, has most recently been published in *Fiction At Work*.

Mary Diane Hausman was born and raised in the Texas Hill Country, and that experience provides a strong voice for her work. Her work appears with Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Rita Dove in the anthology, *Unsilenced: The Spirit of Women* (Commune-a-Key Press), in her own poetry collection, *A Born-Again Wife's First Lesbian Kiss and other poems* (Relief Press), as well as in numerous other anthologies and literary journals, including: *Not Child's Play* (Lunchbox Press, Inc.), *Confluence*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Inkwell*, *New Texas*, *My Lover Is A Woman* and *Pillow Talk* (Ballantine Books and Alyson Books), *The MacGuffin*, *Primavera*, *Spillway*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *The Texas Review*, *Westview*, *Out of the Dark* (Queen of Swords Press).

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Gene McCormick has had twelve books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry published, the two most recent being *Naked Skeletons* (Pudding House Press, 2010) and *Livin' The Blues At Cranky Jack's Bar & Grill* (MuscleHead/BoneWorld Publishing, 2010). His narrative poems appear frequently in select literary publications. Four such poems have recently been converted to songs and performed professionally. He lives in Wayne, Illinois, with his wife Marie and dog Daisy.

Katia Mitova was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, and lived there and in Poland until 1993 when she moved to the United States. After the fall of communism in 1989, she was the Editor of the Bulgarian quarterly for foreign literature, *Panorama*, and a correspondent for the Polish Section of Radio Free Europe. She has published short stories, literary criticism, and a poetry collection, *The Human Shell* (1994), in Bulgarian. Since 1999 Katia Mitova has been writing poetry in English and has published in the anthology *The Secret of Flight* (Vacteam, 2005) as well as in *The Chicago Literary Review*, *disClosure*, *di-verse-city*, *New Mexico Poetry Review*, and *The Penwood Review*. Her photographs have been used as cover art for poetry collections published by Vacteam.

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Sweta Srivastava Vikram is a multi-genre writer and marketing professional living in New York City. She is the author of two chapbooks of poetry: *Kaleidoscope: An Asian Journey of Colors* and *Because All Is Not Lost* and the co-author of *Whispering Woes of Ganges & Zambezi*. Her debut novel, tentatively titled, *Perfectly Untraditional*, will be published by Niyogi Books in India. Sweta's work has appeared or is forthcoming in literary journals, online publications, and anthologies across United States, United Kingdom, Canada,

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Anoush Rima Tatevossian is a public diplomat/international communications professional with a creative side that has fed several film and writing projects, including a series of short-story collaborations with writer **Michael Hart**. Fascinated with migration, identity, social movements, and cross-cultural interactions, she has traveled extensively and has worked for several nonprofit and international organizations. She is Armenian by heritage, lives in New York, and is a citizen of the world.

Linda Tzoref was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She received her BA in philosophy from San Francisco State University and an MFA from Emerson College. Currently, she is based in Atlanta, Georgia.

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DS Winkle is a graduate of the University of Illinois and received her MBA in finance from DePaul University before realizing that she had no interest in corporate life. She currently works in Human Resources for a large financial institution and dreams of publishing a novel. She has won several short story contests and believes that people's differences are what make life interesting.

Nicholas Y.B. Wong is a Hong Kong-based poet. He has recently won the Oblongata Contest Award and has been nominated by *Asia Writes* for the Best of the Net 2010. His poem "Lives" has been short-listed in 2009 Chroma International Queer Writing Competition. His work appeared in *The Sentinel Literary Festival Anthology 2010*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *The Centrifugal Eye*, *Asia Writes*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *The Q Review*, *Fag/Hag: A Scandalous Chapbook of Fabulously Codependent Poetry*, *pyrta journal*, *6S: The Green Bike Stories*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *Fifty-fifty: New Hong Kong Writing*, edited by Xu Xi (2007, Haven Books) and among others. He is currently an MFA Candidate at the City University of Hong Kong. More info can be found at <http://nicholasymbwong.weebly.com>.

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PARABLE OF THE DISHWASHER

by Mark Conkling

At sixty-five, Helen found her mind often wandering into episodes of uncertainty, minor incidents to be sure, but still troublesome. Fred seemed charming enough, but that evening in Bible study, the way he looked at her from across the table made her feel uneasy, as though the wrinkles on her face might disgust him. He a widower and she widowed, they both had lived alone for the past three years. A retired accountant, Fred did taxes for elderly people in the church, a service that earned him a good deal of respect. When he smiled, his brown eyes watered, revealing to her an attractive and warm sensitivity, a feature unlike her deceased husband. Helen crossed her ankles, drew her feet under her chair, and straightened her neck, as if her upright posture might overcome the mismatch between her rubber-soled brown shoes and her cheerful flowered dress. Her shoes made her gait solid, and at her age, she thought, she did not need a broken hip, one more difficult thing to manage for a woman alone. She worried briefly that he might think she was too old for him—even though she knew he was sixty-seven—yet right now felt annoyed about the way he interpreted the parable of the workers in the vineyard from Matthew 20, the subject of the evening study. Fred put his fingertips together, moving them like the childhood imitation of a spider doing pushups on a mirror, a favorite joke of her grandson's.

“Okay,” he said, “so workers toil in the hot sun all day and then someone comes along in the last hour, works for an hour, and gets the same pay. It

doesn't seem fair, but life's not fair. I think the worker who came late in the day had surprising good fortune. He was able to benefit from all those men who had worked all day. Let's face it, some men are just lucky."

"How can you say that?" Helen blurted out. "God sees them all as equal. It doesn't matter when you come to God. His grace is everywhere. Our job is to respond."

Fred smiled. "Well, you must admit, the last guy ended up with the same thing the other men worked hard for—they cleared the way for him. I call that lucky, you know, like the fellow at the casino who puts one quarter in the slot machine and wins the jackpot. A lot of folks fed that machine with quarters before he came along."

He had a point, she mused, but it was not the point of the parable, at least not the right point. It sounded too cavalier, almost selfish.

"It's not at all about luck," she said. She pushed her fingers through her gray curly hair, curls relaxed now from a permanent six weeks ago. She worried he might be teasing her, taking a different point of view just for fun, or maybe even flirting with her, checking out her reaction to a playful bantering of ideas. "I think it's about grace extended to everyone, and people learning how to work together. God is not a slot machine, and He does not dispense luck."

"I suspect you're right," Fred said. "But you must admit it would be a lot more fun to be the last man instead of the first one—you don't do anywhere near the same amount of work, but you still get the prize—you get paid the same. I'd prefer to be him."

"But think of what you'd miss," Helen said.

“What would I miss? I’d get to control when I work, show up in time, and get paid the same as everyone else.”

“You’d miss all those years with the workers, learning how to be with other people, you know, to love them. God’s grace is there for everyone, but it comes with responsibility. Respecting others—that’s the point. You can’t just ignore what other people need.”

“Well, when we all line up to get paid, we all get the same wages, and we’ll all be equal anyway. I’ll still be welcome in God’s Kingdom.”

Other folks around the table chimed in and carried the discussion until the end of the class. Helen felt a little peeved at his stubborn manner, but she also noticed a tantalizing shiver of excitement when Fred smiled. His gray wavy hair made him look healthy and vigorous, and Helen felt grateful she had recently been to the dentist and had her teeth cleaned. As she stood up, Fred walked around the table.

“Would you like to go somewhere for coffee?” he asked.

“Oh, I can’t drink coffee this late,” she said. “I’d never get to sleep.”

“How about some ice cream? We could go to the 31-flavors place.”

Helen picked up her purse and held it close to her. “Well, all right, for a few minutes, but I should get home before it gets too late. I’ll meet you there.”

Fred chose a cup of rocky road and Helen decided on lemon sherbet. They sat by the wall and watched others choosing flavors from the overwhelming array.

“You know, it’s often hard to choose,” Fred said.

“Yes,” she said, “we used to only have chocolate, vanilla, and

butterscotch, remember?” She smiled and wiped the corner of her mouth with a napkin stretched over her finger.

“Maybe that’s what happens when you get older,” Fred said. “Our options get limited, and we don’t have as much to choose from.”

Helen shifted in her chair, took one more small bite, and put down her cup. “Perhaps so, but I need to be going now. It’s getting late.”

Fred motioned to her cup, smiling. “You should finish your sherbet,” he said. “Waste not, want not, you know.”

“I don’t want anymore,” she said, standing up. “Please just throw it out.”

Fred stood up, tossed her half-full cup in the trash, took the back of her arm, and ushered her out the door.

“Will I see you next week?” he asked.

“Well, I plan on being in the class.”

“It certainly has been a pleasure.” Fred smiled. “May I call you?”

Helen felt stunned. “Well, yes, I guess that would be all right.” She smiled, turned, and hurried to her car. Call me? My goodness. Bewildered, she sat quietly in her car for a moment before driving home.

Fred called on Saturday and asked if he could pick her up for church and then go to lunch afterward. Helen accepted his invitation. She felt awkward coming into church with Fred, but she also felt delighted on the arm of an attractive man. They went to a cafeteria for lunch and talked about their children and grandchildren, a total of seven between them, five grandchildren from his two daughters and two from her daughter.

“I see them only for the holidays,” Fred said. “Since my wife died, it

hasn't been the same. There's a distance between us, and they're kind of hostile, as if it's my fault their mother got cancer and died. They never ask me for advice."

"I know," Helen said. "Kids get to know you as a couple, as a mother and father, and then when one is gone, they pull away, and nothing seems to fill in the gap. I guess that's where faith comes in."

"Faith comes in?"

"Yes, with my faith I can withstand the absence of my husband and still feel like my life means something. I know that God is always nearby."

"I can agree with you there," he said. "I have to learn to trust my faith more. I'm often far too lonely, and I have a hard time making friends."

"My daughter still calls some, and she's quite blunt," Helen said. "She tells me I have to trust my gut, and move on, but I tell her I trust my faith. God gives me good direction if I listen."

* * *

Helen and Fred spent more and more time together. They got involved in mission work, preparing food at the rescue shelter, feeding homeless people. They went to the Christian bookstore together, shared ideas, walked in the park, and laughed. As Fred dropped Helen at her home, she regularly let him kiss her good night, his mouth tasting like peppermint, his lips lingering longer as their time together increased, now over three months. Lately, she felt stirrings of a long dormant libido, stirrings her doctor told her were rare in post-menopausal women, perhaps indications of a new lease on life.

