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"The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to
The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.
Does it move to and fro or is it of both
At once? Is it a luminous flittering
Or the concentration of a cloudy day?"

—Wallace Stevens
(untitled)

When there are no tears
We must use words
Though purer be the saline drops
Than dribbled ink
The power of my pen.

What shall I write
When wanton self lies beneath still melting snow,
And Justice seems to know no spring?

Dare I direct so, stylus
To probe hibernating truths?
Or would I wander as I'd rather
Between early daisies,
Sweet instances of inspiration:

The willow tree which remains the willow
Come summer foliage.

The colony which remains my home
Come revolution, tide of blood
Or constitution, declaration of my need to be alone.

The world is full of poetry
That serves not for the rending of my soul
The dripping of my heart
Neither does it cap the leak.
But words will ship these migrant thoughts to trading shores.
And I will buy me peace.
(Understood.)

by Laura Morris
The Ceaseless Rings

I need to slide naked like a fog storm,
make my way over the Appalachian
ridge; I want to watch as oak-hard corn
lives through June in the middle, crack-dried, thin-
crow-picked, then continues slowly until

Santa Monica: arched-pier-gate welcomes
with a dead circus ahead. Stillness fills
the space between cliffs; as the ocean's Om,
fizzing lisp, turns me over, I will need
no more proof that the east is a wrecked shell.

There, where pockets of pacific green weeds
grow, trapping violet blooms and orange tree smell,
I will think of Oberon and eyes, how
finches warble impromptu songs of now.

by Emily Kay Carson

dead trees

dead trees plastering the walls laugh at my innocence
humbling my otherwise stable self-image of wisdom
and movies are upstairs and the philosophy section three down below
so I descend into unknown dark caverns
walking through dense dead forest set up in rows
auto-catalyzing growing exponentially thicker and less navigable
wondering whether my afterlife will be similar
pulped, my memories shelved with the others
for the use of the lumberjacks (or memoryjacks)
thinking of the light for which I struggled, and my old friends
wishing someone would read me, and guiltily, that I was upstairs.

by Matt Homan
melting

you wrap
a strand of
my hair around
your finger and
twirl it around till
you let it go away
when i need to be
alone but come back
in 45 minutes because
you know that pretty soon
i'll want you there is never
a moment when i cannot stop
thinking about the way you look
up when you are confused is how
i feel when your too-deep blue eyes
adore me even when i complain that
they forgot to put the dressing on the
side by side is a very nice place your
arm around my shoulders when i feel
cold nights bring back memories of our
first walk through the snow fell from the
sky almost as easily as i fell for you have
a way of changing the radio stations way too
quickly we rushed under the willow tree when
we got caught in the rain on our way to the movies
aren't as fun if you're not whispering some silly or
ridiculous comment every other second to none is the
way i see you when you've just surprised me with a box
of chocolates satisfy cravings like no other person knows the
extent of your failure to put your turn signal on my way to the library
i like to take the scenic route so that i can dawdle past the forget-me-nots
are almost as cute as the dimples in your face to face we sometimes argue
over the little things are much more entertaining when we do them together
always feels so good thing you know that when i am buying you gifts i just
don't care how much i'm spending time with you always makes me forget
where you leave off and i begin

by Claudine Mead
Enclosed With Letter,  
Please Find A Recent Poem

At a suit party downtown,  
I stand with Greg at the buffet table,  
Eating shrimp while he tells me  
How his boyfriend left him  
And carried off all that made life:  
The cat, the stereo, and Greg’s Czech porn.  
My friends tell me more than I really  
Need to know. Why? I wonder, and  
Pop another icy shrimp into my mouth.  
Quid pro quo, I tell Greg  
How its hard depth of coldness  
Hits across my lips and excites  
Memories of my own loss:  
Of your nipples,  
Back inside, on an afternoon  
Of coat-less snow angels.  
Later we drank Earl Grey  
And did crossword puzzles  
As the wind drove snowdrifts  
Far up the sides of our cars.  
My vodka empty,  
I slink over to the cash bar  
And get my nerve up. Bartenders here  
Are always show-offs. Not much need  
For flash with Stoli on the rocks.  
They deign to take my crisp bills  
And slide my date across the formica  
In a plastic cup. Sherri from work  
Trips by, pinches my  
Ass, and says hello  
The way she would if her lips  
Had formed the words  
Now I know your little secret.  
No, I would not like  
A wedge of lemon  
For my ice water,  
Thank you.

Focus rides the cubes  
Of ice that dance in my drink  
As I cross the room to speak  
To some old friend.  
Her new husband hangs off her arm  
And she talks, loud,  
About their honeymoon  
In Barbados.  
I grin and look to  
The husband:

Bald and effeminate  
And two inches shorter  
Than his wife, I only  
Assume that he is rich and  
Personable. Otherwise,  
I have no excuse  
For being here alone.

I survey the buffet table again  
And find the livers in bacon:  
Bitter and greasy,  
Like our last night  
In Williamsburg,  
Knowing we would not  
Meet for months after.  
I was drunk then, too,  
When everything moaned  
And sang like a shape-note choir  
Of that holiest sense of coming  
Unbound.

Slow and numb, I slump  
Into the passenger seat.  
Greg drops me by the curb at home  
Says, maybe we can be friends  
The way we used to be.  
“Oh well,” I slur,  
“It’s worth a shot.”

In that spirit, then,  
I send you this poem,  
Just in case you wondered  
What things look like  
Now you’ve gone.

by John Martin
When I...

When I walk down the street
You hear the clip-clop
Of my flip-flops
While I hum a beat
That moves your feet.

Atlas shrugged the boulder
And it landed on my shoulder
Like a bluebird
Chirping spoken word
Winking at me
Because we see that reality
Isn't a necessity
He flies off into
The sky so blue
Clutching my heart
For a jumpstart
Sparks shower down like rain
Emotions burning with pain
Evaporating
Satiating
The hunger of my past
Me of a former caste
And all the while
I'm really a mile
Higher than high
Waving goodbye.

When I walk down the street
You hear the clip-clop.
Of my flip-flops
While I hum a beat
That moves your feet
Thank you mister
Bluebird insister
Of hope and humanity
Swinging through calamity
Along with Curious George
And jungle George

Ignorance befriends stubbornness
With jagged coarseness
Razorblades on the wrists
of a species so pissed
Able but unstable
Like broken cables
And lost fables
Meanings too true to believe
Cover scars under the sleeve
Bluebird hold me tight
With all your might
I'm not anything but
Hardly somewhat
Methodical
Illogical
Soon to be dead
Lying in my bed
I see enlightenment in dreams
Coming loose at the seams
Pouring into my lap
Like pine sap
Holding all my pieces
Gluing what ceases
To be identity
Resiliently.

When I walk down the street
You hear the clip-clop
Of my flip-flops
While I hum a beat
That moves your feet.

by Matthew Harrison
Errata

It begins in his bed
Hands like birds alighting on buttons and bra clasps and belt buckles
The way a man tilts your face away with a gentle savagery
exposing the sinews of your neck, lamb-flesh
I am his prey
When I lie beside him,
I am a sliver of moon,
sediment, silt
driftwood caught in the pilings of his arms
His descent into sleep summons the glad ache of my hips
His is the sound of mountains being made
The Kama Sutra of the clock face indicates my hour of departure
He won't call me again.

by Elizabeth Sanglier
What is it about doughnuts?
Is there some unwritten rule that says you're supposed to bring doughnuts over to a person's family to express sympathy? Because I've never heard of that one before.
My little sister made a sign that said, "NO MORE DO-NUTS!!!" but my mom wouldn't let her put it on my grandma's front door.

Grandma's house was where we all were. Well, almost all of us. Those in the area were always around, and Aunt Vinnie had flown in from Reno, Aunt Marianne was up from Atlanta and Uncle Len was down from Albany.

But we were waiting. Still, we haven't heard from Aunt Cathy. It's been four days. And if anyone brings us more doughnuts, we are going to throw them out the window. I don't think I'll ever be able to eat doughnuts again.

So we sit. And wait. That's all we do. And those family members who feel guilty about wasting food and not eating the doughnuts eat them. The rest of us are losing weight faster than if we were on liquid diets. I guess there are two extremes - eat everything in sight, or don't eat anything at all. I fall into the "don't eat anything at all" category. And to make conversation, everyone comments that I look like I have an eating disorder. So I complain and attribute it to the awful college food, and then they all try to get me to eat the stupid doughnuts.

Grandma's house hasn't changed much during my 20 years, and I doubt it changed much before that. The living room abounds with much-outdated blue and gold decor. The couches are so worn you can see indentations long after a person has gotten off. Flanking a coffee table are two club-style chairs on wheels, ready to fall apart any minute. Framed pictures line the piano that hasn't been played in years. Cathy's picture had been moved to the front.

Then there are the flowers. In addition to the doughnuts, everyone is sending flowers. It is an allergist's nightmare in the living room. I'm sure we have more flowers than the florist. At one point, my mom and Marianne decide that something smells awful. After careful sniffing of all the arrangements, it is determined that the baby's breath has gone bad.

"The baby must have eaten a whole lot of garlic," Uncle Joe says.

No one laughs.

The women in our family always pride themselves on the fact that they age well. Grandma, at age 79, never has looked a day over 65. But today, today I barely recognize her. Her hair, usually perfectly coiffed thanks to her weekly visit to the beauty parlor, lays limp against her head. Her face is expressionless, and white as a sheet.

Grandma tries her best to keep busy. She insists on cooking, even though there is more than enough food in her kitchen to feed the entire state of New Jersey. She vacuums the floor underneath us. She refills
the room’s wine glasses. My dad can’t stand seeing her running around like that, especially since nothing needs to be done, and he coaxes her to sit down. We make room on the couch, and she gingerly lowers herself to the cushion. She sits straight up, and crosses her bare feet at her ankles. She kneads her gnarled fingers together for a few minutes, and then jumps up.

“Have to check on the potatoes,” she mumbles and leaves the room.

A 4-year-old had just nonchalantly told us what no one had dared to let themselves think, much less say, even though we all knew it in our hearts.

My Aunt Grace follows her into the kitchen. Grace is not the emotional one. She’s the youngest of my grandparent’s eight children; in fact, she’s closer in age to me than to my dad. I’m sure she’s feeling it all on the inside, but I’m impressed by her ability to hold it together – a complete contrast from my other three basket-case aunts. Grace just got married this summer. The news has completely diminished the “blushing bride” glow that she wore so happily just days before.

We continue to sit, and wait, and make idle chatter. Grace’s husband is Hank. We’re still not comfortable enough with him to call him Uncle Hank, but he’s a pretty good guy. He’s been around every day to wait with us – not bad for the new kid on the block, I guess. He tries to keep the mood light by picking fights with Grace about every two seconds, and saying that he doesn’t ever want to have any kids. Grace tries to ignore him, but the fights usually end with her reminding him about her ticking biological clock.

Hank says he’ll settle for a dog though. Grace says she wants one of those little “yippee” dogs, the little ones that yip all the time and never grow too big for your purse. Hank says “No way!” He wants a tough dog, like a bulldog or a rottweiler.

We all sit around and mindlessly turn the pages of the various magazines and catalogues that lay around the house. In one of them, we find the perfect stuffed yippee dog. His name is stated in big black print as Coconut. You can even buy accessories for Coconut, ranging from a pink doghouse to a Christmas set complete with miniature candy cane and reindeer ears. We leave the page open on the coffee table to taunt Hank.

My dad gets bored with being well, bored, and decides to prey on Coconut. He draws a beard on the poor, defenseless glossy picture. Then he adds antennae, fangs and slippers. We all get a nice forced laugh out of it. But at least it is laughter.

The news blares constantly in the house. My grandfather is deaf, but I don’t think there is a need for all three TVs to be on at full volume. You can’t go anywhere in the house without hearing the minute-by-minute accounts of the tragedy. We can’t stand it, and we pretend to not hear it. We can’t turn them off though. We are still waiting.

