

RAINY DAY



RAINY DAY

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Dear Reader:

Kate Pascucci
Editor-in-Chief

DROPPED SUMMER

Armine Pilikian

you, dear,
just might have a face of
a thousand summers.

scratches of sun
caked into flakey irises,
golden as filo
not as sweet though

merely
overheating

because you never
cannonballed, knees cupped
into a weightless pool
never let those
seamless, sweet legs
blossom
in pale chlorine

never ate fries oily and
heavenly
under the solid moon under
the muted sign

no you sat
caged in tupperware
like a dried up dumpling
life's oil
all sucked out

[WHEN YOU'RE YOUNG]

Joanna Chen

When you're young,
All that matters are the swaying flames,
The way you hold the air full in your cheeks,
Like a balloon ready to gutter out.

You lie under the sprawling maple tree for hours,
And if you squint the right way, you are Pocahontas
Before the Christian days, worth your weight in guns,
Your bone and brain malleable enough to leap the highest cliff.

You spend a lot of time with your fingers crammed in your ears
Burrowing into the rug under the dining room table,
Your fingers dug deep in plush yellow, even if the rest of you
Can only close your eyes.

You wonder what the neighbors think
Of your mother's lily perfume, your father's big glasses,
Their English fresh off the cutting board –
All the praying children your mother stowed in the irises.

You Maintain Eye Contact, the way Mrs. Fryling taught you,
And you hazard the children not to whisper to the neighbors.
You press your finger to their lips for emphasis.

Keeping secrets is important.
When they hit you, your parents avoid the public places:
Your face, your wrists, your thighs.
You compare the yellowing of your skin to the dining room rug.

They worry you with their stone stare
And worse, the chalk bruising their cheeks,
Their brows, their arms, their knees,
Didn't wash off in the rain like you thought it would.

So when your father's at work and your mother's out shopping,
You bring the children inside, one by one.

You stow them under the dining room table,
 You gag their stone mouths with yellow plush,
 Then you go lie under the maple tree until dinnertime.

CELEPHANT.

Melissa Hughes

our prosthetics

exited stage left

long before the fog

tongued the collarbones

of the lotus-eaters

swallowed by this room
before long our tarantula
eyes were speeching
shadowbox stars in semi-
collapse

sea sponge hands shuffle

what remains after ruin

into recyclable &

non

still that bedroom

is poured through keyholes

until it is any room

you have been everyone all rooms

you could be anyone all rooms

the patron saint of

my dream bank city is a

tapeworm swollen

with a dense & starless sea

it is the divine

right of parasites
to end up inside me

the envisable inormity blisters

into cellophantaisis &

discotheque nightlies the sequentia of

my mollusk heart

busy

making erasures of its chambers

to see how little

could remain & it would

still exist because

everything ends

up within
this suitcase
skin

the ruin somnambulance

phantoms for sameness

effervescence just an act

raining cellephantly to be scene

in the kraken display of atrophies
membranes globster the absolvant

sickle cells wander the perimeter of that bedroom
e x p a n d i n g

GOLDFISH FLU

Anne Jones

The fever took him by degrees. He could feel it slowly seeping into his consciousness, steadily winding its way through his maze of arteries and veins. It spread throughout his body with a force and a relentlessness which he'd never before experienced. His throat felt raw, and his stomach rolled. Somehow, he could feel that the sickness had an intent. It was something more than a cold, more than a virulent flu. It was something evil.

"First, you take a goldfish out of the water, and you put it on the floor. You have to watch it as it flops; watch its gills gasp for air. You have to watch it die."

"Why do you have to watch?" I asked, fascinated and repulsed at the same time. Miki gave me a hard stare.

"This is magic, Jackie. You can't just expect it to work for you. You have to make a sacrifice."

"Okay," I said, trying to sound serious. "What next?" Miki looked at me as if she were trying to transfer her intensity to me through her eyes. Her long black hair fell forward over her shoulders like a living thing, and I wondered if she really believed what she was telling me.

It had all started off as a joke. I was angry with one of my friends, Keith, because I'd talked to him about the fights my parents were having lately, and he'd told everyone about it. I was upset that our whole class knew, but I was madder at Keith. It wasn't really that he'd spilled a secret I'd asked him to keep, more that he didn't seem to feel sorry about it, much less to understand that he'd done something wrong.

"I wish I could make him see," I'd told Miki. "I want him to think about what he did and feel sorry." Miki had smiled, a smile that lit up her eyes with malicious pleasure.

"I can make that happen," she'd told me. And that's why I was standing here in the middle of the soccer field after dark, talking about killing goldfish.