"Don't pass this by," her doctor had said, a woman her same age with an

impish grin on her face. "You still have time to be sexually active again, even at sixty-five."

One Sunday evening, Fred kissed Helen good night, and she asked, "Would you like to come in for tea?"

"Of course," he said. They sat at the kitchen table, stirring their tea. "You know, Helen," he said suddenly, "we ought to get married. We get along so well, and you've become my best friend."

"Perhaps we should," she said, smiling and taking his hand. "We do share the same values." She felt adored and young.

"We like the same things. We read the same books and like to eat the same food." Fred smiled, his eyes misting.

Helen felt the stirrings again, little shivers of warmth coming up from below her flat tummy. She felt glad her stomach was flat because she thought Fred might be seeing it soon, although she would keep the light off, and he probably wouldn't stare anyway.

"Where would we live?"

"Well, I suspect it would be best if I sold my place," he said. "You wouldn't want to live there. It's cold and spare, and the memories haunt me. Your house is bigger. Besides, it's filled with your family pictures and all your kitchen things."

"I'd like that," Helen said. "There's just one other thing. It's probably a good idea for us to get to know each other better."

"Well, if you mean money, I'll be handling our money, paying bills, taking care of our investments and things. I know how to handle money."

Helen looked at her teacup. “No, I mean we should know each other, you know, intimately.” Her face began to flush.

“You think we should sleep together?”

“Well, yes, but not tonight, okay? I don’t feel ready.” She smoothed her dress.

“Sure, whatever you think.” He squeezed her hand and kissed her gently.

“Let’s stay apart this week, and you come over on Saturday night for dinner. Then we can go to church in the morning and talk more about our plans.”

That week Helen went to a department store and bought a new frilly nightgown, a long white one with loose shoulders and a silky sash. On Thursday, she had her hair done and bought two new 400-thread percale sheets and pillowcases. She got up early Saturday, went to the grocery store, and bought chicken breasts, fresh vegetables, lettuce, and a red bell pepper for the salad. She also picked up a peach cobbler from the store bakery.

When Fred arrived, she noticed he wore a new maroon shirt, a color that made his brown eyes seem to glisten. He smelled clean, like fresh herbal soap. She had already set the table with her best china and a vase of fresh yellow daisies from her garden.

“This is lovely,” he said, looking at the table. “I’m beginning to feel lucky—I mean blessed,” he said with a grin.

“Now, Fred,” Helen said through a laugh, “don’t start in with your teasing.”

Helen served dinner and Fred poured glasses of Chardonnay from the

bottle had had brought. Fred cleared his throat. They bowed their heads and he said grace.

“Thank you for that blessing,” Helen said. “The way you thank God—it shows your strength—I like that.”

He raised his glass. “I can imagine a life together with you,” he said. “I feel very comfortable. I hope you are okay about tonight.”

“I must admit I’m feeling a little excited.” She smiled, reached over, and took his hand. “I don’t want this to be a test or anything like that, but you know it’s important that we feel compatible. Like my daughter says, I should make sure I feel good about everything before I get married again, and so should you, Fred. Otherwise, we should just be friends. But don’t worry; I know it’s going to be just fine.” She smoothed his wavy hair and kissed him.

“You are beautiful tonight, Helen.”

After dinner, Helen cleared the table, scraped off the plates in the sink, and began to load the dishwasher. Fred came up behind her, put his arms around her, and gently cupped her breasts. She leaned back against him, taking a deep breath, and tipping her head back.

“Let me help you with the dishwasher,” he said. Helen turned, kissed his lips, spun around, and took the wineglasses from the table, feeling joyful, like a ballerina. One by one, Fred picked up the dinner plates she had already placed in the rack, turned them around, put them in the rack closer to the edge, in the rack spaces closest to each other, and arranged them straight. Then he took the knives out, turned them over, and pointed them down. He did the same thing with the forks, but kept the spoons with their handles down.

“Fred, what are you doing?”

“I’m helping you load the dishwasher.”

“Those things were already loaded,” she said. “You took them out and rearranged them.”

“Well, yes, Helen, there is a right way to load a dishwasher.”

“A right way?”

“Yes, the plates should be facing the center, next to each other, starting near the edge, to make the most room. The silverware should have all the sharp tips pointing down, and the bowls and glasses go on the top rack pointing down.”

“You don’t understand,” Helen said frowning, running her fingers through her tight curls. “I already had those dishes in there.”

“I’m sorry,” Fred said, backing away. “But for heaven’s sake, Helen, there is a right way to do things.”

“Well, maybe there is a right way, but who appointed you the judge?” Fred snapped his head around. In the shadow of the florescent light, Helen thought his gray hair looked like a stringy mop.

“For heaven’s sake, Helen, I’m not a judge. I just know how to do things correctly, like load a dishwasher, handle money, you know, maintain an orderly life. That’s what I do.”

“Well, maybe I like my orderly life the way it is. Maybe I want to handle my own money. Maybe you could respect what I want, Fred. Have you thought about that?”

Helen turned her back and began crying softly, imagining her new

nightgown in the trash.

“Come on, Helen, it’s no big deal.”

“I think you should go home now.”

“My gosh, Helen, just because of a silly dishwasher? I’m sorry. I let this argument go too far.”

“You shouldn’t sell your house, Fred, and I don’t think we should get married.”

“Please, Helen, can’t we just let it go?”

Helen wiped her eyes with a dishtowel and folded her arms on her stomach. “No, Fred, you let it go to where it is, and you can’t even see it.”

“What don’t I see?”

“The point, Fred. You can’t even see the point.”

WORN RELIGIONS

Some people wear their religion swaddled
around their skull like a bandage
on the human condition; others let it hover,
like the shadow of a halo, above
a balding crown; some wear it streaking
up their calves to parts unseen;
some drape it across their faces to deceive
devils; some are devils; others
grow religion from their chin;
some tattoo it on their skin; a few
embroider it in their underwear
and hide it under business suits.
Some believe, however you wear it,
it's a cover-up.

—Corri Elizabeth

ENOUGH

I was another zombie
following orders to murder
buds of new ideas and grow
plants of bureaucratic apathy
along with the fungus of monotony.

While punching
the time clock,
age caught up.
I heard nothing
but the crushing
of dreams
smelling
like rotten fruit,
so I quit my nine to five.

A broken pocket, sure
but my reflection in the mirror
says thanks for not strangling it
every morning with a corporate noose.

—Sweta Srivastava Vikram

I WANT TO CLEAN MY HOUSE

Dreams of Being Unemployed

by DS Winkle

I stare at the skyline ahead of me. Another Monday morning has arrived, and I'm in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Kennedy Expressway, heading into downtown Chicago. Every week it gets harder and harder to get out of bed, knowing I have five days of work ahead of me. I hear on the radio that unemployment is at 10%, and I know I should be thankful to have a job. I feel guilty. I wonder whether the 90% of people who are employed are happy. I wouldn't consider myself unhappy but I'm a dreamer, and I dream of doing different things.

It's not that I hate my job. As far as jobs go, I'd have to say mine is a pretty good one. The problem is that I tend to get bored quickly and, therefore, have held many different positions throughout my career. I always needed the stimulation of a new company, new coworkers, or a completely different job.

That was then. Now I realize that my problem is not that I don't like the work I do, it's just that I don't like to work. I've suddenly determined that I need a major life change, which involves wandering through life without a real plan, throwing away all my timepieces, getting up whenever I want, and enjoying life.

The last time I talked with someone about my *conundrum*—*conundrum* being the best word I can think of to describe my lack of enthusiasm about my job—was with a previous boss. (You can't really talk about a conundrum with a

current boss.) We were discussing what we would want to do if we could do anything, and she had said she just wanted to have time to clean her house. At first I thought that was kind of a silly thing to say. Usually when people retire, they have grandiose plans for traveling, spending time with family, engaging in volunteer work or other valiant causes. I had never heard anyone say, "I just want to have time to clean my house." But the more I thought about it, it was exactly what I would want to do right now.

One qualification on this. Wanting to have time to clean my house does not actually mean spending time cleaning my house. It means having time to just sit and think. To me, a clean house symbolizes order and the ability to focus on those things that are important. Not having to dig through the clothes dryer to find a clean pair of underwear, because you haven't had the chance to put the laundry in the laundry basket, let alone fold it and put it away. My mind is so often going off in a million different directions, thinking of all the things I should be doing that I would just love to be able to completely and fully focus on one task and one task only.

So I've been planning this out for quite a while, and it sounds like something I must do. Except that if I quit my job, I will either 1) need to sell my house and car and move to a remote area of Mississippi, where I know my life savings to date may actually last me until I die or 2) need to come up with a grand plan for making money that doesn't involve a job.

Since Mississippi is not on my list of must-sees before I die, I will probably have to concentrate on option #2. How could I make money without a job? I see three possibilities here: 1) I could write that best-selling novel that

I've been thinking about since I was ten and then continue to write best-selling novels until I decide I have enough money, 2) I could win the lottery, or 3) I could find a really rich man who would pay me for companionship and wouldn't expect me to divorce my husband.

Reading this, you are probably saying to yourself, "Honey, I wouldn't count on #1." Option #2 would require me to actually go and buy a lottery ticket, which is a very intimidating thought. And, in regard to #3, having recently looked into a full-length mirror while naked, I have to accept the fact that everything isn't always fabulous after 40, and I'm not sure I'd have the most up-to-date equipment required to lure in that rich guy.

Now I don't want this to be an exercise in self-pity. I fully realize that I am in the top 1% of people in the world in regard to my standard of living. I know that 70% of the people in the world cannot read, that 50% suffer from malnutrition, and that if I were a woman living in Afghanistan right now, the very last thing I would be worried about is how much I hate my great paying job. But, unfortunately, regardless of how much I tell myself I am so lucky and should just stop whining, there is this constant nagging feeling inside me that says, you should be doing something else.