Then there are the visitors. They are old neighbors, friends, schoolmates, Girl Scout leaders. They come from all over, but it’s the same with each visitor. They knock on the door. Grandma invites them in, but when they see all 16 of us in the living room, they don’t venture past the entrance-way, promising they won’t stay long, that they just wanted to stop by. They start to
cry, which makes Grandma start to cry, which makes the living room start to cry. They all come bearing the same advice: Don't give up hope. Miracles do happen. We're praying for you. The advice is in vain, because all of us know that all the rest of us know that there isn't much left to hope for. They then share their favorite Cathy stories, or just tell us about the last time they saw her. That's the hardest part. We don't want to hear them. We simply can't bear it. And that's usually when the whole living room is bawling and then the visitors tend to back slowly out of the house.

One particularly soft knock comes at the door. Another visitor, we think. Without waiting for the door to be answered, in walks Matthew, Grandma's neighbor from across the street. Matthew is four. Apparently, he comes over often, as he gets attention at Grandma's house that he doesn't get at his house because his mom just had a new baby. And today was no exception.

First, he shows us how he can jump on one foot. We are delighted by the distraction. Matthew jumps over pillows. Matthew jumps high into the air. Matthew jumps onto the couch. We just can't get enough. I understand why Grandma says that he comes to visit often. He definitely gets all the attention over here.

When he gets tired of jumping, he starts running around in circles and making car noises to amuse us.

"Matthew, have you been watching the car races this week on TV?" Hank asks him.

"Nope," he says as he stops running.

"I've been watching the buildings fall down."

You could have heard a feather drop on the carpet in the room.

"Did you cry?" he collectively asks the group.

Marianne, who is starting to tear again, answers him. "Yes," she says in a strained voice. "I did cry. It was a sad, sad thing."

Matthew slowly looks around the room. "Cathy died in there," he says.

"Matthew slowly looks around the room. "Cathy died in there," he says.

We gape at him.

A 4-year-old had just nonchalantly told us what no one had dared to let themselves think, much less say, even though we all knew it in our hearts.

We sit, still shell-shocked and watch as Matthew resumes the identity of a car.

A few minutes later, his dad stops by to take him home. He says he hoped Matthew wasn't much trouble, picks him up, puts him over his shoulder and whisks him out the door.

"Out of the mouths of babes..." Vinnie murmurs.

• • •

My sister Lex and I were waiting outside the church.

It was freezing outside. The first cold day we've had this year. I could see the Parkway from the front steps of the church. Cars just flying by, not a care in the world.

Cathy's best friend Maura came to talk with us on the steps. We had never met before, but she knew who we were from pictures Cathy had shown her. She couldn't stop crying, and telling us how much we looked like Cathy. She said to be strong, because Cathy was watching us from heaven.

Maura went back into the church. Lex burst into tears. I stood there, letting the wind pull my hair across my face.

"She can't be watching us from heaven," my sister cried. "That would mean that she was really gone. She can't really be gone. They haven't even found her body!"

I tried to calm her down. "This is why we're
having a memorial service,” I said. “We’re going to remember her life, ok?” I tried to give her a weak smile.

She sniffled. “But I miss her,” she said quietly.

“We all do,” I said, and I pulled out a travel pack of tissues for her. I got her cleaned up, and we went inside.

My shoes echoed in the church. It was the biggest church I had ever been in. I couldn’t pay attention to the service. I just kept looking around. We had a picture of her from the wedding this summer enlarged and put by the altar. She looked so happy there.

Everyone was crying during the whole ceremony. People went up, and told more Cathy stories to the congregation. But I didn’t mind so much this time.

The priest said what an asset Cathy was to the church. He said how she was always willing to open her checkbook and give up her time to help out, and how she often went to more than one mass a week so that she could be a lector, a eucharistic minister and a choir member.

One of the choir members talked about how much Cathy loved to sing, even though after being in the choir for nine years, she still could not read music. She reminisced about the choir’s trip to Greece the summer before, and how excited Cathy was to leave the United States for the first time. She laughed when she recounted how Cathy would come straight from the train after work to choir rehearsal, and how she’d always rush in, all disheveled, because the train was late nearly every day.

Someone from Cathy’s company also got up before the crowd. He said that Cathy was not just an anonymous number of one of the 200 lost from the company. He said she was very involved at work, but that she always put her family first. He said that everyone on her floor of the office knew all about her mother and father and brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews, because she talked about them all the time.

I imagined what I would say if I went up there. I’d say that I remember when she drove 45 minutes up to our old house one year just to show my sister and me her Halloween costume. I’d say how she was always the one who came and baby sat us for a few days when my parents would go on business trips. I’d say that she loved working in the city, and loved looking out the huge glass window in her office on the 103rd floor and seeing the world below. I’d say that I made her feel really old once when I was 6 or so and announced to the Christmas dinner table that when I grew up and turned 20 years old, she’d be 40. And I’d say that I missed her. A lot.

When it was all over, we turned to walk out of the church. I smiled when I saw that the service ended up being standing room only.

Everyone went next door to the church for a reception after the ceremony. We all stood in a line to greet everyone coming in. It was so awkward. Tons of people I didn’t even know coming up and kissing me on the cheek, and telling me that everything would be okay. And it took forever. Those that we did recognize had trouble identifying all of us (“Wait, which one are you?” “I’m Drew’s oldest.” “Oh, Drew’s daughter!”).

It was a short reception. People came in, said their respects to the family and then got out of there. After they left, we just stood around and looked at each other and looked at the mess. And realized that the cleanup hadn’t even begun.
Lex went over to Grandma’s fridge and pulled out a box of doughnuts. I groaned. I didn’t even want to look at them. But I didn’t want to leave her either. She pulled out a glazed one and put it on her plate. But she sat there staring at it for a while and didn’t eat it.

“Something wrong?” I asked. I felt like throwing up just seeing the doughnut sitting there.

“Nope,” she said, still staring at it.

“Come on, what’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Is there mold on it?”

“Nope.”

“Hair?”

“Nah.”

“So, what?”

“Well, the doughnut is kind of like us.”

“Like who us?”

“Like, our family us,” she said, her eyes filling up with tears. “We just have a big hole in the middle now.”

The tears spilled onto her cheeks, down her face and on top of the plate. I went over and hugged her and she cried on my shoulder.

Byron Norclius
Competition

There were three of us, that afternoon;
I was playing the Mozart, he the Liszt,
The other the Beethoven—their combined twelve hours
Per diem won it for them; my hands died
Before I began: my incessant
Procrastination, my subversion of talent.
There was even one shared scherzo on which
I prevailed; yet that failed to stop the flood
Of time which gripped me then, as I
Wandered among the trees, smiling at
Parents and children holding their instruments:
Who else but a pianist could go without
At such an hour; it is a naturally
Whorish art, to thoughtlessly
Share each key with a thousand others.
Even then I did not practice, but went about
Shuddering, and wiping, stretching, molding
My fingers for their failure, their denial
Of momentum and their hesitant legato.

Oh and there would be ample prizes for us all;
It was a year of lack in terms of interest, our generation
Divided by extremes: the artists, the athletes, the Well-Rounded-Ones.
I was scrubbed smooth and made of nothing.

by Sam Keyes
The Fish of Me

(it is not at all what i expected)

it is gray
the leaves have fallen and disintegrated
my drive through town, over the bridge and to the left, winding on that narrow stretch between the mountainside and the riverbank, is uncomfortably canopyless.
and ice is choking the river.

but it is winter
and i am twenty

instead of seven
when my grandparents looked young and my parents were
when my cousin and i took our baths for the day underneath the pontoon boat - shedding our suits in seconds and making sure we put the shampoo and soap in their nooks underneath. so that they wouldn't float away or sink.
when i looked up at our mountain, and thought i could have seen one of the injuns my grandfather warned me about behind a tree
when they told me my mom was queen of the Susquehanna
when they called me a fish
and i thought it was good

I can remember it slowly dismantling
when the Injun and arrow story became charming
or when those adjunct professors put siding up on my grandparents' house in town
or when we lost the fight and they took our stone walkway out and put up the dike

and why didn't they know that i was a duck, not a fish
I didn't want to be hurried along to the Me that must think like this
And wonder about the symbolism in it being called Lock Haven

maybe it's because someone else, who I don't know, is living in Mimi and Biggie's house along the river
so that I cannot stop and visit
maybe it's because I wonder if we'll ever all be back there together
but then I remember that I am not seven or even twelve
but twenty and driving past.

by Patty Devlin
P.S. Post Script

Do you want to get down tonight. Down. I don't think you want to know that my skin could burst apart at any moment shatter like that eternity of a dry leaf suspended.

Do you (I do) remember that moment of fall. I watched you walking to me (those last days the weather had been manic, cold killing the leaves off, draining them brown, hot holding them hopeful, bravely hanging on until) one strong breeze swung with you with the falter of your steps and ripped them all in snowfall flutter flittering all and covered you were glittered, branches bumped forward to bare.

What of that. My skin bruises easily. What of that too. Skin and leaves always. Skin and leaves to go.

(Down.) Leaves on the ground. They turn eggshell, that delicate crunch, and lie like cupped hands, scraping along, with the memory of that silent shush and how they twee, interrupt the sun, and the narrow shudder of light escaping, bending around and jutting at all angles, that dimpled light. That is down there.

by Carrie O'Brien
Marvel

They lick our hearts
with a beat, treacherous—

Clocks—
they even wind up
like a thermometer—
as if for the heart—

like a metronome
with its seductive little notches
and its sleepy head.

But the face—
it winds down.

These ticks and beats—
they march us ahead.

The knob—
it winds back—

while its face
told us we were alive.

In its glass, a distorted eye
blinks affectionately—
it ticks coquettishly—

with an invisible eyelid
draping like a quilt
over a corpse ten seconds' old.

What is it about a city?

A city at mid-moon
dims one light at a time.

Windows become stars
one at a time.

They count down the hour
until the sun rises again.

What is it about syncopation—
and mistakes?

They make circles 'round us.

They skip 'round
the hands of the clock—

twirling about
between the pitch
and tick
of a song
in the soul.

It is I, twelve floors up.

I am now.

And if I jump,
it should be—

if it is that I am deaf
to the resounding mistakes
and watch the clock
add up my time.

I might as well jump.

The clock—
it licks our hearts—
with a treacherous song
as it ends,
and the heart races on.

So then it should be
that we leap—
make off with time.

It should be
that we have the courage
to leap and make the moment;
make time with the cadence
of a clock ringing behind.

Sing this song—
swing and do—
the ledge is there
for the sleepy heads
who wait.

What can be a clock?
What can measure
a moment
in this night
of receding hours?

City at mid-moon
with lights and grit,
soiled black to my sides—
I swing, I spit.

The leaping by
and resounding mistakes.
The courage to leap—
and make the mistakes.

In a sky rise—
twelve floors up.

I, the Vanguard in the sky;
immobile and free, We
twinkling
among the shards
of stars
in windows
we cannot fathom
for each;
feeling the same light
upon each of our backs;
the feeling of Now,
a night of receding hours.

by Melissa Patterson
Belikin Beer

Perched upon a Lazy Lizard stool sinking at the edge of the eroding split.
The water is clear and blue, very tempting as the hot salt melts the eyes, but dangerous.
Skinny natives with machetes bury rows of thick cane poles to keep the water out.

Empty emerald bottles of Belikin beer, markers of what was meant to be forgotten.
Discussing the rising prices of bananas and the bargain of marijuana.
All I wanted was banana pancakes with chocolate, but somehow, it has come to this.

I offer the bar man a beer for a song, but the song isn't for me and then you come.
Wearing a little straw hat and a red bikini.
They see you over the reeds.
They will see you in their dreams or they have never seen you at all.

A tall black man plunders a lobster from the ocean and smokes it on the pit with lemons and butter, only to offer it to you for nothing in return but a smile and a snapshot for the rest of his mind.

It was once flattering to watch others swim and dilate in coconut ice cream, because I was with you, and then I realized that you would never belong to anyone so I bought a bottle of cheap red wine.
At the bottom of the bottle I finally professed my love, which you considered to be an attempt at humor.
Two mad clowns wading fully clothed into the sea, and I floated high, wasted, spewing words of serious froth as you laughed.
You thought it all to be a joke as waves and words lapped from my salty tongue.

The song ended.
Women hung large white sheets.
A fisher boy began to scream Crocodile, pointing at my sea. But his words did not matter - and only then did you see that maybe mine did.

by Lonzo Wilson
exactly what happened

He was overcome
by the rain
(an ocean of reminiscences & puddings &
unsure glances & later)
drop solitaire
blasting into his
left temple,
fraught with uncertainty,
this midafternoon
in the painful labor of Winter.

by Sam Keyes
Les absentmindedly rubbed the yellowing receipt between his thumb and forefinger as he read the store sign. "Blue's Memories – 6 St. Mark's Place." He looked down at the slip of paper in his hand and thought, "I'll be damned – it's still here."