My boss' name is Harry. Harry is a wonderful man, and if I were looking for someone who would run back into a burning building to save my goldfish, it would be Harry. The problem is that there are not too many opportunities for this kind of support, and so I have to work with Harry in the way that you are supposed to work with your boss, and that is to do what he tells you to do, no matter how stupid or ridiculous it is.

Harry is definitely not stupid, so I think my major frustration stems from the fact that we have two very different styles of communication. Harry is from Tennessee and to say that he should be more laid-back would be like saying to Hillary Clinton that she needs to be more assertive. For every hundred words that I say, Harry says one or maybe two. Whereas I have this inexplicable need to come up with a solution before I have even heard the problem, Harry not only listens to the whole problem, but takes several breaths after I am finished (maybe because he fears I might have been hyperventilating) before stating his opinion. There have actually been several times where it took Harry so long to respond to something I said, that I thought he may have had an aneurism and slipped into a catatonic state while I was speaking. Now, however, I have learned that this is just his communication style, and I need to learn to adapt to it. I have now started counting 1-Mississippi, 2-Mississippi, 3-Mississippi while waiting for Harry to respond, and it is actually a quite fun game. I made it up to 14 one day last week.

In regard to my coworkers, I couldn't ask for a nicer, more caring group of people. The problem here is that I don't always want to be around nice and caring people, and once in a while I would really, really like to hear some bitching and complaining from my "team members." We all work in Human Resources and handle what we call "Employee Relations." So when an employee calls me to complain that we are serving Christian donuts because they have red and green sprinkles on them at Christmastime, my coworker smiles that Stepford wife smile of hers and says, "You know we have to be sensitive to everyone's religious beliefs and spirituality. We have to celebrate

diversity!” At this point, I usually feel like plunging a stake through her heart just to see if she is real.

The other day a manager had a problem with an employee who had severe body odor. Another manager told him to refer the employee to me because apparently HR people are better at telling people they smell. Yesterday an employee who had been out on disability, due to anxiety attacks, called me to let me know her doctor was releasing her back to work. The only condition was that she be kept away from any type of stressful situation. She works on the customer complaint desk. I really feel I am no longer able to help people. I wonder whether psychiatrists ever have the urge to just tell a patient, “Shut up! You’re driving me insane!” Of course they don’t, and that is why I’m not a psychiatrist.

The last thing I want to mention about my job is what made me realize that I am no longer interested in climbing the corporate ladder. I no longer care about advancing my career, learning anything new at work, or getting that next promotion. I am tired of the political games that are played, and, although I usually watch it from afar, I have personally experienced a vice president make his assistant measure his office with a tape measure to compare it to another vice president’s office. I am constantly amazed at how eloquently our senior managers express themselves and how poorly they listen. The skill of self-promotion is truly an art, and it often seems that those who are best at this have little time left to do anything else.

Over the past 20 years of my career, I have vacillated between wanting to be as high up on the corporate ladder as possible to joining the Peace Corps.

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a veterinarian, then a teacher, and then a writer. Now I don't really know what I want. I just know that I would really love some time to clean my house.



Home Ground
—Keith Moul

THEY'RE BAD FOR YOU

by Chad W. Lutz

"They're not looking," one of them said softly to another lying limp across the lawn from him.

"Should we do it?"

The first shot a wink at the other and slowly began moving into position among the giant feet littered about the green doormats of their homes. After they both felt it was safe, they ignited their plan into action.

"On three! One, two, three!"

With that, the three cigarettes leapt forward and stabbed at the feet with their fiery, ember heads. They crawled right up the legs of the people, the very same that had tossed them carelessly aside like some old and broken child's toy, never to be cared about again. Swinging from hair to hair in the long unsuspecting limbs, they cried out to their burning brethren.

"Rise up, my brothers!" the King Kool shouted with Virginia Slim at his side. The armies of Marlboro and nearly a million other clans of butts seeking reprise for their ill-fated shortened lives rose from the trash-laden grass field where the night before thousands of careless youngsters dropped everything from acid to sandwich wrappers in the twisted festival twilight.

"Now is the time, brothers!" the king said, shouting at the top of his filters again. "Now is the time! Be swift and make haste! Don't give them the upper hand! STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE! Strike like the match and burn this injustice to the ground!" A couple of the clans burst out in glorious agreement,

fists pumped in the air, mouths agape with dry anger foaming in the corners of their mouths.

It hadn't always been like this. There was once a time when humans and cigarette lived in perfect harmonious union. They used to travel together, learn together, watch movies together; even visit the doctor together. But now, now, things were different and everything had changed. Once they were delicious, now they were considered dangerous. And the cigarettes felt burned.

It was science and the advancement of technology. Science ruined everything, changed everything, and the cigarettes soon learned that they were no longer "man's best friend," but man's most feared assailant. They had trusted the humans. They never once thought they would end up the butt of an age-long joke. Their trust had been gained, but now lay smoldering in the ashes in the middle of a sun-scorched field.

"That's it! Go forth and spread the death and destruction they prophesize we'll one day bring. If they think we're a threat, let's give 'em what they want!" The King Kool raised both his arms and his head to the heavens and let out a cackle so loud and so heinous, the monster living under your bed shivered and cowered back into the warm darkness. He looked back to his advancing battalions. "They smoked us! Now, let's smoke them!"

People thrashed and screamed, clawing at the mini-invaders swarming like a burning plague with vengeance afire in their eyes. As the first body fell to the ground, a raucous cheer rose from the battlefield. The cigarettes smothered the body, crawling in and out of the eyes and ears and setting everything that could burn on fire. It was like a lucid nightmare that you couldn't wake up

from. It didn't matter where the people turned, there were cigarettes everywhere. They even came out of the bushes and leapt from trees. They leapt in blunt lust from the garbage, from their pockets, from their hands at the pinkish people who they felt needed punished.

"Why are you doing this?" One of the humans handing out anti-cigarette pamphlets yelled as a group of cigarettes cornered him near a tree. He looked down at his tiny assailants. "I smoked for years; I'm on your side, see?" He picked up one of the cigarettes and put it in his mouth, puffing as hard as he could to prove a point. "See? I love cigarettes!" The cigarettes stopped their advance, quelling the rising fear creeping up his sweaty spine. But they didn't stop to spare his life, they stopped to watch as the cigarette the terrified teen wearing a bright display of tie-dye had plucked from their ranks slipped out of the grasp of his fingers and leapt down into his throat, choking him straight to the ground whereupon they lit fire to his body and cheered as he plumed like a cigarette into the bright blue sky.

And one by one the people fell, each smoldering in the same warm welcome as the next. Their screams and cries drowned out by the music they all came to see; the sky they came to feel. Soon it wasn't just cigarette against human, but all things against man. Panicked like white mice they scampered and clawed through each other, squirming to get that much further away from the "creatures" as the next.

As an offering to the Mother Earth, the humans that remained were tied to stakes and burned alive, much to the rejoice of the cigarettes, who took turn lighting themselves on the embers of the dead and then took turns puffing each

other, blowing smoke on the faces of those as they burned.

THAT'S HOW IT WAS WITH HOWIE

by Corie Adjmi

(First appeared in *Verdad*, Fall 2010)

Howie reached for the pack of Marlboros on his night table and lit up. He leaned back against the headboard and exhaled. Smoke billowed in front of him. It was already ten, and he was due to pick up his daughter, Olivia, from his ex-wife's apartment in Manhattan. He knew he should call to inform her he was running behind schedule, but he dreaded that. He envisioned his ex-wife, Lori, rolling her eyes. "You're late," she would say as if he didn't know, "Olivia's been waiting."

Howie reminded himself he hadn't intended to be late. He also hadn't intended to be divorced. He never intended to drink too much or stay out too late either, and yet here he was on Saturday morning, sporting a tremendous hangover, alone.

Howie reached for the ashtray, and it slipped from his hand. He peered over the edge of the mattress to assess the damage like someone staring into a bottomless pit. Cigarette butts and ashes littered the floor. He blew, scattering the mess.

He couldn't believe how Lori had ended up in Manhattan and how he was left behind in New Jersey. Originally, when they conceived Olivia, Lori was the one who wanted to live in the suburbs, believing that children had a right to play outside in their own backyard. But at some point, she craved the energy of city life and couldn't tolerate the solitude any longer. Howie knew it was really him she couldn't tolerate, but he didn't want to think about that. He took a

drag. “Fuck her,” he said out loud.

He threw the covers back, got rid of the cigarette, and hauled himself to the shower. He stood under the water, letting it get hot, and watched his skin turn red. He stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and cleared a spot on the mirror with his fist. He slicked his hair back using gel, brushed his teeth, and leaned in to take a good look. “You’re the asshole that was left,” he said, jabbing his finger at the mirror. He shook his head. “I’m talking to myself. I can’t believe I’m fuckin’ talking to myself.”

He walked to the window and stared at the hole in the ground. He’d intended to put a pool in, but it never got done. Howie was known to be a workaholic, and he rarely spent time at home. Lori was ruthless in her badgering. She said she didn’t mind if he didn’t want to be around all summer, but the least he could do was get the pool finished so she and Olivia could enjoy hot days together; and yet over two years had gone by. Lori expressed her dissatisfaction along the way and watched from the kitchen window, as workers slowly dug up the yard. She paid attention as the green grass disappeared and the black hole got bigger. Then, one day, nobody showed up for work and everything just stopped. Their backyard, dangerous and off-limits, was protected by yellow tape and a temporary chain-link fence.

The irony was that Howie was a builder; that’s what he did for a living. And he was good at it. He developed multiple properties simultaneously—some twenty stories high, some sprawling for acres. But he wouldn’t take care of the pool.

One night, while he lay in bed, Lori yelled at him. “It’s not the Empire

State Building for Christ's sake. What's taking you so long?"

All he wanted, he remembered, was to be left alone. And now, he was.

His eye caught the picture of Lori that sat on his dresser. He left it there because he hoped she'd be back, and up until that moment, he wanted her to know she was welcome. But now enraged, he hurled her picture into the garbage can. "I don't need you."

He put on a white Lacoste shirt, khaki pants, and navy Tod's. He grabbed his car key, passed the kitchen, and did a double take not believing what he saw: dried eggs stuck on a skillet, and on more than one plate, an uneaten bagel, hardening, with cream cheese, and red wineglasses half full. On the stove sat a mountain of pots encased with tomato sauce from when he attempted to make pasta earlier in the week. Empty Campbell's Soup cans and a heap of bowls he'd used for cereal lined the counter. He didn't want his daughter to see this mess, but what could he do? He could hear Lori's voice as if she was standing right there, and a vision of her flashed before him. "Fuck you," he said, walking out to his car. "I'll clean it when I'm good and ready."

He revved the engine in his black Corvette and lit up. He wondered how it was that Lori always made him feel bad about himself. She had something to say about everything, even the car he drove. The night he brought it home, he was elated and couldn't wait to show it to her, but he was embittered when she freaked and asked when he planned to grow up and act his age.

He turned the volume on the radio up high, and as if he and Lori were still discussing the car, he said, "I'll drive what I fuckin' want." He glanced in the rearview mirror and peeled out of the driveway.

He stopped at Starbucks and stood in line. Impatient, his head ached, and he needed coffee badly. He looked around. People sat alone, at round tables, and sipped coffee. Some read the newspaper, but others stared off into space seemingly content with lethargy. Maybe they were slow moving because it was Saturday, Howie thought, attempting to cut them some slack; but deep down he was certain laziness embedded their souls, and it bothered him. Worse than that, he couldn't imagine being in public alone. Didn't they have friends? Howie had never been one of those people who could be alone. His BlackBerry served as a constant companion.

He dialed Lori to tell her he was on the way. He got the answering machine and, relieved, left a message.

The cashier counted change from the register deliberately, and it was driving Howie crazy. "What's the problem? This isn't brain surgery." At the sound of his voice, the woman in front of him turned around. Howie aimed his chin at the cashier and said, "This is the downfall of our country."

When he got to the front of the line, he ordered black coffee. "The biggest you've got," he said. He handed the cashier a five-dollar bill, and dying to get out of there, he said, "Keep the change."

* * *

Outside, he rested his cup on the roof of his car and lit a cigarette. He reached for his cup and took a sip. "Ouch," he said loud enough for a woman stepping out of her gold Lexus to hear. "Hot," he said, hoping for sympathy, but she turned her head and kept walking.

He drove fast and got into the city in record time, but before he parked,

feeling jittery, he smoked another cigarette. If he'd called Lori, she would've brought Olivia down, but Howie wanted to get Olivia himself so he could see their new apartment.

He knocked on the door, and from where he stood in the hallway, he heard Olivia running to open it. "Daddy," her voice tinkled. She jumped into his arms. Howie hadn't realized how much he'd missed her.

Lori didn't invite him in, but from the door he saw all he needed to see; blood-red roses bloomed in a crystal vase, the sun broke through clouds and now shined brilliantly through floor-to-ceiling windows, and coffee-table books were displayed and stacked in size order. In the corner, on the floor, there was a knapsack. And curiosity took hold.

"What's that for?" Howie asked casually as if her answer didn't matter.

"I'm going away for the weekend."

"Where are you going?"

"Hiking."

"Hiking?" Howie's face reddened. He could feel the color like fire, traveling up his neck to his cheeks. The heat was overwhelming, but he tried to contain himself.

"Who are you going with?"

"A friend," Lori said, in a way that begged him not to interrogate her further.

Howie felt his heart pound against his chest. Lori was moving on. She was now a woman who hiked. He also happened to know, because Olivia had slipped, that while Lori used to eat plain old scrambled eggs, she now shaved

white truffles on top.

He thought about the Lori he knew, and how she used to get in bed at night, her feet colder than either one of them believed was possible, and how she'd slip them between his thighs. He'd arch his back as if in pain and let out a playful scream, pretending that this was torture. But he treasured that he could provide for her in this way. He missed that.

The problem was he simply didn't know what Lori wanted. If he had, he might have given it to her. Every time he thought he was doing things right, she made sure to tell him how he wasn't. One night, they lay in bed in the dark, fighting and discussing divorce. They'd just come home from a party where Howie had been flirting. Lori spent the night eyeing him, so furious, she'd forgotten to eat, and she was starving.

"Should I get you something?" Howie asked, rolling toward her.

Lori cringed and moved away. "I don't understand. Just a second ago, you agreed that divorce was a great idea, and despite that decision, you want to get me something to eat at midnight?"

She was right, Howie thought. She didn't understand that it was instinct for him to provide for her; protect her and Olivia. That came naturally. But she talked about him being *present* and emotionally available, and he didn't know what that meant. She said she wanted—no, needed—intimacy, and he argued that if sticking his finger down her throat while she held onto the toilet with both hands after drinking too much at the Wilson's party wasn't intimate, he didn't know what was.

Lori kneeled down and hugged Olivia. "I'll miss you, sweetpea."

Howie noticed how Lori's voice lilted, and he felt a pang of longing. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket.

"Oh, no. Not in here," Lori said.

"Oh," Howie retaliated, ready to explode. "I wouldn't want to tarnish your precious paradise. Come on, Olivia. Let's get out of here."

With Olivia at his side, he exited the building. The sun shone brightly and he squinted, taking time to adjust to the light. Just weeks ago, he would've been playing golf. Now weekends were spent with his daughter.

He pulled her in close, kissed her head, and inhaled. She smelled like strawberry shampoo, and he thought there was no one more delicious in the world.

He threw her knapsack into the trunk and opened the passenger side door. "After you, miss."

"Thank you kindly," Olivia said. She put her seat belt on and looked at him in the driver's seat. "You smoked."

"Me? Not me."

"I smell it, Daddy."

"Must've been somebody else."

"Cut it out, Daddy."

"Okay. You caught me."

"You promised you'd quit."

"I tried, sweetie."

"You don't try, Daddy. You just do it."

"That's easy for you to say."

Howie intended to quit smoking. He'd tried numerous times, only to fail. But most recently he joined Smoke Stoppers, and he liked Dr. Frank Stern's methods. "If you're undecided, you'll get nowhere," Dr. Frank said. "In order to move forward in your life, you must find the courage to change. You're not a victim. You have a choice."

Every day for two months, Howie woke and faced himself in the mirror. He chanted:

I hate cigarettes.

I quit.

I will never smoke again.

He liked the ritual and was beginning to believe in himself when Lori moved out, taking Olivia with her.

"Promise me you'll stop, Daddy."

"I promise, sweetie."

They drove in silence and Howie glanced at her. She was dressed in pink, and he was overcome by how small she was. He remembered the day she was born and how he loved her immediately. He recalled holding her in his arms, awed by her frailty, wanting to take care of her.

He stepped on the gas and zoomed into the Holland Tunnel. Olivia slid down low in her seat. "It's spooky in here. I hate it."

"You don't have any reason to be afraid."

"Yes, I do. What if it collapses?"

"It won't collapse."

"What if it floods?"

“It won’t flood.”

“What if we get trapped in here forever?”

“Olivia, stop it. Nothing bad is going to happen.” He turned on the radio, and the news announcer reported that a man in Monmouth County had been charged with sexually abusing children. He used his job as a handyman to gain access into homes where children lived. Howie didn’t want Olivia to hear. He shut the radio.

Olivia turned to him. “What was that about?”

“A bad man.”

“What did he do?”

“He hurt children,” Howie said tentatively, not sure how much to tell her. He wanted to change the subject. It was making him angry. He thought of the children, innocent victims, and wanted to kill the guy who’d harmed them. He wondered how a grown man could hurt a helpless child.

“Is he a daddy?”

“What makes you ask that?”

Olivia shrugged. “Just curious.”

The car in front of them came to a stop. Howie hit the brakes and simultaneously swung his arm across Olivia’s chest. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Look at this traffic. Must’ve been an accident.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“I have to pee.”

“Didn’t you go before you left?”

“I forgot to.”

“Well,” Howie said, “you’re going have to wait.”

“I can’t. I really have to go.”

“Olivia, stop it. There’s nothing I can do.”

Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. “I’m gonna pee.”

“Don’t you dare pee on my new seats.”

“You only care about your car. You don’t care about me.”

“That’s ridiculous. Of course I care about you. Just because I don’t want you to pee on my seats doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.”

“Help, Daddy, really. I can’t hold it in. I’m going to explode.”

Howie looked around. He couldn’t pull over. He couldn’t move forward. He was stuck. He took a deep breath. “Olivia, you’re a big girl.”

She braced her hands on the dashboard, grasped the handle on the door, smacked at the roof, clinging to whatever she could find. “Daddy, do something.”

They inched forward. “Here.” Howie said, handing her his empty coffee cup. “Pee in this.”

“What? No.”

“I won’t look.”

“I can’t do it.”

“You can, sweetie. I’ll help you.”

Olivia took off her seat belt and then squatted. With one finger she pulled her panties to the side, and together they held the cup.

“Is it in the right place?”

“I don’t know,” Olivia cried.

Howie adjusted the cup, but Olivia moved it back. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to help.”

“I can’t do this.” She pushed the cup away and sat down.

“Look, we’re moving,” Howie said.

They came up behind the car that was stuck because of a flat tire.

Hazard lights flickered on and off.

“Here’s the problem,” Howie said as he drove around the car and picked up speed. “It’s behind us now.”

Howie pulled into a gas station, and Olivia ran to the bathroom. He stood outside the restroom and waited for her. He filled his car with gas and bought her a pack of gum. Smiling, they both got back into the car. Howie stepped on the accelerator heading south on the New Jersey Turnpike. When he reached 90 mph, he whipped out a cigarette and lit it. He inhaled deeply.

Olivia turned to him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m smoking.”

“But you promised.”

“Listen you, it’s been a rough morning.” Howie exhaled and reassured himself that there was nothing more he could do.



Bean 1
—Katia Mitova

A NOTE TO SUMMER

It's been three weeks since I got dumped
by conjunctions, prepositions, and breeze

of commas and semicolons. Period sits perched,
like a queen with a tiara of pretense, on the branch

of creativity, but the minute I arrive at the root of the tree,
suggesting change, she orders her guards to drown me

in the puddle where toads of listlessness cry for eloquence
and temperatures kill seeds, creating an oasis for cactus.

I didn't want to point fingers but truth, like those bottles
of empty calories consumed, is effervescent unlike me in July:

It's not writer's block that I have because the ocean
of poetry exists; I believe you suck the goodness from it.