A metallic bell rang as he pushed open the door to the shop. A photo of Louis Armstrong's grin and the sweet swoon of an Aretha Franklin chorus, "Daydreaming and I'm thinking of you, Daydreaming and I'm thinking of you," drifting from the in-store soundsystem greeted him. The walls were covered with album covers, '60s and '70s music posters and memorabilia. And the display shelves were packed with neat stacks of records, all bagged in protective plastic sleeves, carefully sorted by category - soul, r'n'b, jazz, funk, rock, blues, gospel.

Les, who was the only customer in the store, was immediately struck by the nostalgic atmosphere of the place. His eyes widened to take in all the photos of black musicians: Jimi, Ella, and James Brown, BB King, Sade and Al Green, Miles, Coltrane and Bill Cosby. He'd never seen such an assortment of history packed into one place. But it aggravated him. He was too used to the open space of his immaculately clean apartment - minimal and uncluttered in every way.

"What kin I do fo yuh youngblood?" asked a raspy voice from the back of the store. A short, older black man conservatively dressed in a wool sweater vest, slacks and driving cap stepped around a cabinet and approached Les. "Yuh lookin fo sumpin special?" he said, adjusting his small rimmed glasses to size up Les. "Yeah I knows yuh are. Yuh done came to the right place. Yuh's searchin for some memories of yuh childhood I bet. Ol' Blue here will fix yuh right up. What tunes yuh tryin to remember?"

"I didn't come for records today Sir."

"Son, I gots the best vinyl selection in the Village aight? But if yuh came fo posters or somethin else I gots that too. And yuh don't have to call me 'sir' youngblood. Yuh done makin me feel old – Blue will do."

"Sure ... Blue. Actually I didn't come for anything musical. I ... well ... someone sent me one of your old store receipts and I was in the area, so I thought I'd come by and see if you were still here."

"I still be here son, Blue's Memories since 1963, but I don know bout yuh receipt. Lotta peoples come through here sell all they records one day then come and buy em back the next. So what's so special bout the receipt? Somebody break the bank on vinyl?"

"No. Nothing like that. I think it may have belonged to my mother. But I'm not sure. It's been a long time since she passed."

Aretha's sonorous voice faded out and Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments" ushered in an atmosphere of melancholy over the speakers. The mellow, but intense melody line silenced the honks, squeals and yells of the bustling crowd on the streets outside with one musical sigh.
“Well let me see the receipt an see what I kin remember. My memories is as good as anyone elses. Man listen to Freddie Hubbard blow that horn. I love this here solo.”

Les handed the old man the yellow slip.

“Oh see here son. This ain’t a receipt fo purchase. This is a receipt fo sale. Somebody musta sold me some records back there in … let’s see … slip says October 17 of ’73.”

Blue started rummaging behind the counter muttering the date over and over—stopping to look at the slip again—checking the date and then back to rummaging.

“Ah here it is. Muh box of records here from ’73. Yuh gotta keep these kinda things kid. Yuh never know what the taxman gone ask you bout. Here we are. October 17. Oh man.”

Blue went silent. He slid his glasses down so they barely remained perched on his nose as he looked over the scrawled records of transactions—the vinyl he had bought and traded nearly 30 years ago. Les stared at the storeowner and began drumming his fingers on the glass counter-top, starting to get annoyed with the rummage of the old store and its keeper’s ancient recordkeeping system. But he was also curious about what information the receipt might yield. He somehow knew it was his mother’s. Although he wasn’t quite sure why. He only remembered broken fragments of her. Bits and pieces of images and sounds, touches and evoked feelings. Needle drops of memories spanning the six short years between his birth and her death.

“Yuh moms name Naima youngblood?” said Blue as he read out of his notebook.

“Yes, Naima Harris,” Les said, surprised that the old man could decipher the 38-year-old scribbles of notes.

“I was wrong fore youngblood. I know all bout this receipt. Or at least that day I wrote it. Yuh moms, Naima Harris, came up in here and sold off her entire collection of vinyl. All soul music son. I member it clearly cuz she had a shopping cart – one of those silvuh chrome deals with the wheels that don’t roll straight and squeak up a storm. Yeah man. That cart was overflowing with albums and she rolled it right in the same door yuh came in today. She musta had everything. Yuh could tell they been played, but they was all clean. I almost didn’t have the heart to buy ‘em all from her.”

“She just kept looking at me with a half-hearted smile and I axed her if she was sure about sellin em. She said yeah – she needed the money fo her baby. An I told her that ain’t no man worth as much as these here musics, but she told me it wasn’t fo no man man, but her six-year-old baby. Youngblood – that musta been fo yuh.”

“Needle drops of memories spanning the six short years between his birth and her death.”

“Son. I told yuh sure as sheetrock is hard I member. I even got some of the albums written down here – the Impressions, Nite-lighters, Isaac Hayes, Funkadelic, all them James Brown records, yeah … Every single James Brown release up to then, even the forty-fives – ‘Mother Popcorn,’ ‘Sex Machine,’ ‘Super Bad,’ ‘I Got that Feelin,’ ‘Out of …’

“Did she tell you why she was selling them?” interrupted Les.

“Yeah son, jus calm down. She just kept looking at me with a half-hearted smile and I axed her if she was sure about sellin em. She said yeah – she needed the money fo her baby. An I told her that ain’t no man worth as much as these here musics, but she told me it wasn’t fo no man man, but her six-year-old baby. Youngblood – that musta been fo yuh.”
"It must have been. I wasn't exactly liv­ing in Brooklyn Heights then."

"Hey now, fo some people music is life youngblood. I member thinking that bout yuh mother as I looked in muh cash box trying to give her everything I had fo them slabs of plastic. She bout looked like her heart was gone burst when she walked out that door with a couple hundred bucks. Yeah. It took me near a month just to put those records out to sale—I kept hoping she would come back fo em. But she never did."

"She must not have had time. She died that December of a heart attack. I was only six."

"Now that's a shame son. But peoples do what they got to. Getting by. But yuh gotta member, life's just a moment in time. And we go round and round. Yuh come to the right place fo memories youngblood. Yuh gotta go back to go foward's what I always says. Yuh sure I can't find yuh something to listen to—maybe jog yuh mind?"

"Thanks, but no. I don't listen to much music. I don't have a record player. All I have is a clock radio."

"That hurts youngblood. Diffrent strokes for diffrent folks I guess. Well yuh know where I'm at. And where I'll be for a while. Devil don't have too much on me yet."

"Yeah sure," Les said, moving toward the door. "I don't get into the Village much—stocks and all. I appreciate your help though. I've never known much about my mother—Who she was you know? But I don't expect to find out too much these days. I need to get going."

"Well life's a funny thing youngblood, I shore knows that," Blue said as he handed the receipt back to Les. "When yuh least spect it yuh'll learn somethin."

Les took one last look around the store of memories—the records, posters and pho­tos. There in the corner flipping through the funk records was a tall, bearded black man with permed hair. He was garishly dressed in a tight '70s outfit of all white with a 5-inch wide silver belt buckle, silver necklaces and a floppy, felt women's hat with a pea­cock feather stuck in the brim.

"Ain't you got any mo Funkadelic records up in here Blue?" asked the funky-look­ing black man in a deep baritone.

"What yuh see is what I got."

"Now ain't that a damn shame. I fly my black ass all the damn way down here and cats ain't got my shit."

"That's funny," Les thought as stepped onto the sidewalk. "I was sure there were no other customers."

He shut the door and the bell tinkled. Blue put away his box of records and sat down behind the counter, staring vacantly into space, contemplating the last few state­ments of Bill Evans' piano solo and the quiet ending of the "Stolen Moments" melody.

Les slowly walked down the sidewalk toward 6th Ave. He had his head down, not even noticing the jostles and bumps from the teeming street crowds. All the while he stared at the yellow slip of paper.

"What the hell is this," he thought. "First this receipt arrives and then I talk to this old record dealer about my mother. Strange."

Les hadn't thought about her in years. He hadn't wanted to. As a motherless 6-year-old, he'd harbored a feeling of aban­donment toward her. He'd been shipped from one foster home to another—each with a measured sympathy for a black boy from
Brooklyn. He was taken in simply to increase the dollar amount on the government checks that arrived each month. By the time he was a teenager he'd grown accustomed to the transitory shuffle of his life. But he hated it. He cursed his mother for dying and leaving him to be raised by one foster family after the next. But with every new bed, every new sibling, every new father and every new mother, memories became less important to him. Les learned how to shut the past out, almost ignore the present and remain focused on the future.

Usually he would have taken a taxi back across the Brooklyn Bridge, but he didn't feel like it today. He stopped walking at 6th Avenue and looked both ways past the rows of shops and their respective window shoppers. The subway didn't seem like such a bad idea to him—especially at this time of day.

He descended the stairs just as the F train to Brooklyn screamed up to the stop. Hurriedly, he bought a token and squeezed through the closing silver doors. The train lurched away from the platform as he sat down on the molded, hard plastic seat.

He hunched forward rubbing the receipt between his fingers. "Who in the hell would have sent this to me?" he thought.

The train shifted back and forth over the tracks as it sped under the streets and Les found himself rocking in the seat in time with the vibrations of the car. As the train shrieked around a curve, the paper slipped from his hands. He bent over to pick it up just as the train came to halt at the next stop and the momentum threw him into the stainless steel hand pole in front of him.

By the time he brought himself to his knees the train had left the platform and the rocking sensation kicked in again. A flow of images flashed over his inner mind's eye like electricity coursing through the third rail. He remembered.

Walking into the main room of the small apartment and finding the wooden doors to the stereo cabinet open. Three Beatles albums lying haphazardly on the now empty shelves. His mother staring at the void with red eyes shedding tears. Asking, "Momma—what's wrong?" Her scooping up his 6-year-old body and rocking him against her shuddering chest. "Nothing baby. Nothing. The world breaks us gently sometimes baby." Her gently breaking and vibrating like the shuddering of the subway car racing through the tunnel.

But with every new bed, every new sibling, every new father and every new mother, memories became less important to him.

The Bergen Street stop was as it always was—pleasant. The sunlight reflected so hard off the blacktop that the surface appeared stark white. He didn't notice the change though. He was too focused on simply walking the few blocks to his apartment. But so tense that he was now clutching the receipt, bending permanent creases into the 30-year-old slip. He didn't care whether he preserved it anymore. The impact of the memory had been made. He couldn't forget what he had just remembered. And he had to know more.

He fumbled with the key to his door, finally slotted it and then crashed through into the immaculately organized setting he called home. The structured arrangement was an involuntary response to the constant shifting of his seemingly chaotic child-

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hood—a resulting compulsive desire for order. His eyes panned across the exactness, the perfection of it all. Everything had its place and it was there, untouched since he had left that morning.

The blank envelope that the receipt had arrived in was still in the stack of letters by the phone. He swiped it off the counter and held it up to the kitchen light trying to discern any markings. A 32-cent Malcolm X stamp and no return address. He sniffed it, then ran the tips of his fingers over the paper’s surface trying desperately to discover some distinguishing feature that might reveal the sender. But the questioning confounded him and out of a sudden frustration he tore the envelope in half.

The utterance of a low growl escaped from deep in his throat as he rubbed his eyes, feeling a pressure building in the socks. He rubbed so hard a spectrum of bright lights began to strike through the darkness on the back of his eyelids. The change began to throw off his balance so he stopped the force of his hands and opened his eyes. The red blinking light on his answering machine startled him.

He punched the mailbox button, impatiently ignored the feminine, but mechanical voice on the machine and wished that this plastic box of transmitters and dials would work faster. He wanted the damn message. Now.

Finally the beep signaled the beginning. A clamor of guitar feedback and loud drum breaks emanated from the speaker. “What in the hell?” Les thought as it continued for about 30 seconds.

Finally a smooth, deep voice that was hauntingly familiar called out, “Aight dat shit will do for the take. I finally got this here nigga on the phone. Ay yo Les. This is Eddie. Eddie Hazel. Look here cat. I’m a friend of your moms. I know you got my letter and shit. My bad on not letting you know how to hit me back, but I do a lot of traveling cat. A lot of flying. He moves in mysterious ways if you know what I mean. Anyhoo—I’ll be on the ground for a minute and I think we should meet up, kick it about your moms and such. I’ll check in with you later. Aight? Chill.”