—Sweta Srivastava Vikram

GOOD MORNING

I step out of bed this morning with
the light already bright through your shutters.
We say good morning.
You make coffee.
We sit at your backyard window,
spy doves and a white-throated sparrow
just learning to sing.
His plaintive whistle pierces our silence;
the flannel of your gown brushes
against my knee:
We smile at our growing familiarity.

—Mary Diane Hausman
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MRAZ

I'm not actually in love with you
I think.

But I so want to put our mouths together
so I can scoop your words
and roll them between my teeth
like marbles.
I want to get them mixed up on the floor.

You are spectacular
like the clashing of gods,
like fire fissures in the sky.
You see moon dimples
in my cheeks.
You haul me up like a tide.
Like the moon.

I want to balance your reflection
on a handheld mirror
as it puddles over weepy glass.
I want to run a finger through it
and mix your colors up
like tea dregs and cream.

We do not belong together, I think.
You are evasive
like lightning tails,
and I'm not much good at
balancing puddles.
But I'd like one night
to taste the marbles.

—DSD

THE ONE WHO GOT AWAY

by Jessica Ross

It's a universal human experience that there are some people who we just can't get over, no matter how hard we try. Most commonly referred to as "the one who got away," we all have this person locked away in a secret compartment in our heads. If you've never suffered through this kind of lost love, consider yourself lucky. Unfortunately, I am not one of those blessed few. Despite spending four and a half years making a concentrated effort to forget about Chris, I remain hopelessly in love with him.

We met off OkCupid.com, my dating site of choice. I took one look at his picture and IM'd him immediately. He wasn't the hottest guy I'd ever seen, but something about his floppy dark hair and sly smirk drew me in. I felt like I knew him already. If I had stopped to read his profile before I sent that IM, I would have discovered that he had a girlfriend and was only on the site to make friends. But by the time I found that out, we were already chatting, and I was already under his spell. I was sympathetic that he was going through a rough patch with his girlfriend. I honestly don't believe he was on the site with the intention of cheating on his girlfriend; but there was a bizarre connection between us that neither of us could deny. I don't know how to explain what made me fall for Chris so hard, what made him different from every other 20-year-old guy I came across. In my eyes, he was the ideal man; he had all the characteristics my dream partner would have: intelligence, sense of humor, compassion, a genuine sense of caring. Chris was dedicated to school; he

worked hard to achieve his goals and he loved animals. He was smarter than me, and that was a trait I did not often come across. Chris was all I was looking for in a guy. I was head over heels in love with him before we'd even met.

On our first date, Chris took me to the classiest sex store in New York City. Babeland, as the title implies, catered exclusively to women, and Chris was determined to buy me a vibrator. "I want to make sure you're taken care of, since I can't do it myself," he gallantly stated as we strolled along the streets of Manhattan.

We entered the shop and landed in a world of soft music, bright lights, and dildos in every imaginable color, shape, and size. A saleswoman glided over to offer assistance. She began to question me on what kind of vibrator I wanted. I had no idea since I'd never owned one before.

"Do you prefer internal or external stimulation?" the smiling girl inquired.

I was 18 years old and didn't have much sexual experience. I didn't know the difference between internal and external stimulation, and tried to mask my lack of knowledge by murmuring, "Um...both?"

We eventually settled on a light-blue vibrator called an Angel Kiss that offered both types of stimulation, and Chris paid for it. We exited the store and wandered in the direction of Chris' dorm. He shared a suite with three other guys. We reached the dorm and headed inside. One of the roommates was sitting in the living room, and Chris introduced me as a friend who he was showing around the city. The roommate gave us a suspicious glance as we

casually entered Chris' room and locked the door.

We sat on his bed, staring at each other, not sure what to do. Our attraction to each other was unquestionable. That moment in his dorm room was so intense that it seemed the air crackled with a static electricity that connected us to each other. I decided to make the first move. I leaned over and kissed him. After a moment of hesitation, Chris responded enthusiastically. Before long, most of our clothing had been removed and we were rolling around on the bed. I tried my damndest not to think about The Girlfriend. This is how we referred to her in our IM conversations. From everything he told me about her, it appeared that The Girlfriend didn't appreciate Chris. She took his good looks and good heart for granted. But that wasn't my problem. She didn't deserve him; he obviously belonged with me. Besides, he would most likely dump her soon anyway.

We didn't have sex that day; that would come on the second date. But we did plenty of other things. Eventually, I had to leave to catch my train back to New Jersey. Chris and I got dressed and wandered downstairs, feeling somewhat like criminals and trying desperately not to look guilty.

The very second we walked out of the dorm and out into the chilly February night, a pretty blonde came up to us. It was The Girlfriend. This girl who I was both envious and resentful of kissed Chris right in front of me, then stared suspiciously at the shopping bag in my hand with the Babeland logo prominently displayed. I averted my eyes in a mixture of jealousy and shame.

"This is the girl I was telling you about, remember? Her mom is friends with mine, and I agreed to show her around New York for the afternoon. I just

need to take her to Penn Station and then I'll be back..." I zoned out as Chris attempted to explain away my presence. I felt dirty. *He had just been with me and now he's making out with her. He's not mine; he's hers. What have I gotten myself into?* With another kiss and a second dark glance in my direction, The Girlfriend departed.

Chris walked me to Penn Station. We didn't have much to say to each other. While we were waiting for my train to arrive, he turned to me and said, "I'm massively attracted to you." The feeling was mutual. We made plans for him to come out to my college in New Jersey on a weekend when my evil roommate would be out of town. It wasn't stated explicitly, but it was clear to both of us that the purpose of that visit would be sex. With one last kiss, he deposited me onto the train, and I headed back to New Jersey.

When Chris came to visit me at my college, we had a good time together. Looking back on it, the sex was mediocre since I was still at the point where I didn't really know what I was doing. But at the time, it was magical. Lying there in Chris' arms in post-coital bliss, I felt both happy and safe. It just felt right. I belonged there in his arms. Unfortunately, Chris didn't agree.

A few days after we had slept together, and less than a week before Valentine's Day, Chris informed me that he was going to give things another go with The Girlfriend. What happened between us was a mistake and would never happen again. It shouldn't have occurred in the first place. And it wouldn't have if my feelings for him hadn't been so strong. I knew I couldn't have all of him, but I was willing to take whatever teeny-tiny scrap of himself that Chris was willing to give me. Yes, I know that makes me sound completely

pathetic. But part of me was convinced that he was my One True Love, and I was willing to take what I could get.

After Chris explained that he was going to stay with The Girlfriend, I was completely heartbroken. I called up my former coworkers at Hollywood Video and sobbed the whole sad story to my friend Joe. Joe promptly put me on hold while I sobbed and raged at the universe, and a few minutes later Miles, the assistant manager, came on the line. I couldn't believe that Joe had the audacity to put me on hold when I was clearly having a mental breakdown. Luckily, Miles was more sympathetic. He managed to calm me down a bit, and after a brief talk we hung up. Still weeping quietly, I tried to begin the process of getting over Chris.

But it still hasn't happened. I have met other guys, hundreds of them, in the last four and a half years, and yet my mind always goes back to Chris. There was nothing extra special about him; he was just another guy, like all the others. Except somehow things with him were different. I felt different when I was with him. I felt like I was somehow who was worthy of getting a great guy. I thought he was an amazing person, and I deserved to be with him. Looking back on it now, I still think that Chris is essentially a good person. I honestly believe that he would not have cheated on The Girlfriend if he hadn't had such intense feelings for me. I've tried to convince myself that he's a jerk, that he used me, that he's scum. But I just can't get myself to accept that. In my heart I still believe that we had a special connection that couldn't be ignored.

The only thought I have to console myself is that when we kissed, I didn't feel anything magical. It wasn't like in the Disney movies when the princess

kisses her one true love and immediately knows that he's "it," it was no different from kissing anyone else. Which means he must not be my true love. If he was, I would have felt something more special in that kiss. Right? I keep telling myself that. Maybe one day I'll even start to believe it.



fisher king in red square
—Fred Tarr

THE RELUCTANT MUSE

by Michael Hart & Anoush Rima Tatevossian

His paintbrush danced intensely upon the ever-changing canvas. An hour earlier it sat untouched, lifeless, waiting for an artist to shape it from a blank rectangle to a moment in time captured by the imagination, eyes and hands of its emancipator. Now, it was filled with reds, blues, yellows, greens. Shades and variations of each. He uncrossed his legs, sitting upon the worn, green couch parallel to the bed and reached for his palette, which rested upon the maple coffee table.

He flirted with the colors, seeking a pink of his liking, one that would bring out the hues of her soft skin. He brushed her exposed buttocks, palms and the side of her face not planted in the pillow. When he looked at her—studying the curves, indentations, perfections, and imperfections of her body; the way her hair reached out, flowing into the sheets, the thousands of strands in each lock, waving together like the particles of sand forming a collection of gently compacted dunes; her skin, delicate, radiating in the winter sun, reflecting a soft array of tones like the melting tinges of a sky embracing dusk—he realized he could not justly portray her. These things cannot truly be captured by any camera, word, musical note, or paintbrush. They exist for the eye of the moment. They exist in the living world, not the imaginary world that is art. As much as he realized this, he could not help himself from attempting her portrait. Even though transferring such beauty to a canvas was an obviously impossible task, it stirred unrest in the beholder. He sat, unable to

simply embrace her presence for what it was—finite. He could not control himself from attempting to keep her beyond the moment.

Nearly complete, he smiled at the work he had produced. This lazy Saturday morning was a scene he'd always have—even if only as a shadow. Outside, the frigid January air swirled through the park, past the window, and into the faces of those unfortunate enough to have business to attend to. Inside, in the warmth of their apartment, she rested among the disheveled covers and sheets of the bed, and he admired her.

She shuffled in the bed, and the moment was gone.

“Mmm,” she rolled onto her back, pulled a sheet over her naked body, and rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?”

“A little after ten.”

“How long have you been up?” she asked, not yet conscious of her surroundings.

“A couple hours.”

She yawned, “Doing what?”

He hesitated for a second—a pause that, though ever so slight, reverberated. Still, he tried to cover his tracks. “Just working on some things. Waiting for you to get up.”