In his haste to listen to the message again, Les accidentally erased it. As he raised his fist to pummel the machine a wave of exhaustion swelled through his body—from the toes to the tips of his neatly trimmed hair. He lowered his clenched fingers and lightly pounded the counter, berating himself for being so careless. For losing control.

“A shower will do me good,” he said almost commanding himself to try to relax. He stepped out of his clothes, leaving them on the kitchen floor. But when he turned on the hot water in the bathroom, he decided to grab his portable phone and left it on the sink as he stepped into the steaming water. He let the nozzle drench his forehead with a blast of searing liquid and his knotted muscles began to loosen. The phone never rang.

He took a long shower—longer than usual. Afterward he walked around his apartment while he dried himself and knocked the water from his ears. When he came to the kitchen he saw the pile of clothes and his compulsive cleanliness drive peeked out. As he stooped to gather the coat, tie, shirt, pants, socks and white briefs, he noticed the red blinking message light. “Well I’ll be damned,” he thought, “Didn’t I erase that message?”

He pressed the mailbox button and immediately the same familiar baritone voice came sailing out of the speaker: “Damn Les.
This is Eddie, I left a message earlier. Sheeit. Look I'm only in town for a minute so we need to connect. I'm playing this gig out in Brooklyn tonight. You need to come with. Aight? The club's called 'The Aphrodite's Child'—kinda freaky huh? I hadda put in some major prayin to land that name. He's got a sense of humor though. Don't you forget. Shit is kinda cool—warehouse style on the 9th floor at 10 Jay Street. Tell the man at the door who you are and that you's meetin me. Aight? Chill.”

There was no line outside the venue. A light sweat broke out on Les' forehead as the freight elevator scraped through the shaft to the 9th floor. With a rumble and clang the trip ended and the doors scraped open to the loud, pulsing sounds of crackly, vintage funk.

The jet-black bouncer with long matted dreadlocks and tight Peter Tosh t-shirt looked quizzically at Les in his casual khakis and button-up shirt. “Yuh gut duh wrung flour me tinks.”

Taken aback by the muscled man's high voice, Les hesitated then quickly launched into his name: “I'm Les. Les Harris. I'm trying to find Eddie Hazel.”

The bouncer looked at Les from his brown leather loafers to the flattop of his hair, finally muttering, “Llawd ah mercy. It teake all kinds.” Then in a booming bullhorn tone that cut through the crowd, the speakers and the funk, he yelled, “Eddie yuh guest be heah,” and pushed Les through the entranceway into the loud, dimly light club.

Les immediately felt overdressed. Black women and men in tight leather pants and studded jean shirts were dancing like crazy to the sounds of the DJ—the only white person in the club. The crowd was a mix of folk with differing shades of skin color all wearing distinctly '70s clothes. Some, like the waitress in African dress, others in jeans and shredded t-shirts. There were afros and perms, dreds and kinky long hair. Some shaded their eyes with huge round sunglasses and floppy brimmed hats while others sported headbands or knit wool caps.

“Heah dis nigguh is,” the bouncer said pointing at Les as he waved to a man across the room who was setting up a guitar amp on stage. Les tried to ignore the eyes of the crowd wanting to get a look at whose arrival had been announced as he focused in on the tall black man whom the bouncer gestured to.

“It's the guy from Blue's,” Les thought, staring at the man. His tight white suit had been replaced by an entire white cowboy outfit complete with a 10-gallon white cowboy hat, white chaps and 12-inch long fringe that hung from all over his body—a Sly Stone lookalike—but it was unmistakably the man from the record store. The man grabbed the arm of a nearby waitress—the largest black woman Les had ever seen. She was decked in a Zulu dress and headdress. Eddie mouthed something to her and then pointed at Les. Before she turned away, he sounded a lion-like roar and jokingly made a biting motion at her. She laughed with her whole body and came over to Les.

“You betta watch out for Eddie. That nigga can't keep his mouth closed. But he told me to tell you that he'd find you after the show—he's gotta warm up. But you can sit anywhere you like and drinks are on the house.”

She was much larger in person, Les thought.

“Thanks. Do you have a smaller table that's out of the way?”

“Sure thing baby,” she said and led him to a table and bar stool in the corner of the
dance floor. “You’ll be able to see everything from here. Whatcha drinkin’?”
“I’ll just have a beer if you have one.”
“Course I do baby, we got everything here.”

Les watched her rear end switch from left to right as she took each step back toward the bar. He was amused by the way such a large mass looked moving. Then he turned his attention back to the DJ. He was shiny-headed bald, looked to be about 35 but with sunken eyes and a dark, almost skeletal face. And he had a seemingly never ending supply of 45 after 45 of Northern soul and deep South funk that—like a magician and the white rabbit—he pulled out of a tiny, cardboard 45 box placed on the table next to the turntables.

His tight white suit had been replaced by an entire white cowboy outfit complete with a 10-gallon white cowboy hat, white chaps and 12-inch long fringe that hung from all over his body...

“Funny,” Les thought, “the lone white guy’s got the whole crowd moving.”

Sweat was pouring off their bodies as if the dancefloor had its own high humidity. But because of the dancers’ heat, their energy, there seemed to be an immense joy exuding from them—a red glowing aura of copaseticness. They danced as if there was no tomorrow, throwing their bodies into gestures of freedom and physical expression. Their eyes rolled back until only the whites were visible as if receiving a musical transmission from somewhere in outer space through the act of dance.

Les stared at them in wonder. “Where are all these people from?” he thought. “I’ve never quite seen such a crowd like this.”

The waitress returned with a glass of piss yellow liquid and laughed at his wide eyes taking everything in. “You look like a little kid,” she said.
“What’s that?”
“I said you look like a little kid staring out at all them folk exorcising.”
“Yeah. But these are the strangest exercises I’ve ever seen.”

She let out a hearty laugh. “Exorcising baby. I said exorcising. But you came just in time to watch another. Eddie and the band’s about ready to play.” She winked at him before waddling back to the bar.

Gradually the DJ eased the dancefloor down with soul tracks and the club quieted so that Les could hardly detect the rustle of women shifting in their dresses and the whispers of hushed conversation. Eddie, the lead guitarist sidled to the lip of the stage—fringe shimmering from his shoulders, the sides of his thighs and down his chest. The rest of the stage was extinguished as a floodlight focused on the frontman. Extra noise disappeared. The muffled laughs, scraps of chairs on the floor, ice clinking in glasses of liquor were all enveloped by the slightest hiss of the guitar amp. A soothing blanket of electricity feeding back over the exhalations of the crowd.

The rhythm guitarist strummed an achingly simple 6/8 riff. An ever so quiet minor arpeggio in a slow 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4-5-6 rhythm that trembled across the crowd’s ears. On the four, the drummer cracked his stick against the skin of the snare echoing soul vibrations just slightly behind the beat.

And then on one, Eddie sent a piercing note that lanced into Les’ skull and heart.
He sat transfixed—as the past began lassoing the present, reining in all movement of time and space as if to try to catch up to the future. The melody sang across the ceiling, the long tones quivering as the guitarist shook his fingers over the frets.

Eddie immediately began to crescendo, almost to an unsurpassable limit as the highs ruptured into crying into screaming into squalling. His eyes pulled shut as if the pressure of his synapses might detonate. And his mouth twisted into a scream that was impossible to hear over the glorious cacophony of feedback that shook the support of the room. The guitarist continued to build momentum—fingers blurring across the frets and the pick slinging across the strings.

Ever so slightly the volume began to come down as he bent the notes. Notes that weren’t even notes anymore. Not licks, not riffs, not runs, but sound becoming birth becoming joy becoming soul becoming sadness becoming anger becoming death.

Les blinked his eyes and in that split instant Eddie’s feet lifted off the stage. Rising with each thumbed bass note, he began to float. The rest of the band faded out and he launched into a salvo of syncopation—the unexpected rhythm patterns propelling the guitar sound over and back. Rasp from clear to black.


Eddie’s foot continued to tap out the 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4-5-6, toes rising and falling as if there was still a floor to bounce off. His body contorted over the guitar wrenching away tone after tone of sound until finally the effort seemed to overstep his physical capability and took on a life of its own.

No one moved. Les shook his head and blinked his eyes again to clear his vision, but Eddie was still there floating above the stage.

He hovered as if to catch an updraft and strike away, but the guitar cord swayed gently in the air behind him—effortlessly connecting, anchoring him to the amplifier and its sound. Sound that soared into electricity as the solo shrieked though the open progression, feeding back with every scream and squeal. Equaling harmonic pain.

Gradually Eddie unclamped his hands from the frets and strings. He spread his arms away from the instrument slung across his chest, stretching his body into a cross. But sound kept cycling out of the amps, bleeding into every molecule of air in the club. Sucking empty air in through the rear of the floor speakers and spraying it back over the patrons in a sonic wash.

A wash that abated drop by drop leaving Les’ ears ringing with each metallic vibration of guitar string. Anguish leaked through every note that floated into the audience. Raining against hands and lips, crotches and asses, chests and foreheads. Hearts and minds that swelled and exploded with the song’s final decrescendo.

It was a guitar solo that lasted forever and then some.

Les blinked his eyes again and then forgot whether they had been closed or open or for how long or whether he had been dreaming or if he had moved at all. But he realized Eddie Hazel was now standing squarely on stage, hunched over the final noodles of sound. Picking out the last, subtle notes of the solo. The past slowly loosened the stranglehold on the present, relinquishing the struggle to catch up for another time. Movement once again crept back into the club.

But no one clapped. The peaceful calm of the amp hissed until someone across the
room uttered in a hushed tone, “Go maggot brain ... Go maggot brain.” The phrase spread through the crowd like a reverent amen and the end of the evening began. The crowd quietly filed out of the club, dissipating into the night.

Les sat dumbstruck on his stool. He slowly shook his head in disbelief, picked up his glass and slowly began to swirl the liquid. As he sat there staring into the tiny whirlpool in his glass, Eddie came over, suddenly blocking the lights leaving his black silhouette outlined in a stunning golden aura.

“Les. My nigga Les. It’s me Eddie. Eddie Hazel. I been lookin all over for you. Shoulda known you be sittin in a corner. Something wrong with that drink of yours? Here have some a mine. I’m just sippin on some sizryup. Ha ha. Gotta keep up with the new jacks you know?”

As Les’ quickly thought of formally introducing himself, Eddie thrust his glass under Les’ nose and he caught the stale blueberry scent of Robitussen, but with an unhealthy dose of added alcohol. The sniff was enough to make Les feel queasy, but Eddie just kept knocking back gulps.

“Uh, Eddie. It’s ... uh ... nice to meet you,” Les said thinking that Eddie didn’t look older than 25. “That was one hell of a solo you just played.”

“Sheeit my negro. Hell ain’t have nothin to do with it,” Eddie replied as his eyes wan-

Sugar Daddy

Honey dipped rose petals for breasts,
mint juniper lips.
Soft, white, wintry thighs
mix moonbeams and Coolwhip.
Milk chocolate eyes
Melt with teardrops of endearment.
Sugary tendrils spill onto satin sheets.
Cinnamon whispers bathe beauty
like the warmth of homemade apple pie.
You are my Candyland.
I am not a man.
I am a diabetic boy in a candy shop.
I am not a man.

by Matthew Harrison
dered from Les to a slim, light-skinned female in a low-cut dashiki strutting by.

"Damn. Every time I make it back to Earth all the honeydips come out—they knows I'm here my man. Now that's something to make a hungry nigga's stomach stop hurting."

"Eddie, you said on your message that you knew my mother and Blue told me that receipt you sent me was hers and I'm trying to find out more about her because she died when I was young and—"

"Like woah cat," Eddie said shifting his gaze back to Les. "Slow your roll here cat. I know your whole story. Your moms died when you was six and you can't remember much about her, except for how you done always felt abandoned and blah blah. Yeah yeah. I know man. Life goes on. But I know her back in the day. Relax. I ain't seen her in a minute, but she ain't changed much. No offense brother, but the man keep s a nigga like me busy—I gotta make up for some crazy living in my time. Penance an all. But what I'm a tell you is the most important shit about your moms. Think you can handle some a thi s sh it cat?"