Her gaze shifted to his collection of art supplies covering the coffee table in front of him. Sitting up, she sighed, briefly closed her eyes and redirected her gaze upon him. She held it there, drilling into him, for a moment—a moment filled with such tension he could almost see it splashing the room with a blazing red.

“You’re not looking at me,” she growled, washing the red away, “you’re watching me.”

She hopped from the bed—nearly tripping on a pair of jeans tossed upon the floor—brushed the hair from her face and pulled a nightgown over her body. In a tempest, she approached his desk, pulled open a drawer, and tossed through papers covered in his words and sketches, creating a flurry of white sheets. The room, for a moment, looked like a snow globe that had been furiously shaken by a child.

In the middle of her outburst, she peered at him, finding his face covered in confusion and, to her annoyance, tinted with a shade of amusement. He continued to hold the canvas and brush in his hand, occasionally applying a stroke.

“This,” she said, grasping sheets of the paper in her hand. “This isn’t intimacy. Why do you have to take everything we share and exploit it? You cheapen it by regurgitating it all on that stupid canvas for everyone to see. You feign passion in your art, and they eat it up. They look at your pieces and hail them as ‘vibrant’ and ‘passionate.’ But you’re not. You’re aloof and detached. You’re cool and calculating. I almost think you do things just to elicit a response from me so that you can turn around and *use it* for your *art*. Sometimes you make me feel like I’m nothing more than the subject of your pieces. Well, I’m not your fucking Mona Lisa. You’re using me up.”

She dropped down upon the edge of the bed and attempted to regain her composure.

He sat for a moment, holding the end of his brush to his forehead, his

eyes burrowed into the floor like a chess player pondering a move.

“This is my work, my passion,” he said softly, “and so much of it is inspired by you. Can’t you see? This is a sign of my appreciation of you.”

“I know,” she sighed, then repeated the bit she had heard so many times before, “I’m your *muse*.”

“Of course. I can only create what I know, and you are what I know. It’s beautiful. Look, here’s our relationship,” he pointed to various canvases resting in different parts of the room. “A year ago, five months ago, today.”

“No,” she resounded. Then, sitting upright, she pointed at him and then back at herself. “This is our relationship. Art is an imitation of life. But you’re so detached from our life that I can’t even say these are pure imitations. You’re never really here. You’re too busy envisioning us as a painting or a poem.”

As if by mechanical compulsion, he reached to lay another stroke upon the canvas.

“There you go,” she said. “You’re doing it right now. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, ‘Good, keep going. This is great material.’”

He returned his concentration to her.

“I am not material,” she cried. “You always talk about ‘consumers and producers.’ You know what you are? You’re a thief. You intrude my space and take my life and put it out there for all to see, leaving me an empty vessel. You know, I think those indigenous tribes have a point about photographs stealing the soul.”

Suddenly, she didn’t find the warmth of the apartment as comforting as she had moments earlier. She walked to the large bay window from which the

late-morning sunlight showered into the studio and watched a couple exit a door on the other side of the building's courtyard. The man stepped over a small patch of ice on the sidewalk, then reached out for the woman's hand to keep her from slipping. Before walking any farther, they faced each other and began talking. As she spoke to him, he reached over and zipped her jacket up to her neck. The gesture was so honest—there was no thought, just action. It was an effortless show of affection, one so alien to her watching eyes that she felt her throat constrict as she fought back impending tears. She swallowed hard, trying to push the swelling envy down into her chest. The couple walked out of view, and in her mind they continued on in a world in which every time they encountered a patch of ice, he ensured she didn't slip. It was a world where they walked down the cold street, not bothered by the wind blistering across their faces like sandpaper wearing against wood. The world was filled with a halcyon soundtrack—the simple melodies of Satie, the narcotic voice of Nick Drake, the gentle tones of Leszek Rojsza's fingers plucking at the strings of his guitar. There was no conflict in that world, and when she saw them again, walking through that courtyard, they would be characters of a drama, in the surreal lighting of her idealized imagination.

But they weren't characters. Their world was no more perfect than hers. Maybe that's what irritated her—the realization that her life hadn't evolved into what she had dreamed of as a teenager. Then, she had envisioned having a selfless mate who always thought to compliment the way she looked, not just at times when she dressed up for a special occasion. That man brought flowers to her from time to time and didn't think a candlelit dinner was cliché.

No, that dream was a ridiculous Disney-built concept of love. One she had disregarded and, in fact, despised since she had become a woman, though she now couldn't help but wonder if—in her rejection of that ideal—she had swung too far to the other end of the romantic spectrum.

As much as she adored the work he produced, much of which hung upon the walls of their apartment, it was a constant reminder of her diminished ambitions, which she found particularly painful, considering how she had always been praised for her “potential.” To be a writer or a photographer or a dancer, those were dreams that also were born in her teenage years, but unlike her dreams of romance, those dreams remained beautifully vivid. Part of those dreams seemed likely to be fulfilled when they had begun dating. She had seen him as a partner where the environment of their relationship would be one of reciprocity. They would foster and encourage mutual growth on an even plane. When they moved in together, she had envisioned him painting as she sat at a typewriter or carried around a camera. Half of that had come true. Why couldn't she fulfill the other half?

She had come to think of herself as a seed waiting to be planted in the right environment. A place where the rain would fall and the sun would warm her until she would finally poke her head above the ground and reach upward. She works best in collaborations, feeding off the energy of others to gain inspiration. He had seemed like a perfect source of that energy. So how did this happen? Because, she judged, instead of him offering inspiration to ignite her potential, he saw that spark inside of her and used it to propel himself. Propulsion used to spend Saturday mornings painting her while she slept.

“The idea of a photograph capturing a soul,” he said, interrupting her thought, “the tribal people aren’t making some metaphorical statement. It’s a literal view.”

She could see their argument twirling in long revolutions around the room. It was an endless cycle. There was no resolve to be found. At least, not through the means she was pursuing.

“Maybe you need to be in my shoes.”

“I’d be thrilled if you wrote a poem about us or about me,” he said. “I think it would be great for you to get back into your writing.”

“Maybe I will,” she said, looking vacantly at the floor. “I’m going to make some tea.”

She walked into the kitchen and began shuffling through a drawer.

He followed her and grabbed a coat folded over a chair at the kitchen table, then tossed a scarf around his neck.

“I think I’m going to walk down the street for some bagels,” he said. “Might pick up that new Wes Anderson movie from the video store. Seems like a nice day to lounge around.”

“Sure,” she said coolly.

She was filling a kettle with water, her back turned to him. She was still annoyed and he knew. He threw on the coat and approached her from behind. As she stood fooling with her tea at the counter, he stretched his arms around her with a deep embrace. He had once read about a study that suggested a strong hug made a woman happier than most anything else a man could offer. Something to do with the chemicals released in the woman’s body. He didn’t

really care how it worked, as long as it worked. Adding a cherry to the gesture, he leaned over her shoulder and planted a consolatory kiss on her cheek.

“Love you,” he whispered.

She just stood there and then went back to shuffling through a drawer. Perhaps it was better to offer her some space. He didn't like to leave with unresolved conflict, but she was being stubborn, and he knew the best move was to let her figure it out on her own. He walked to the door and put on his shoes, then, before he could open the door, she called to him.

“Hey.”

He turned to welcome her reaching out to him with an apology. Instead, he received the flash of a Polaroid camera. She smirked sardonically. Somewhere between her pursed, upturned lips was a message racing to escape. But she kept her lips sealed. He didn't understand what game she was playing, but he definitely didn't like the way she stood there smiling at him. And the way she flicked the developing photo in her hand—back and forth, over and over—like she was clanging a bell that unleashed a shrill ringing throughout the studio.

She walked toward him, writing something on the photo with a marker, and then handed it to him. Before he could release a word from his mouth, she was gently pushing him through the door.

He shrugged as she closed the door behind him, and then he made his way down the wooden, open-air staircase of the building. The wind, slightly diminished before it swept into the stairwell, remained brisk. The stairs creaked as he descended, telling their old age under his modest weight. As he

approached the final flight, he looked down at the photo. On the white border below the film were the words "The Artist" written in cursive. He looked at himself through the lens of the Polaroid. There was a slight sepia tone to the developing photo. The camera was at least 15 years old. But under the mild brown haze, he stood dumbfounded. His short brown hair still disheveled from sleep. His eyes wide. His face covered in sparse stubble.

He looked up at the bay window of their apartment, and through the reflection of the sunlight on the glass, he saw her standing there, looking down at him with a wry smile.

He slipped the photo into the inner pocket of his coat, just over his heart, and tapped the pocket gently to ensure it was secure. Can't be too careful with your soul.

The seashell longs for the tide

Why do you recede,
taking everything with you
including me,
then you spit me back to the sand
where I mull in the sediment,
waiting

You stand so tall at times,
rising to the sun
only to drop back down
become low and deceptive,
a ghost of the ocean you claim to be

Come back tide,
kiss the ridges of me,
don't come with such force,
and leave with such whisper

You said you'd give me the salt inside you,
but I can't taste a thing

—Nijla Baseema Mu'min

MELT

by Linda Tzoref

I am in her bed, which is really just a battered mattress on the floor in the middle of a small, cold room in a small basement apartment. Lately it seems I am always cold, and although San Francisco is not known as a warm city, it lacks the stinging frigid air of a place like Boston or New York. It never even snows here, maybe some rain in the winter. Summers are the worst, “June Gloom” they call it. You need a sweater or jacket to venture out. Colette is almost asleep, and our bare legs are tangled together. Her warmth feels good against my skin, which is icy to the touch. I feel like a giant icicle, frozen to the core, and now I am trying to make myself melt, at least thaw out a little. Her roommate is gone, but this does not make me feel any bolder. Instead, it scares me. Anything could happen.