"Look Eddie," Les said starting to get frustrated, "this entire day has been upside down from the moment I walked into Blue's Memories with that receipt you sent me and then your messages and I just realized that you were in the store the whole damn time and ... I just want to know. This not-knowing shit throws me all out of wack and ... and I need to know about my mother. More than the pictures of her and me smiling together. More than the abandonment. And certainly more than her selling a bunch of old records for money."

"Well damn nigga. You bout as uptight as they get. Those were more than just old records dun ain't you figured that out?

"They were records. Big pieces of black plastic with grooves. They don't make them anymore."

"They was more than that to your moms Les."

"Please Eddie."

"Aight. Forget it. You'll figure it out sometimes or another. I betta just lay it on you then huh? You ever heard of Jimmy Nolen?"

"No. Was he someone my mother dated?"

"Sweet Jesus no. What the fuck did I bother askin for?" Eddie said as he looked up into the rafters of the warehouse. "Course you don't know who the fuck Jimmy Nolen is. The whole majority of peoples ain't know who the fuck he is. A damn shame. Look, Jimmy played in James Brown's band startin in '65. Right around the time he invented funk. You heard 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag' right?

"I think I've heard of it—he grunts a lot doesn't he? Not really singing?"

"Lord have mercy on ya brother. You know 'Papa's got a brand new bag,' he sings out the lyric. "The rhythm guitar plays a 9th chord on a 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' riff and then the rest of the band cuts in. That's somethin folk live to hear. You tellin me you ain't never heard no 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' guitar sound?"

"Look Eddie I don't listen to much music, maybe I heard it when I was young, I don't know. What does this have to do with my mother?"

"Oh Lord give me the goddamn courage to change the things I can't. That choppy sixteenth 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' strumming was none other than Jimmy Nolen scratchin the soul out his damn guitar strings. Nigga invented the choke-rhythm guitar. And that shit was your
moms grits and gravy. She kept tellin me not to sound like Hendrix when I soloed and more like Nolen. That's the hella important shit about your moms."

"Eddie. I don't understand this. Is this another thing I'm going to have to figure out like that receipt?"

"No my negro. Fuck that damn receipt. You done probly torn it up any way by now. This is much more important and it's easy. You woulda figured it out by now if you owned more than a clock radio."

"That's somethin folk live to hear. You tellin me you ain't never heard no 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' guitar sound?"

"I need more than this Eddie. What's the point? Look can you tell me something more ... I don't know. Something more 'concrete' about her?"

"Naw man. I done told you everything you really need to know."

"Please," Les begged.

"Aight," said Eddie, rolling his eyes and grimacing like he was hit with a sudden panging stomach cramp. "Just go to Blue's first thing tomorrow and tell him you want some Jimmy Nolen shit. Put it on real loud and feel the vibrations. Okay? This isn't hard man. Trust me. And look, I gotta go. Everybody's done left and I ain't even get to smoke a sack. Damn I hate you hardheaded ones. They make these trips such a pain in the ass. Getting my insides all twisted up again."

With that Eddie headed back to the stage and picked up his guitar from the stand.

"Eddie, wait. Are you sure there's nothin else?"

Eddie looked back over his shoulder and said, "Naw cat. I bared all I got. That's all we ever can do. I'll be peepin you later."

"Eddie. One last question. I promise."

He turned, ax in hand.

"Were you really flying during that solo? I mean ... I couldn't tell, the lights were flashing and ... well I was sure your feet left the stage."

With a sly grin, Eddie looked Les square in the eye and said, "My feet were never on the stage. I told you on the message. He moves in mysterious ways," he said gesturing upward with his guitar. "You'll figure it out. Trust a nigga like me and have a little faith."

He turned away and walked off the stage.

Les looked down into his glass and caught a distorted reflection of his face—smoothly abstracted into a swirl of hair, eyes, ears, nose and mouth. He decided not to take any swigs of alcohol. Instead he gently set the glass on the table and left the venue quietly, not even noticing that the crowd had somehow disappeared into the city lights, into the stars. He didn't speak to anyone on the street as he walked the 10 blocks back to his apartment. The exhaustion drained any feeling he had during the evening. He barely made it to the couch where he collapsed into a deep sleep, still wearing his cigarette odor-ed clothes.

Back so soon again youngblood?"

"Yeah, I need some more help with the past Blue," said Les as he craned his neck to see if any other customers were browsing through the shrine of memorabilia.

"First yuh gotta get focused on the present son. Why don't yuh try lookin at me
stead of rubberneckin round muh store?"

"Sorry, I was just checking. Do you remember that other customer who was looking for records yesterday? A real bugged out looking guy?"

"Hmmm ... Oh yeah, dude in all white, '70s looking stuff? Askin fo Funkadelic records?"

"Yeah, yeah. That's him."

"Yeah, he comes in here every now and then. Sorta shows up outta nowhere—he don't even set off the doorbell ringing. Always looking fo Funkadelic jams. 'Specially 'Maggot Brain.' Wonder how many copies of that gem he needs? But yeah, I never talked much with him. He looks and he leaves. Never bought a damn thing. But diffrent peoples is always comin up in here. Why you askin bout him?"

"Just curious, he looked interesting that's all."

"Okay. So what kin I do fo you? You got more receipts from your moms?"

"Not today. I actually came for music. I need something with Jimmy Nolen playing guitar."

Blue's eyebrows arched into a quizzical expression.

"Jimmy Nolen youngblood? Now ain't too many folk ask fo him by name. Usually it's James Brown this and James Brown that. Now how yuh get started lookin for Jimmy Nolen if yuh only owns a clock radio?"

"I met someone last night that mentioned I should check him out."

"Who?"

"This guy Eddie. Maybe you've heard of him? He may be a local, I don't know. Eddie Hazel – plays a really wild guitar."

"Eddie who?"

"Hazel. Eddie Hazel."

"That's what I thought yuh said. Yuh sure bout this?"

"Well yeah. He's the guy looking for Funkadelic records. I saw him play over in Brooklyn last night."

"Now I done heard it all. That cat in muh store is just some crazy nigga who likes '70s style and Funkadelic. And I don't know who yuh saw, but he wasn't no Eddie Hazel."

"How do you know?"

"Cuz Eddie Hazel been dead since December 23, '92. That's how."

"Oh."

"Yeah youngblood. Eddie Hazel was born in Brooklyn, raised in NJ and done joined George Clinton and Funkadelic when he was only 19. Played a mean-ass guitar. Sorta sounded like Hendrix. Yeah man, his jam was 'Maggot Brain' off the second album. Crazy beautiful solo. I heard George asked Eddie to play the saddest thing he could imagine so Eddie played his momma dying on his guitar. Ain't that some shit. And in one take too. The rest of the band wasn't playin so hot, so George faded the 'em out on the recording an let him wail. Cried his soul out on that Gibson guitar for 10 minutes and 10 seconds. Saddest thing yuh'll ever hear."

"Are you sure he's dead Blue? That sounds exactly like the guy I heard last night."

"Son. Eddie Hazel is dead as dead. He went to Lampoc prison for a while. Story has it he was high on angel dust on a plane ride, couldn't keep his mouth shut and bit the damn hostess. Crazy nigga. Did so much cocaine and dust and drugs and shit. Yeah youngblood. Nigga done killed himself slowly. He was only 42, but he was all bleeding up inside, faulty liver and all kinds a stomach problems."

"Jesus. What is happening to everything around me?"
“Hey look son. Yuh probably saw some cat that looked like him—yuh know that guy that comes in muh store and yuh got yourself confused with thinkin' bout yuh moms an all that. But ain't no damn devil way yuh coulda seen Eddie Hazel.”

“Blue it had to have been him. He played that solo so long and sad that I thought he would fly away. He knew about my mother. But then he looked so young.”

“Nigga don't be crazy. Ain't no such thing as a angels. The mind can play tricks on yuh youngblood. Don't worry bout that. Just some crazy dream or memory yuh had and now yuh gots it confused with the present. I'll get yuh that Jimmy Nolen jam and we'll get yuh on yuh way. Yeah don't sweat this. Some good 'ol soul music will set yuh straight. Jimmy Nolen yeah. Shootfire he's a damn fine player. He passed in '83,” Blue said as he quickly filed through a box of 45s.

“Yeah here we go. James Brown on the King label. 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag.' That's what yuh want. Here I'll even play it fo yuh on the in-store so yuh know what yuh's gettin.'

Les, whose mind was still mulling over the receipt and Eddie and the solo, watched respectfully as Blue took the 45 out of the sleeve and placed it on the turntable. Ever so carefully he hooked the needle with his right index finger and gently placed the tip on the outer edge of the disc. Immediately a light crackle filled the store. “Just some record dust that's all,” Blue said.

A crisp blast of ten horns—saxes and trumpets erupted, out of which followed the uptempo groove of the bass and funky drummer. Brown's vocals growled over the rhythm and the bari sax honked on beat two. Fifteen seconds into the song, Les closed his eyes and felt his hips and shoulders involuntarily sway to the drums. Sound-tendrils of groove snaked around his entire body, dragging his feet into rhythm with the beat. A beat so strong his head nodded in time, his chin bouncing off his chest and then jutting outward. The corners of his lips stretched as if to snag his earlobes in a smile that said he was finally remembering.

“Ain't no drag ... Papa's got a brand new bag,” sang Brown. Then the “ting-aling-aling-aling-aling” of Jimmy Nolen's choppy chord work broke the barrier of the band, soloing so on point. So on the beat.

So on the rhythm that Les threw his hands out in front of himself and shook them along with the scratch of the pick over the strings. His body crashed into the store cabinets and stacks of records, but he shrugged it off like he was on the dancefloor and just happened to bump into another dancer. Blue just smiled, almost knowingly, as he watched the younger man lose himself in the past, which didn't have to struggle to flood Les' soul with memory as it had the night before. Jimmy Nolen's rhythms came naturally and they entranced Les. He embraced them as he grooved along, dancing through the aisles of the store. Twirling and spinning in time like he'd grooved to the tune of his mother's heartbeat from the womb when she went out dancing. As he'd felt the song thrusting his little five-year-old body back into his mother's outstretched arms as she funked around the living room with him, the stereo cabinet still brimming with records. As he'd felt the song fusing through his blood as it had hers, pumping straight from the heart to his mind to his soul. Fleeing his physical essence and flying away like a funky black angel.
Abanico

Stitch your silken fan but do not pose behind its folds; let it be caged satisfaction. A frozen fragment, hang it still and sure, to fill that space with metal-golds.

As it unwraps, I want to touch that black fabric; old days laid flat in rows, slight russets and warm gingers spent; stitch your silken fan but do not pose behind its folds.

Your bodybreeze is enough, a motion slowing; cold needle-thrusts push a slight wind, etched lines, creases unbent; hang it still and sure, to fill that space with metal-golds.

Auburn highlights shine like august sun, ache untold; you give breath to thread, I lay deep scarlet compliments— stitch your silken fan but do not pose behind its folds.

You are silent as you work, eyes bone dry, tin-dim, though bold as beams that cracksplit through; look up, a slit heaven sent— hang it still and sure, to fill that space with metal-golds.

You will be captured in glass; trapped with light, neatly rolled into thin rays, bouncing off of the framed filament. Stitch your silken fan, but do not pose behind its folds; hang it still and sure, to fill that space with metal-golds.

by Emily Kay Carson
An Italian Love Poem

She'll be a Mediterranean town
with perpetual blue oceans,
loud, rough, and all covered in olive oil.
I'm only awake enough to fuck and buy fruit
from a corner market . . .
and this old man - my new best friend -
he understands me,
even though I only know one Italian phrase:

Tu sei una bellissima ragazza!

I let her buy the fruit this morning.
Watch her out of open bay windows,
white curtains flapping against my arm in the sea breeze.
I see Zeus fly down in the form of a swan
and fuck the shit out of her.
She is quite taken and never comes back.

by Terry Smith

Aging

i.

Death is augusttremulous,
a light that shakes in the aftermath of its theft.
Death is a mule,
neck hung about with palmfronds and pearls.
Death is the division,
where the sky lies cracked like a child's door.

ii.