* * *

We met three weeks ago at Delia’s. I went alone since I didn’t have anyone to go with. She asked me to dance. My outfit was ridiculous: black knee-highs reaching all the way up to my mid thighs, thick rubber-soled black shoes, a short kilt, and a peacoat. Librarian-meets-Catholic schoolgirl. And I’m Jewish. Obviously, she found the weird outfit appealing, or maybe she ignored the out of place ensemble and just looked at my face. I am no beauty, but apparently some people appreciate exotic looks. My face is okay: Sometimes it looks magnificent, and other times it hovers near flat-out homeliness. On the dance floor with her, I was released from everything, and this resulted in a

feeling of lightness, almost pure dizzying delight. Everything was forgotten, all those mundane worries that plague you at night: will I be able to pay the rent, will I find a real job when I'm out of school, what sort of future, if any, awaits me, what is the point of anything when everything is meaningless? I was studying the existentialists at the time. Despite so many thoughts winding around in my head, I just danced with her, felt the beat pulsing in my throat and stomach. She charmed me while I walked her home; maybe it was the slight French-Canadian accent or her shiny light brown hair cut into a bob. We kissed good night, cheek, then other cheek, and exchanged phone numbers.

Colette didn't know about my other life, the one where I lived with my boyfriend. I thought of her often while in our little apartment on the Great Highway. She and I began spending more and more time together, but there was a closeness missing, of course. Nearly everything I told her about my life was a lie. At the very least I usually omitted the truth. My boyfriend knew no details about our relationship and he never asked, merely encouraged me to see her. He liked the idea of my being with another woman. Somehow it didn't count or wasn't threatening like it would've been had it been a man. I never understood that, and still don't (isn't cheating *cheating?*), but at the time it served my purposes well. When I finally confessed that I thought I was bisexual, he said very matter-of-factly that I should find a girlfriend. To an outsider it probably seemed like an ideal situation, but it never felt satisfactory. My confusion merely multiplied.

* * *

She liked to dance and so did I, so we usually met in bars. The rush of

the sweet alcohol crept into our cheeks as a rosy red hue and aided us in getting closer-so close that our sweaty T-shirts were almost rubbing. By closing time I would find myself on her mattress again, in her little basement apartment on the lower Haight. We would stroke each other feverishly; our bare breasts pressed together, tongues lightly touching as if gently tasting an ice cream cone. She knew what to do with her hands, how to touch me so I shivered, stroked me like a fur coat. In the mornings I never wanted to leave, wanted to stay like that beside her and have her hands all over my body, searching, just lay like that all day in her arms. Real life intruded, however, and I had to go to class, and she had to go to work. After class I would go home to my boyfriend only to think of her. He and I would usually go to the beach and walk, then later in the evening when it started getting dark, I would cook dinner. Vegetarian dishes, nothing elaborate. Almost like a real family instead of playing house. Most of the time it was tranquil, save for the occasional arguments. Now I can't even remember what we would fight about, but we were so young it couldn't have been anything important. I was just struggling to tread water back then.

* * *

One afternoon when we were walking around the upper Haight window-shopping, Colette nearly blew my cover. The vintage hats and bright wool coats with brass buttons caught my eye, and I tried not to get ruffled.

“Are you sure you're a lesbian?”

“Yes, of course. Why do you ask?”

“Just making sure. You don't seem like one.”

What should a lesbian seem like, I wondered.

* * *

My boyfriend started demanding more and more of my time, which, of course, meant I spent less and less time with Colette. Perhaps his initial ease with the situation went away, I don't know; I never asked him. For some reason my relationship with him was the one I felt deserved preservation, even though my feelings for him were disintegrating. I had been in love with him or so I thought. My feelings for Colette were quite strong, but to label it love would've been incorrect and pushing the boundaries of my capabilities at that time. It was probably closer to infatuation. At any rate, what I felt for her was much deeper than what I felt for my boyfriend, even if I couldn't admit it at the time.

Walking around campus, I posed as straight. And at night, if I was with Colette, I became gay. I no longer knew for sure who or what I was. This illusion that I lived in was a pattern reverberating from childhood. Because then as when I attended university, I acted as if everything was fine. But it wasn't. It never was. I was used to lies, however, since my parents perpetrated the biggest one—that they were happy and in love. When I was little I didn't register my mother's occasional black eyes. Once a facade is erected, it is hard to tear it down. Because the facade begins to become a part of you, almost as if there is an invisible glue that clings to your skin and cannot be peeled off, at least not without pain of some sort. It becomes attached to you, as you become attached to it. You are not sure who you are any longer. And every utterance becomes significant and complicated, and everything must be remembered, every act, every word.

The black eyes stopped and when I was twenty-eight my parents divorced. How come you never left him, I asked my mom. Oh, but I did. No, you didn't, he left you. He said he wanted his freedom, remember? I did, she answered, I left him a long time ago.

One night Colette and I were out for dinner. I wanted to do something pedestrian and quiet and just be normal, do what normal couples do. Not that we were a couple exactly, there were never any discussions about what our fleeting relationship may or may not be. Still, I wanted to be able to talk to her and watch her eat; the way she enjoyed food was quite pleasurable to me. After eating we were on our way back to her place, and that's when I spotted him crossing the street toward us. It was Alex, my boyfriend. We caught each other's eyes.

"Hi, Yael."

The three of us stood on the street corner, and I thought my heart would burst right out of my chest. I wondered if he could see it pounding away.

"Hi—Alex. How are you?"

"All right."

He stared at me, and barely looked at Colette. Just one quick glance, to see what she looked like.

"Colette, this is...a friend. From school."

"Hi." She extended her hand toward him.

"Well, we're going to get going," I said. "Good seeing you."

Did she feel the tension? Did she notice him staring at me? If she did, she kept it to herself. After we left, I turned around quickly so Colette wouldn't

see, almost as a reflex. Alex was still standing on the street corner, looking vacuous.

That night at Colette's I dreamt that Alex and I were in an empty floating house together, and we kept looking out the windows. He was at one window, and I was at another one next to him. The house wouldn't stop floating, and I could even see clouds drifting past us, then disintegrating.

The next morning when I woke up, I knew I couldn't see Colette again. I didn't know what I would do without her, but felt as if I had no other choice. I was straight (one of the lies I told myself back then). And Alex was someone stable in my life. We said our usual good-byes, and I was off to catch the bus. While at the bus stop, I thought about her husband, a friend she had married so she could stay in the States and hopefully even get a green card. They had met in Austin, Texas, six years ago. He was her best friend, and the only man she had ever loved, even though the marriage was in name only. It had never been consummated, nor would it ever. So what, I wondered, did she feel for me? She never did say. I wanted her to love me more than she loved her husband, to rely on me the way she relied on him. And yet here I was, leaving her. Eventually she stopped calling since I never returned any of her calls. Somehow we never ran into each other. She had talked about going back to Canada, so maybe she had. I hoped not. I could not see Colette in such a cold place, so big and vast and far away. Another language was spoken up there in the province where she was born, one that her tongue wrapped more easily around, perhaps. It was a language that I had studied as a teenager and at one time had spoken, but my memory no longer served me, and most of it had been

long forgotten.

YMCA LOCKER ROOM

The locker room is not busy today
but Scott has a locker just to the left
of mine and is standing there dripping,
naked mostly, pulling navy blue briefs
up one leg, up one thigh, then the others,
snapping the elastic waistband lightly
when it meets his waist where the pelvis
and spine fuse, where the bush of dank
pubic hairs meet the other hairs escaping
into the belly button to hide from the light
of day. I am fully clothed—gym shorts
and tee shirt, athletic socks and running
shoes, headphones—afraid still to be naked
in front of a man I admire in the way men
do here in the locker room, perspiring
like the white subway tiles perspire down
the walls, pooling in the corners.

—D. Gilson

TWO ROUGE FRUITS DUKE IT OUT

Raspberries have every advantage
over strawberries, hands down, no doubts.
They taste better, have an intriguing shape,
demand a patrician “p” in their spelling
(contrast *raspberry* with bourgeois *strawberry*).
A raspberry need never be sliced,
is soft to the palate, rich in color.
Pluck a handful of raspberries from their
fragile pint wooden box, mash the fruity rubies
in your palms, and then spread the smooth,
soothing gel across your face: forehead,
cheeks, chin, nose, eyelids, lips.
Ahhh.

Strawberries are too firm to squish,
too prickly to apply as face balm,
and are tart when sweet is called for.

And yet,
strawberry outsells raspberry ice cream
twenty-to-one, and strawberry shakes
outsell raspberry shakes by an
even wider margin.
Fast food restaurants traditionally offer
vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry flavors,
making raspberry a non-option.

Bad triumphs over good;
Tasty fruits finish last.

—Gene McCormick

THE HEAD

I am irritated by the
 uncircumcised penis
 which looks like
 a sea cucumber
 faceless
 fishy
When erect
 it's a child drowning
 in a black lake
 whose youthful
 head
 can only be envisaged

—Nicholas YP Wong



The Womb
—Katia Mitova

GUESS WHAT THEY DO IN ENGLAND

by Susan White

When I was in the third grade, my best friend's family went on sabbatical to England. The Butler family occupied Rachel Paschal's home for six months. The two Butler daughters were frog-belly white and sounded like cartoon characters to my Tennessean ears. But I had listened to the *Oliver* album more times than I had brushed my teeth the preceding year, so I could understand their language. And my teeth were well on their way to looking British. Josephine was my age, and Sophie—who already had strawberry hair under her long, skinny arms—was in the sixth grade.

Josephine's father took Rachel's father's job at the college, and Josephine took Rachel's job as my best friend. I showed her all the creeks and waterfalls, she introduced me to poached eggs, and together we decided to stop wearing underwear.

One Saturday morning, the three of us carried a sleeve of Ritz crackers, change in our shorts pockets, and three toads in a wicker basket to the sand-cut: a wooded shortcut between our houses with giant expanses of pinkish-cream sandstone that we could sit and climb on. We made a circle out of sticks and rocks on a wide, flat sandstone area, which we sat around, betting on which toad would clear the circular boundary first. We played game after game, and I was nearly out of change when Sophie shouted, "Josephine, you aren't wearing knickers!"

Josephine brought her mosquito-bitten legs together, disrupting our

sticks and stones. “So!” She said.

I stretched sideways to grab the toad that hopped past her.

Josephine, avoiding her sister’s attention, put the other two toads in the basket.

“That’s disgusting,” Sophie said. “I don’t want to see your ugly bird.”

I stood and the toad’s sandy legs kicked the air.