Dream is where dead smiles meet,
hallow in a cavern, echoing the day.
Dream is the latitude of night,
silent, horizontal, circumnavigating.
Dream is the only sincerity,
honesty laced with black and white edges.
Mother is becoming heather gray, slipping slowly into rosepetal skin.

Mother is still an answer, stable as a cloth-of-gold crocus.

Mother is a calling, something I hear only in seashells.

I am the growing division, motherborn but fathercloned.

I dream of applebubbles on my lips.
I dream of honey and liquor.

I am a mule bearing the lifedust, softeyed, softeared.

I am becoming augusttremulous, a light that envelops from the inside.

by Emily Kay Carson
from metamorphoses

“In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora.” Ovid

The transformation of the hours into chocolate morsels, the migration of birds, The absence of the smell of paint, the chalkboard scratch of misplaced hilarity, Speak, who, where, as if, a painting: two painters who are tired of paint, Their noses turned to turpentine, their eyebrows to congealed brushes Like the sudden move to Spring in the Deep South, or dandelions, or dark Colors which reveal the light of the moon’s magnanimous milking Of the stars. O whose and his and hers, My eyes are magnetized in every direction; or in my beginning is my Middle, as if roses chewed cud, as if I were who I am who knowing must Be and is and shall in being discontinue; for this is the like of the hour, Whose time becomes rocks, trees, discontent schoolboys; whose tocks Become lazy summers and humid late autumns; whose tocks Are and become the Velcro of my soul’s longing.

With the advent of sliced bread there came rats; not rats like in The Plague, But those that pop out of walls and stare at you rather than eat your baby. And in this assertion one finds that death is easier to bear, that in the blank Stares of mourning, there are still f sharp minor chords, still nocturnes Which mothers play in their heads when they feel the fangs of the wind. But do the unheard songs of birds sing, deep and low, high upon the north, Where words become icicles; and does music persist in the musical Notes of two blades of St. Augustine; the confessions of plants, irrelevant As a dead idol, blare tidings of nothingness to a world whose only delight is Self—where is thy victory, where is thy sting, o auto, o counterfeited Something. I am not water. These words are not ex nihilo, nor these thoughts Prime; the world has enough thirty-sevens. The audience, the audience, You are my joyful pen, my bloodied eyes, my fractured solitude.
A young boy, not unlike what I imagine Ibsen to have looked like At age nine, suddenly becomes a giraffe, towering over his own House, his own kitchen, his father's desk, the neighborhood yard. His movement is fickle, like an accordion. He first tastes his own Trees, then those of the Lindholms, but finds nothing so pleasing As the idea of the sky, its blueness increasing without bound, Its lack of children and pomegranates, its subtle wit. So he makes the sound that giraffes do when they say goodbye, Then jumps, clear into the gulf between earth and never And perhaps what we like to call the moon, to land on the shores Of his own planet, where he can be le petit prince, but where Giraffish is the langue of choice; and sometimes, but only sometimes, Because of his reticence, he remembers his home, his family, His little bedside table with the convenient piggy bank and Photo of the beach. Yet he thinks he is happy, and We know that he is, for his neck is strong, and the leaves Abundant, and it's a free galaxy.

If pain is anything, and it usually is not—except For snow, sometimes when one's face is frozen And one contemplates lost loves—it is not The opposite of a grapefruit, whose juices, splattered, Fail to choose any surface upon which to rest, But fly, free and finally feeling the air whose particles They have shunned; nor is it the thing itself, Yet it becomes, over time, the way I feel when I look At a certain shade of carpet, whose hue reminds me Only of her cruelties, or that certain touch Which only suggests the absence of metaphors For my relationship with the jobs I have not had, The money I have not made, the fame I have not Gotten. Where is my heart, or my motives, or their Million muttering minutiae, or the inability to speak Certain phrases which twist or sound inebriated: Judicial system; this passeth forth; but also the lisp Of loneliness—its pale self-denial, its reliance On the universality and untemporality of minutes. I am a villanelle. But I do not rhyme, merely repeat. Repeat, repeat.
Janet, without thinking at all, last Thursday
Turned into a rhapsody of flavorful appreciation,
And then a cookie: large, static, several hours old but still fresh.
Her eyes seemed to remain in two large chocolate chips,
But these were the first that the insects attacked.
Her guts, it seemed, had all become a gift from Ghirardelli,
As her boyfriend soon discovered, digging,
With her girlfriends,
Into her former side. It served her, they thought,
Right that such would happen: her life, up to this point,
Had been utterly cookie-less; she had always refused to eat them,
And now, to demonstrate her newfound open-mindedness
Which stretched to all things theoretical and digestible,
She attempted the legendary dessert, only to find herself remarkably
Round, soft, edible. She was gone before sunset; washed down
By milk and the stars.

In the beginning, God was creating the heavens and the earth.
Nobody was moving; that is, there wasn't anybody;
Then suddenly there was. Or perhaps not suddenly;
I don't know. But being is always sudden when you wake up.
And so the cosmos woke up—or came out
Of the nonexistent womb with its eyes still closed.
Light was an anomaly when there was so much
Nothingness; it was amusing itself, being the only anything
Anywhere near, when God started organizing.
In the end things were a great deal better than good,
But we know that the Creator must be a classicist
Because he uses litotes. Besides that, prelapsaria
Wasn't exactly a Golden Age because everything
Was made out of wood. Fie on Eve for not thinking
Of aluminum. But they got along quite well.
The birds were humming, the willows sighing,
The not-yet-born children laughing.
In this story a tree turns into I.
The tree was a live oak, standing gravely
In Biloxi, and before I knew it, those grand
Branches had curled into hands and fingers,
Its knots into a nose and eyes. It was definitely
Myself. Yet there I was, looking at myself,
Not willing to say “Hello” just yet.
So instead I said “Hello” and I didn’t answer.
Then I said, “Isn’t this bizarre,” and I agreed.
We decided that the tree mustn’t have ever been.
But then we disagreed: “There’s a big hole there,”
I said, pointing to the ground. I wasn’t so sure.
So finally I suggested that we part, I going home,
I going to Singapore or somewhere.
“I’m confused,” I said. “As am I,” said I.
Finally the British navy rolled up on the sand
And told me to wake up.

Early this morning the College of Cardinals knocked,
Terribly softly, on Larry’s dorm room door, to his
Utmost surprise, pronouncing him the pontiff,
The Holy Father; there was a loophole, they said,
In church law, which did not require the pope
To be anything in particular; he would, however,
Have to move to the Vatican immediately, if
He didn’t mind. Nor did he, for in their eyes
He saw that nothing was impossible, that pure
Robes would solve all problems, and that Rome
Was only a few short hours away.
Silent, like the figures atop St. Mark’s in Venice, does the world
Go to its destruction. No harpers play, Orpheus having gone,
Ruined by the whole Hades incident. There might be a bitter,
Dissonant rendition of an Eastern liturgy, the basses and altos
Grating the nerves of the tenors, whose hearts remain in Las Vegas.
And when the world is transformed from its present beauty,
There will be nothing but itself, reworked in a million ways
Or one—like a pomegranate seed, or a tangled mesh of rubber bands.
It will find itself refreshed but unrenewed, for the rocks will still age,
The buildings collapse, the fires burn out, the fat ladies sing,
The little kids walk their poodles, the master of a large household
Use a stopwatch to get dressed. The only thing that has changed,
Besides everything and the mailman, is unchangeability, its persistent
Denial of dust, of wings—Icarus was resurrected yesterday
By a careless bard, only to fall again into the sea. Again
The plowman continued, the waves ignored, and Daedelus
Yet cried, “Icare, ubi es? qua te regione requiram?”
And to no avail, as always, as the worker bees die,
As the evening becomes the morning, becomes the noon,
Becomes the twilight and then the perpetual absence of words
To contain these nine hundred thousand faces.

by Sam Keyes
The Vocabulary of Love

by Mo Kiley

Retrospect – Noun; A review, survey or contemplation of things in the past

41 years old

"Look, I know it's only one test, you'll just have to study harder next time. Less TV, and more books!" I glanced over to the passenger seat, where my frustrated son was pulling off his shin guards and socks.

"Dad, I did study. Like at least an hour. The words are just so hard. When am I ever gonna need to know what "ostentatious" means anyways?" He raised his eyebrows at me and gave me a quizzical look. I could remember doing the exact thing to my parents, and I'm not sure they ever had an answer for me.

I just smiled and assured him that he would need it someday.....

"Look, we can practice the words together so that you can do better when you take the re-test." I ran my fingers through his red buzz cut. We drove home in contemplative silence.

Serendipity – Noun; The faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident

21 years, 3 months

The first time I saw that beautiful red hair was two months before I actually met Nora. I was standing at the soda machine, filling my glass with my daily dose of caffeinated beverage. I glanced to my left, trying to spot some friends, when I saw her sitting alone, reading the newspaper. I paused, long enough for the glass to overflow all over my hand and Coke to dribble down my arm.

What caught my eye was that she was wearing the gaudiest, most hideous sweater I had ever seen. It was neon pink, green, orange, and yellow. There were puffs and polka dots and stripes, like something out of a bad 80's movie. My first reaction was of disgust for the sweater, my second, admiration for the person that could have the guts to pull off something so hideous.

After that, I saw her practically everyday. It was as if I had suddenly discovered something that I had passed by so many times and never noticed. And now I searched for her. Everywhere I went, I mentally scanned the area, looking for this intriguing girl. Sometimes she wore that sweater, sometimes not. She was one of those girls that just seemed so perfect in her imperfection. She haunted my thoughts, the nameless girl with fiery red hair and poor fashion sense. I started to take note of where and when I saw her each week. I got to know her schedule. Not that I was a
stalker, I just happened to know that she worked at the coffee shop at the same time every week, and that she liked to study in the same seat in the University center. I just couldn’t get up enough courage to talk to her, well, at least to hold a real conversation. The most I had ever said to her was “Large coffee...black”. That’s it. After that encounter, I sat for hours and analyzed those three words to try to determine how she may have perceived them. Did I seem too cool? Or did I seem like some baboon who couldn’t use his paltry vocabulary to create a full sentence? My hopes were down. It was my senior year. I was supposed to be living it up, and all I could think of was this girl with the ugly sweater.

Then something happened. Some people may call it fate, but I tended to be skeptical of using such words to describe something as uncertain as probability.

I woke up late for the class I had missed one too many times already. One more would be an F. I quickly threw on the clothes that lie at the foot of my bed from the night before. I grabbed a notebook and ran down the hall. As I kicked the door open, I caught a glimpse of someone on the other side of it, but it was too late. The door hit hard. The person went down, a flash of Rainbow sweater. Neon pink, orange, green, yellow puffys and patterns scraped the dirt. I stood there too afraid to move, for I believed I had just killed the woman of my dreams.

Culpable – Adjective; Deserving of blame or censure as being wrong, evil, improper, and injurious

10 years, 2 months

Her name was Sarah. She had just joined our class midyear. She had been home-schooled until her mom died that year. After a few weeks of grief, her stern and somewhat intimidating father declared that it was time she faced the world, no matter what she looked like.

I’ll always remember her. She sat next to me in math class, and often times I would catch a glimpse of her face. While my teacher babbled on about numerators and denominators, I would slowly turn my head in her direction, pretending to look at the clock, as if I was antsy for recess. My eyes would rest upon her left cheek, a craggy landscape of scar tissue. My gut would tell me to turn away. My conscience told me to leave her alone. But I couldn’t. I was mesmerized. My eyes would walk up and down the left side of her face, visually tracing the grooves and ridges of pink puffy flesh.

She always caught me looking. I was so engulfed in the lunar surface of her cheek, envisioning microscopic aliens hitting golf balls, and claiming her face as a new colony. She would quickly turn; her eyes would look directly into mine. They were the clearest blue. The right side of her face, the half that was turned away from me, was so smooth, so normal. She looked like two different people, cut in half and sewn together. The injured look in her eye brought the shame. I didn’t say a word or even smile. I just turned my head away and concentrated intently on simplifying the fractions that lay on the paper before me.

My best friend that year, Eddie Walker, said that I loved her, and that we were going to have a hundred babies. I shuddered, and looked to where she sat by herself on a swing at the other end of the yard. All my friends were laughing, singing “Sarah and Radley sitting in a tree...K I S S I N G!!!”

My face grew hot and I clenched my fists. I said through gritted teeth, “I do
NOT like her! She is so.....stupid.....and UGLY! No one will ever love her, especially not me!” I stopped short, realizing that my whisper had quickly turned into screams. I turned to where she sat. The swing was still swaying back and forth, but Sarah was gone.

She never came back. I never saw her face again.

**Empathy** – Noun; Identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feelings, and motives

25 years, 11 months

The call came while I was at work.

Nora moved so slightly, her bandaged hand shifting in mine. It was not until she gave my hand a squeeze that I knew that she was awake. Her face, wrapped in gauzy bandages could have been that of anyone, but I knew that it was Nora, by the red hairs peeking out from beneath the white fabric. She gave a little moan. She did that all the time without even realizing it. It was one of those things that I loved about her.

“Hi,” I whispered, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re okay, the doctors are making everything okay.”

But I knew that things would never be completely okay. The doctor’s said that her face was badly torn up. She hadn’t been wearing her seat belt, and as a result was thrown through the windshield upon impact. They said that her face would never be the same.

I looked down at her form that lay on the sterile sheets. Strands of her red hair stuck out from behind the gauzy mask. I reached out and stroked them. It was then that I had to turn away.

Nora, my Nora. Her beautiful face etched in my memory, a beauty like no other.

**Melancholy** – Noun; Sadness or depression of the spirits; pensive reflection or contemplation

22 years, 7 months

Dear Nora,

I just want to start off saying that I love you. If you don’t read the rest of this, I want you to know that much. Because I do. I love you.

My thoughts are a jumble. I’m not sure that I am going to be able to say what I want to say, but just bear with me. Saturday was the worst day of my life. I’m not going to go into some long cliché about how I wish I could go back and not say what I said, and what I thought. Because I did say the things that I said and I thought horrible things. That is me. I am not infallible. I say things that are wrong, and are prejudiced, and are cowardly. But nothing makes me feel like more of a coward than when I imagine the life that I would live without you.

It’s sounds stupid, but hitting you in the face with that door was the best thing that ever happened to me. It meant a day of apologies at the emergency room for me, and a broken nose for you. But I can not imagine what my life would be like if it had never happened, if we had never met.

Remember that time when you made me that peanut butter and jelly sandwich at three in the morning? I want to do that again. I want to make a thousand peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with you. Just don’t give up on something that has been going so well for so long. You have made my life sweet. I need you. Again, I love you, I love you, and I love you.
18 years, 5 months

I was driving back to campus, the dark night blanketing my car. My contacts had already begun to fog up. There were halos around the headlights of the passing cars. I began thinking about the possibility that lay on the path that I was currently taking. I could finish college, get a job, maybe get married, and then die. These options bored me. They were inevitables. In order to “have a life” I had to give up living, and become the zombie that so many others had become. “Need things... get job... buy things... buy more.”

And I sat there, listening to some DJ who thought he was cooler than he really was. “Hey go on down to Circuit City for all your home and office needs. Well, I know what I need right now... and I don’t think that they got that there... he he he... if you know what I mean... he he he.”

Needs? Any available future path became a slippery slope. Everything led to meaningless possessions.

The music pulsed, my head pounded and my foot grew heavier. I approached the bridge that led to the front of campus. As I picked up speed, my mind began to wander. What if I suddenly jerked the wheel? What if I flew off the bridge into the icy water below? My life would suddenly change. Predictability would be erased. I may live, I may die. For that brief instance it pleased me. I was aroused at the possibility.

And just as suddenly as the thought entered my mind, a fear gripped my stomach. I held on to the wheel tightly, to steady my shaking hands.
anyone else there. And far more attractive. Beautiful in fact. Her red lips curled upward while her dark eyes flirted their way into my mind. Nora used to be that beautiful. I would lie awake each morning, just looking at her, thinking how lucky I was to have her. I haven't done that in years, I suppose I prefer to sleep in now.

After the meeting, I drove around for a while, thinking. When I pulled into the driveway, the house was dark. Nora and the kids must have gone to bed. The dogs greeted me at the door, and followed me into the kitchen, their nails clacking against the linoleum. In the dim sliver of light from the bathroom, I saw the sandwich. And the note.

"Just thought you might be hungry." It was my favorite, peanut butter and jelly. Quietly, I crept up the stairs, and peered in on Nora's sleeping form. She heard me and raised her head, a slight smile on her face. In the dim light, her scars were barely noticeable. I smiled softly, and slowly closed the door and walked back to the kitchen. With just the light from the bathroom, I sat at the table, and ate the sandwich in silence.

Inquietude: Noun; a state of restlessness or uneasiness

5 years 2 months

It was my favorite part of the whole day. After my mother had changed me into my pajamas for the night, I would sit down on my father's lap and read with him. Usually he would open up the book of generic fairy tales that we had owned for years. A few of the pages were ripped, and several were covered with streaks of orange, evidence of my sister's crayon experiments. But despite its flaws, I loved that book. Its pages filled my mind with images of fairies and talking wolves, and damsels in distress. My father would trace his finger along the lines of words that lay upon the page, reading slowly to me. Yet I knew every word before he said it. So instead of looking at the pages, I would turn to look at my father and watch the sides of his mouth as it opened and closed. I was amazed how it could appear so small in one instant, a little circle of pink wrinkles that would suddenly expand to cover most of the width of his face. The repetitions and fluctuations soothed me, and when the story was over I went to bed feeling that everything was going to be okay. Until one night. Dad had just finished reading the story about the knight and the dragon and the damsel. I sat there, not quite ready to go to bed, and looked up at my father. "But what happened after that?"

"What do you mean?" "Well, you just read The End, but I dunno, I guess I just wanna know what happens after he saves her and they fall in love. "Well, they live "happily ever after"...I guess. It's just a story. Okay, how bout this? The prince and princess get married and open up...a shoe store....and....have a son, who asks too many questions when it is time to go to bed.

"That ending stinks."

"Well, it'll do. Time for bed." That night I lay awake, thinking about that beautiful princess and her brave prince. And that dragon. I wasn't satisfied with THE END; there had to be something else to the story.

Euphoria – Noun; a feeling of great happiness or well-being

65 years, 7 months

I woke early. The sun was shining in
my eyes, and I knew that I would not be able to drift off again. The light filtering through the curtains fell upon Nora's face, creating a map of shadow roads across her face. She lay on her side, facing me, her blanket clenched to her chest. Her eyes were closed in the softest way. She moved slightly with each breath, rising and falling, her nose whistling softly. I watched her as the shadows shifted into early morning and the sun grew brighter. I had the urge to reach out and touch her soft hair, which only hinted of its prior redness. But I didn't. Something held me back, an inner peace that I did not want to disturb. Feeling was rising up inside of me, and I had to gasp for breath.

The alarm rang. Her eyes opened and closed, and then opened again. She saw me looking at her. She smiled, and I did not turn away.

Cynicism – Noun; An attitude that is scornful of the motives, virtue or integrity of others

19 years, 4 months

Let Go

The embryo of desire
is a polished, luminous pearl
lodged deep within the folds of our
oyster-mind clamped shut. Open the shell and let go the
priceless node into moments which
shall never pass again—the tide
of our life.

And if never again we
berth the pearl
at least we found it,
and rolled it over our tongue.

by Melissa Patterson
my 256th picture day

you think that i enjoy calling you
superstar, princess, or petunia
when everyone is a superstar, princess, or petunia?
or that i enjoy tilting and turning
your little head
to get it at just the right angle?
how much patience does it require
to
sit
still
for
fifteen
seconds?

but i have almost forgotten...

your fifteen seconds lasts a day.
you probably want your picture to be taken
and over with. well i am over with
so don't hurry the time it takes
to capture you picture perfect.
so perfect there upon that box,
an unblemished history,
an ability to fly kites believing they can never go high enough,
the only monsters you know are the ones under your bed,
candy still gives you that sugar high,
the clouds in your sky are dragons and steamboats,
the moving gleam of curiosity and uninhibited emotion
that i caught in your eye
before you left the rushed excited happy giddy chatter
with your friends that are still waiting on line.
torn from your companions,
you dread this one picture—
try taking this picture
over
and
over
and
over
again.  
they're all the same.

if you can't hold that forced smile for a couple moments now, 
how will you be able to plaster it on  
for days weeks months years at a time?

as the light flashes ensuring that your face will be frozen forever, 
perhaps you'd like to take a peek and look through my lens.

by Claudine Mead
You have a beef with donuts?” she said. “They’re donettes,” he said.

And they were donettes, the smaller version, the kid brother to the donut. On the last night of Tattooed Potato’s Blood Tour 2001 on August 31 at the House of Blues in Las Vegas, lead singer Joshua Slayten knew his donettes from his donuts, and the proclamation that the midget donuts were actually donettes seemed like a good enough answer to her question about donut beef.

“Yes, hmm” she said.

She was Tracie Pinker and she had overcome much of the stigma of her name to be sitting backstage interviewing Joshua Slayten for She magazine. Tracies spelt with the “ie” teeter between inspiring snap impressions of a coquette or a herped whore giving birth to bastard children of prime ministers and surgeons general. The teetering is not equal. Coquettes are easily flattened against walls, heads patted into obscurity at cocktail parties, married and shipped to Indiana. Herped whores are like dust stains, on a wall in perfect sharp lines around a picture removed. They linger like the way people meet, vaguely frightened, and later uncomfortably misforgotten.

Tracie was only allowed five minutes with Joshua Slayten before his manager would burst through the door with champagne in one hand and finger wagging in the other.

“What is your favorite part of a show?” she said. “You can’t pick a favorite song or something. I mean what is you favorite part of doing a show?”

“God, my favorite thing about doing a show is when you say the name of the song you are about to play, and there are these long seconds before they start screaming” he said. It was like the color explosion of a firework, and the belated thunder pop to follow, disjointed, like an alternate reality, dimension, shade, did exist, and the sound had disappeared there for a few slip lipped seconds.

“Yes, hmm,” she said.

And that was it. Door burst, and finger wagged, and Tracie was escorted out. The entourage flitted back in.

Joshua was thirty-four, never been married. He had done a photo shoot for She magazine yesterday, a celebrity bathing suit spread and him in a wetsuit. He had gained thirty pounds this year, but his girlfriend was a freakishly skinny famous actress. She was Arbina Colina and she did yoga and pilates because any running or fast walking made her muscles round and normal looking. She told interviewers she was naturally skinny, and the lie was told and retold, much to the chagrin of all women everywhere.
Arbina was on location in South Africa. It was nice for Joshua to have her go on location. He had liked the idea of having an actress girlfriend, but not the reality. She is just like barbecue chicken pizza for him. Barbecue chicken pizza always smells delicious and is fine going down, but it acts as an irrepressible laxative. During his discomfort, Joshua will wonder if barbecue chicken pizza is worth diarrhea, but he will forget again. Just one of those things.

He wrote a song for Arbina, “My Cleopatra,” which satisfied her, but she didn’t understand it. Joshua liked to write lyrics about Egypt with pyramids. Egyptian mysticism is a staple of popular culture. It is one of those really good lies that will never lose its magic like Atlantis, Freddy Mercury, and Communism. Joshua thought that Egyptology, and Egypt as a commodity, would be the next big thing when people got sick of Western with cowboy hats. If they got sick of Western. That was the big question. They had gotten sick of AIDS and lost their red ribbons without a cure in sight, so maybe they would get sick of Western, but you never could tell for sure.

Joanna, although Joshua had no recollection of her name, handed him a mocha frappuccino, size grande. Joshua liked to watch, and hoped to one day be on “MTV Cribs”. He took a nod from Tommy Lee and got his own Starbucks coffee percolators, beans, mixes, and industrial strength blenders. Tommy Lee had his private Starbucks in his boom-boom room. Joshua had his on tour with him.

“God! There’re ice chunks in here” he said, apparently addressing God, but actually addressing no one in particular since he didn’t remember who had handed him his frappuccino. “Would you chill out on the ice?”

Joshua wondered about the state of affairs, and what it means when your greatest concern is death from choking on frappuccino ice chunks. It wasn’t good. That’s for sure.

Tracie was in the bathroom, young, thinly fatted arms flexed leaning against the ceramic white sink, head dangling, hair falling in her eyes if her eyes had been open. She was thinking. Her hair was real now. Two years ago it had been permed and color treated into purgatory. It had been spongy. As every Italian hairdresser in the Bronx will tell you, when hair is spongy there is nothing to do but cut it off and wear a wig. So when Tracie quit singing for The Wrung Rats she shaved her head and got a temp job and wore a wig. Now she had worked her way to interview coordinator for She magazine, and made sure every other employee was on assignment, unavailable to interview Joshua Slayten. Now it was big chance time.