Sophie looked at me. “Josey’s going to get sand up her bird and piss pearls.” She clapped her hands and laughed hysterically.

I wanted to go home and sit in my bathtub. But I laughed with Sophie and didn’t dare look at Josephine. The toad’s belly bloated between my fingers, and liquid splattered the rock below.

“We need to let these toads go behind those trees,” Sophie said. “We’ve handled them long enough.”

As we watched the toads hop in different directions, I whispered to Josephine, “Don’t tell Sophie I’m not wearing underwear.”

Josephine looked at me with the universal expression of hurt, but she did not implicate me. The seam of my blue jean shorts chafed my private place as we three veered off the sand-cut onto dirt and prickly foliage toward our favorite spot.

We sat on edge of the mossy overhang, and Josephine opened the plastic around the crackers with her teeth. She licked the salt off a cracker and ate around its edge in tiny bites, then passed the waxy package to my outstretched hand.

I pulled two crackers off the top and shoved them into my mouth at once.

Sophie said, "Gross. I'm not eating those crackers that Susan touched with her toad-pee hand."

"It wasn't pee," I told her. "Toads squirt liquid out to fizz up animals' mouths that pick them up. It's their weapon." My father had told me this years ago.

"Well I don't want my mouth foaming up," Sophie said. "Besides, that stuff that got on your hands was inside him."

Josephine finished her cracker and took the package from me. She threw the top cracker off the overhang and put half the remaining crackers on her lap. "Fine. Then Susan and I will split them." She gave me the depleted package. "What if we squirted out stuff like toads?"

Sophie looked at us as if she would pounce on us and tickle us until we screamed. "Boys have stuff inside their penis. They stick their penises inside girls' birds, and liquid stuff shoots out inside the girl."

Sophie's description made me nauseated and dizzy. "We don't do that in America," I told her.

But late that night, after my bath, I told my mother what they did in England. The secret was too dirty to keep to myself. I needed my mother to tell me that what they did in England was bad and that I'd never have to worry about doing such a thing.

Wearing a long, blue Joe Cochran T-shirt my aunt had given me to sleep in and smelling of soap, I picked at a popped blister on my foot while my mother explained that not only did Americans do this, but all living creatures did. She said that I didn't have to do it, but that most likely I would get married and do it

with my husband. To my horror, she told me that she and Dad had done it, and that's why they had four children.

That night I lay in bed listening to the crickets and tree frogs sing the terrors of life. My stomach felt like it did when I sat on the monkey swing as the rope unwound—round and round and round and round. Like my big brother's viewfinder, my mind clicked through pictures. Pictures of experiences that suddenly filled me with shame.

My mother yelling for me to come inside—to stop trying to pry my dog apart from the other dog. My insistence that they were glued together by sap.

Allison Gooch and I poking popsicle sticks in each other's vagina.

Rachel and I riding pillows on her bed in a race to feel a tingle first.

Sticking my hands down my babysitter Ronny Bailey's pants, looking for the tiny red ball he'd hidden on his body.

Standing outside the room in the back of our house a college woman rented—listening to ghostlike, tickling sounds and noises like she and some man were lifting something heavy.

This dark knowledge yanked me around. Seeped into everything. My parents' room was beneath mine. Were they doing it? I had to rethink the whole marriage thing. And I was definitely going to wear my knickers every day.

When Rachel returned from England, she brought me gifts. Inside her screened-in porch, we sat on top of her picnic table sucking on exotic hard candies. I savored the sweetness before telling her what I now knew.

SHATTERED ILLUSIONS

by Myra Bellin

My son's first romance blossomed in preschool when he was five years old. He came home and announced one afternoon that he and Tracey, a little girl about a year older than he, had decided to get married. He asked neither permission nor approval, but I was glad that he, at least, thought to inform me of his plans. I murmured something inconsequential in reply, like "that's nice."

Tracey and Michael became steady companions. Tracey was the friend he asked to accompany us to the beach for an afternoon or for an outing to a water park. I was a bit surprised to see romance enter his life at such a tender age and even more surprised to see it last over weeks and then months. But I knew it was natural and normal for five and six year olds to have sexual feelings and attractions. Things were, I felt, right on schedule. It's not as if I actually expected her mother to set the date for a wedding and call a caterer any time soon.

Tracey was very bright and extremely articulate but, to be perfectly honest, just a wee-bit bossy in the imperious way that bright and articulate little girls can be. She liked to instigate projects like filching the bag of chocolate chips from the cupboard so that she could supervise Michael as he placed them, chip by chip, under his bed. I patiently explained that chocolate is poisonous for dogs, and if Robin, our Brittany, were to eat it, he could get very sick. Michael was upset but Tracey seemed not at all perturbed. It was as if she were in tune with some higher power, and my words glanced off of her

like pebbles bouncing off armor. I shrugged and figured that each of us had many years before embracing the roles of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, respectively. I was happy that my son wanted to engage with such a bright and active little girl, even if she was a bit...er...strong-willed.

I also felt that this romance meant I had done a good job as a mother. I was, like all mothers of sons, my boy's first love and, as such, a prototype for all of the rest. Raising an active little boy can be tricky, and I tempered the general advice dispensed by "experts" in child rearing with my gut. I tried to be watchful without being overly protective or smothering. I chose my rules and the fights over those rules carefully, for Michael was willful and more than a bit stubborn. I didn't want needless power struggles over things that were inconsequential to me, like eating broccoli or tasting fish. Tracey was, I felt, a form of tangible proof that I had handled him well during those early, formative years. He was not cowed by her strength.

Their relationship, though, began its inevitable decline rather abruptly and, I think, as a direct result of Tracey's precociousness, during a visit one Saturday afternoon in early July just weeks before Michael's seventh birthday. Ira, my husband, and I were relaxing in matching wrought iron chairs on the second-floor balcony of our center city row house in Philadelphia. Red petunias cascaded from the window boxes on the balcony railing and bright yellow daisies filled a variety of terra cotta pots scattered around the tiled balcony floor. The clear, bright day was urban summer at its finest, and Ira and I were celebrating with cold beer and easy dialogue. As we watched tourists strolling our cobblestone street in the happy sunshine, the crash of our son's bedroom

door thrown open against the wall announced an urgent mission. Tracey was visiting that afternoon, but I only heard one set of footsteps thumping down the stairs.

“Mom, Dad,” he called, breathless, dark eyes wide, “I have to ask you something. It’s important.”

I glanced over my left shoulder to see him, thick dark hair complementing the deep, rich tan that naturally veneered his olive-based complexion in the summertime. While the soft curves of childhood still lingered on his face, the firmer planes of maturity were already visible, poised beneath the rounded surfaces.

He stepped hurriedly over the track of the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony, blurting out his mission all at once.

“Tracey told me that if we get married and want to have children, I have to put my penis in her bagina. Is that really true?” My young son was aghast.

I sensed my husband startle in the chair to my right. Ira’s characteristic verbal agility disappeared. His 6'1" frame shrank behind his sunglasses as he summoned invisibility by focusing on the condensed droplets of water that coated the cold glass surface of his beer bottle. My husband, the glib courtroom lawyer rarely at a loss for words, grew strangely silent. I was on my own.

“Well,” I said slowly, pausing to sip icy brew from my mug, “I guess that just about sums it up.” I was trying to be casual. “And I think the word is vagina,” I added offhandedly, emphasizing the “v” sound.

“And,” Michael continued, speaking rapidly, ignoring my correction, “Tracey said that if we want to have twins, I have to leave my penis in for eight

minutes. Is that true?"

I hesitated, as if I needed to think about it. Off to the right, in my peripheral vision, my husband twitched, but I ignored the visual pull exerted by the slight movement of his mass and kept studying my beer.

"I never heard that part," I responded, pacing myself slowly. "I'm not sure that time matters."

"Yes, it does so matter," Michael announced, pronouncing each word precisely for emphasis. "Tracey said so. She read it in a book."

Well, I thought to myself, I guess that's what happens when your son takes up with an older woman. Especially one who can already read. I retreated. Michael was trying to absorb this shocking state of affairs and arguing about trivial details would be unproductive. Besides, it seemed that I had no standing to disagree with Tracey, obviously the Dr. Ruth of first grade.

"Is that what you guys did to get me?" Michael demanded, as the implications of his newfound knowledge dawned on him.

"Yes," I replied quietly, careful to maintain my even tone and slow pace. "That pretty much describes it."

Michael's large, dark-brown eyes grew wider at the realization that his own parents had resorted to this unthinkable procedure, but he still wasn't satisfied.

He turned to Ira, demanding, "How long did you leave it in?" Michael was always a stickler for details.

"I don't remember," his father managed to mumble.

The next morning, as Ira and I sipped coffee at the kitchen counter,

Michael hurried downstairs. He had obviously been pondering Tracey's information, and as he did so, it yielded profound implications about Anna and Becky, Ira's daughters from a previous marriage.

"You," he intoned, pointing at his father, "did it with someone else." We knew exactly what "it" was without any explanation. Then, pausing briefly, he added, "Twice." Having indicted his father, he turned and stomped upstairs, retreating to his bedroom. Ira and I looked at each other.

"He sounds angry," I noted.

"Yes, he does," his father sighed.

I believe that Tracey told Michael more than he was ready to know. Her sophistication had intruded on his childhood. He never seemed as fond of her after that July afternoon. The notion of marrying her seemed to lose its appeal. He sought her out less frequently and they drifted apart.

I bought a children's book to further explain the intricacies of reproduction. The book had pictures of eggs and sperm and explained how a dad's sperm swims inside a mother's body in search of an egg so they can fuse into new life. The narrative was, however, a bit vague in describing exactly how the sperm gained entrance to the mother's body. Illustrations tastefully depicted doggies coupling on one page and a rooster mounting a chicken on the next. But when it got to human beings, alas, the picture showed a man and a woman lying in bed under the covers next to each other with only their heads and shoulders visible. It was difficult to understand how, in this position, any sperm could possibly get within swimming distance of any eggs unless they somehow flew through the air.

Michael barely looked at the book, although the depiction of the man and woman did interest him mildly. He asked if it was really necessary for a mom and dad to be under the covers in bed to make a baby. I answered and that ended the discussion.

Tracey had already told him everything else he needed, or wanted, to know.