Joshua clicked on the TV, and the mechanical blinds buzz slid down, overhead lights shut off, auxiliary lamps shut on, dolby digital surround sound purred in loyal anticipation, and the entourage shushed.

Joshua’s manager handed him a phone that he instinctively put to his ear.

“Ah hoshua, I’m glad I caught you before you went on tonight, svetehart,” she said. Tracie was in the bathroom, locked in the last stall, sitting on the back bulkhead
part of the toilet and trying not to flush as she impersonated Arbina. She had a yellow legal pad balanced between knees squeezed as the apex of the triangle of her legs and the toilet seat, triangle hovering like a dare above the mirrored bowl.

"I'm watching the Oscar's, babe," he said. "What's up?"

"The Oscar's? Ah I would kill to see the tape of that right now," she said. "Really?" he said. Arbina had never expressed interest in the Oscars before. Finally, he thought, confinement in the South African desert would teach her to appreciate the Oscar's.

"Ahv course," she said. This is the accent, an illusory immigrant accent, that Tracie imagined for Arbina. It made little sense, but not even Joshua minded. "Whetch part are you watching?"

"Itzac Perlam and Yoyo Ma," he said. "Ah so beautiful. So zexy," she said. "Yeah, the best musicians, it's like they're making love," he said. Itzac Perlman, bent over his violin, furiously masturbatory, like quasimoto, and Yoyo Ma, less urgent with fingers long and thin, phallic and telling. "God, those fingers are like E.T."

"That's how you feel about your music?" she said.

"Not like E.T."

"Like making love?" she said. She wrote on her yellow legal pad. "Yeah," he said. He suddenly wished that Arbina was not in South Africa. "God, I'd love to make love to you right now."

"We are good et that, ah?" she said.

Tracie smiled into the gray of the stall door, momentarily believing that she was actually Arbina and not Tracie. Twenty-eight years of being yourself are easily exchanged. Most people will tell you differently, but they lie.

There had been a moment when Tracie decided she was sick of home hair dye products, tired of ecstasy and being tricked into lesbianism at raves, sick and tired of the danger and the wide open feeling of nude sunbathing when she walked down the street alone. And changing was easy. She wore clean clothes and went to work in the morning. It was a miracle, or maybe a mutation of herself that had worn ripped stockings and clothespins. Tracie did not know anything about reinventing yourself, and she thought reinvention was impossible considering the implications of the word invention, and the conflicting implications of the prefix re. But, Tracie did know about inventing a whole other person, and becoming that person. She had done it. Be the change invention or inversion, she knew she was new. We live in fiction anyway, so why not. Tracie didn't even need to change her number or move to a different apartment. She just said Tracie moved when people called. She just opened the door and stared at old friends and said Tracie moved and look around all the furniture is different and no one even recognized. Bravado is an appropriately wonderful lifesaver.

"God I wish you were here," he said. "Vell you are a very lucky rockstar tonight," she said. "Shooting wrapped early and I am surprising you. I vill probably arrive while you are onstage, but look for me, okay?"


The House of Blues was jam elbow packed with straight-toothed kids in tank tops and chokers, proving that not even heavy metal is sacred or pure. Goth is gone too. That was a bad lie. All that black shit around the eyes is gone, dead with Kurt Cobain like music died with Buddy Holly in
an airplane. Not even atom blasts last though, and bacteria grow on the surface first. There was a freneticism in the House of Blues.

Tattooed Potato played and the kids screamed like they were being impaled, but opposite, like they were full of something, and it was coming out. If there ever were a web connecting all people, it was living here last, and you could see the threadbare shimmering spindles glinting in the sound and music.

Tracie listened to the concert and the stamping of shoes from the bathroom. She waited until the encore to come out. Tattooed Potato was playing “My Cleopatra.” Tracie hiked her skirt up and her shirt down. She still looked young and stupid enough to be mistaken for a groupie. She had never been a groupie before. She had been a star, albeit a small one, the kind you can’t see anymore because of pollution. Still, this was her home turf, smoke and drugs and young irrational hopes for heroism and a leader rising.

She stood off stage left wondering if she would be able to turn into Arbina. She wondered if maybe she already had turned into Arbina and just didn’t know it yet. Just because she had changed into another person before didn’t mean she could do it again. The physics of changing your personality is a large and virtually undisturbed and unsearched vacuum. Changing into another person once was ambitious enough, but trying to change twice was crazy like our judicial system. The second change might bring her back to the beginning, and her dead personality resurrected. Unless, of course, we must always go forward. Time. Time is always such a nuisance. It can be so rigid.

Twenty-eight years of being yourself are easily exchanged. Most people will tell you differently, but they lie.

“Aww baby I’ve been looking for you all night,” he said. Joshua handed his guitar to a roadie and an assistant wiped his sweaty head before he hugged her.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. “Let’s go watch the Oscars.”

Later that night Joshua said that Arbina looked kinda different and she said that she was just wearing a lot of makeup because she had come right off the set. Tracie still wasn’t sure if she was Arbina yet, but she knew she could be. It didn’t matter, really. She had gotten this far and she knew that every day is an act of faith.

In his hotel room, Joshua Slayten fell asleep beside her to the TV sound of the Oscars.
i sleep with my eyes open
because i spin and think
about the red speck of boa fuzz
i don’t take down from over my bed –
how sweet Kahlúa lips are on mine.

i guess everyone figured the butterfly tattoo
you wore on your right shoulder was fake.
i should have known,
i put it on myself.
sorry i told that girl it was real –
sorry i pressed too hard and left a mark.

that night
you kissed Europeans
i passed out.

if you mix beer and dark rum
my eyes close and you drip
between my lips.
i don’t drink – merely hold
taste on my tongue,
swirl until you dissolve
into me like virgin rain water
from central American countries
and i am lost against doors
i always forget to lock.

yes, of course i checked
no one lives there anymore, only
interrogation chairs, puttied walls,
and fluorescent light that feels hungover.
you, naked with yellowed skin,
allowed yourself to be held by it
and flattered

if you mix all the liquor on your shelf
- vodka tequila rum whiskey schnapps gin
beer and a dram of vermouth for added flavor-
it tastes like sprite.
but do drink up,
flavor that lingers on lips
refuses to distill,
and Advil doesn’t seem to work
even if you take five before bed.

by Terry Smith
Alchemy

Thoughts are consumed at once into nothing—
like stars.
Thoughts could consume you and I at once into nothing—
like intergalactic stars that were furious and fat before each galaxy thought of itself.
Stars collapse into nothing.

Love begins
when a galaxy thinks of itself,
and then of itself not alone.

In those eyes I see my own vision;
a panorama over his blue skies,
and take up alchemy with an androgynous man.
I let myself onto a world where it feels like it did in the beginning
when I thought of myself alone.

There was nothing to touch—
all was my own—
and the skin which held me then as I floated alone

becomes his arms as I am yet still alone,
and there is nothing else,
because we are one.

by Melissa Patterson
Yellow pages are funny; such a big book for such a small part of the story.

There are reasons to forget.

There was a barber-shop:
Snip-its of hair falling to the ground;
The old men yelled at the game. Papers strewn on the table as disorderly as New York City.
I would color the sports page and the old men would curse —
"Why the hell don't you color the FRONT page?"
My father laughed, the old men laughed, they took away the sports page;

I colored. snip-its of hair.

I never really developed a taste for root-beer; I would have liked to.

A girl lived up the street. She had eyes that came out like a prize-fighter, and a take-no-prisoners smile.
She smiles a lot, she used to cry a lot, but now she smiles more.

It reminds me of a guy I once knew — he smiled a lot. He was a Marine. I don't think Marines usually smile a lot, do they?

But they don't take prisoners.
Anyhow,

once she kissed me, (the girl that is) right on the lips. It was the first time I'd been kissed, right on the lips.

It made my head fizz, not too much, but just enough.

Like root-beer, I guess; I don't really know — I never developed a taste for it, but I would have liked to.

Snip-its of hair.

Yellow pages are funny, like memories, such a small part of the story.

There are reasons to forget — I'm sure I'll find one.

Someday.

By John Dunn
Utopia

Musicians and actors cross their heart to use pens.
Writers cower before the smearing doom of a pencil.
I doubt Mozart used for The Songstress a pencil.
Shakespeare shunned that lightening rod to make a line.

In the No-Life Club where nothing is expendable,
We can twist napkins into art and sigh aloud
At this, what the bustle never sees.
Nothing is all that we may have to do,
but we may still have pleasures here.

We spin our quarters and bend straws into anthems
that our country will never stand to sing aloud:
the testimonies to what life there still is somewhere,
nestled in our booths with no morning to wake.

We live out our dreams without rising to lose them.
We need not move. We move, not need, all
that could be more, into kitchens where all is
made and served to us—which need never be more—A representative to field every question
from the four corners of the world.
A universe
with a sugar-covered table around it,
the world
measured neatly by the palms of our
calloused hands;
William Blake is dead and defunct in
this history.

A machine, the conveyor belt of
Now—we
let it slip like adults can’t— they
will forget
what it was like before, without children,
and have
no life. Somewhere goes nowhere faster than
anyone with a life to live can say
Utopia.

by Melissa Patterson
savoir (or the fear thereof)

I wanted this your
Raspberry cobbler, to be
Better than the stars,

But oh how you've grown
Into a new and glorious
Morning like Provence

And the pitiful
Splattered dewdrops of the South:
Wakey wakey, l'heure

Arrive—but only
If you'll look at me: have I
Changed? If you know and I know

Que les sens, toujours
Ils mentent, but what we know
Is like an ostrich

Or a peach; striving,
My dear, to reach the end of
Futile metaphors,

And crude allusions
To plays and dreams we do not
Know but mention *de*

*Toute façon (c'est comme
Ça).* This my song continues
*Ad pa
dassum,* and

The masters of the
Seven liberal arts push their
Buttons into the fertile

Unground, waiting for
Springs to come but finding just
Unregenerate

*Sciences.*

by Sam Keyes
goodbye the catalogue

i loved you so long that
your name became an adjective for love.

there were whole days that
my body was overcome by the melodrama of you.

i said i needed you like love needs a melody
and why don't you wrap around me
the way scott weiland's voice spoons an interstate love song.

time was slow for a while,
the months all very mouthish,
wide open and gaping.
then, in a flash of gradualism,
only in those six slip-shod
minutes of the snooze button,
did my body remember your.

that day i became an archeologist
of bodies.
the odd arrangement of curves, line,
a body prone, a note scrawled,
the until then anticipation
of last toes in perpetual coil
cobra clenches.
my first and second fingers
in silent permanent slanting sway,
and those deep creases,
elephant skin, around the knuckles,
and the nearly imperceptible
sincerity of a scar
molten, shining amidst the cross hatchings.
i did not miss you.

and what was so very very about love and then not,
but just the scientific division of my hours,
and all my curves and straights,
the exact mirror of a hand held heart,
strung out in binary code.

by Carrie O'Brien
Last Line

The blind man opened his hands,
let his fingers do the talking.
Seizing the opportunity,
he reached out to me
like a lost soul searching for love.
But his smile,
yes, his smile,
it spoke to me,
saying:
"Believe, boy, believe!"
And he touched my face
ever so lovingly
like a nurturing mother
and he filled me with the strength of one thousand men
through his soft, gentle hands.
I opened my eyes
and gazed over a waterfall
into a new world,
as if I was healed by an evangelist.
I laughed aloud
with wonder, astonishment, and love.
His eyelids fluttered
and his smile grew wider.
"That," he sighed,
"Is a blind man's rainbow."

by Matthew Harrison
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“The Vocabulary of Love” by Mo Kiley

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Editor’s note

This year's incarnation of The Messenger continues the high standard of artistic achievement and vision set by the 2001 issue's inaugural endeavor at student-run magazine production.

The staff received approximately two hundred writing submissions, of almost every form imaginable. Though the selection process was at times difficult, we feel that the selected works represent the finest in creativity, intelligence and beauty.

The creative process, which this magazine describes with the motif of light, often yields “luminous” contents, and we hope that you find such illumination in this book.