"Next," Miki continued after a long pause, "you take a live cockroach, and you shove it into the mouth of the dead goldfish. Then you sew the goldfish's mouth closed." I swallowed. The situation was becoming creepier by the minute, and Miki's intensity was starting to unnerve me. I couldn't tell if she was pleased because she was scaring me, or at the thought of performing such a ritual. I shoved my hands into my pockets.

Miki was the scariest girl in our middle school. She was an eighth grader, a year older than me, and everyone was afraid of her. People said she knew how to

do magic, and if you got on her bad side she would put a curse on you. I knew better than to believe that, but I was one of the few people who'd actually spoken with Miki. We sat next to each other in choir, and she talked to me sometimes. She never said anything weird, but there was something about her that made me uneasy. When she'd told me to meet her tonight, I'd wanted to refuse, but you didn't say no to Miki.

"You sew the cockroach in while it's still alive?" I asked.

"Yes," Miki grinned. "And then you say the name of the person you want to curse three times." I wondered how you were supposed to get the cockroach to fit in the goldfish's mouth.

"What happens to them?" I asked instead.

"They get sick. It's like the flu, only it lasts longer."

"How long?" She tilted her head to the side, and her hair slithered forward.

"As long as it takes them to realize what they did that was wrong."

The second day he felt worse. His fever had risen, despite the number of aspirin he'd taken in an attempt to bring it down. Sweat trickled down his spine, and he alternated between chills and hot flashes. It hurt to open his eyes, but he couldn't sleep, so he lay on his back, thinking. Images flashed through his mind, people, conversations. He was remembering things that had happened a long time ago, things that he'd forgotten. The sense that there was something he was supposed to understand nagged at him. He let the memories race through his brain in a parade of color and sound. Finally, he slept.

I named the goldfish Goldie. It swam back and forth in the little bowl I'd bought it, and sometimes rested on the bottom, blowing bubbles that rose to the surface of the water and collected along the rim. I spent a week staring at it, wondering what it would be like to watch it die, before I talked to Miki again.

"Well?" she said. We were standing outside the cafeteria underneath a ramada which kept off the worst of the sun. It was still oppressively hot, and I wondered how you could curse anyone to get the flu in this weather.

"I don't know," I answered. "I bought a goldfish."

"How big?" I demonstrated with my fingers.

"Okay," Miki said. "I'll bring you the cockroach tomorrow." I swallowed. A small bead of sweat trickled down from the hollow of my throat. Just because I got the goldfish and the cockroach didn't mean I had to do anything, I reminded myself.

"And the only thing it'll do is make him sick until he realizes what he did?" Miki nodded.

"That's all." Her words weren't particularly malicious, but there was a malevolent undertone that made my stomach roll uneasily. I told myself to ignore it.

There was no such thing as magic anyway. Miki was just pushing me to see how far I'd go along. I wasn't going to let her scare me.

"Okay," I said. "Do I need to use special thread or anything?" One of her eyebrow's rose, almost imperceptibly.

"No." I nodded, awkwardly wondering how to end the conversation. The lunch bell was supposed to ring sometime soon.

"Do you have a needle?" Miki asked. I nodded. My mother liked to sew. I'd broken several of her needles over the years, and she had a package she kept put away that I wasn't allowed to touch. It wouldn't matter now though; she hadn't sewn anything since dad had told her it was a waste of time.

"My mom sews," I explained. "She's got some really small needles I can use."

"Good." Miki was smiling to herself, and I wondered if she thought I really believed in curses or if she knew I was just pretending. It was hard to tell.

The bell rang, and we both looked up.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, and I attempted a smile. I was just pretending, I told myself. Curses weren't real, so it couldn't hurt to play along. Besides, if anything did happen, Keith deserved it.

"Later." She was the first to turn and walk away, and I watched her disappear through the front door before heading across the field to my classroom.

His throat burned. He was lying on the couch in the living room, the noise of the TV a distant buzz in his ears. He felt as though his head was filled with wet cotton balls, their fuzz stuffed in his nose, ears, and throat. His body burned, but his mind felt curiously aware. Despite the hazy dreamland something was ticking away inside his brain, stirring him to consciousness. He was thinking of all the things he'd done in his life that he regretted, the moments he was most ashamed of. No matter how he tried to distract himself, he couldn't stop the constant barrage of memories. He whimpered.

I'd never felt anything like the smooth slime of scales before. The sensation was vaguely gross, but a cool sort of grossness. I stared down at the fish in my palm, weighing my decision. Miki's smile rose in my consciousness, and with a sudden, quick motion I tossed Goldie onto the floor. The fish floundered and flopped, and I knew that I should feel pity, horror, something, but I was filled with nothing but a strange detachment. It was like I was watching myself, like you do sometimes in a dream, observing but not committing my actions.

It surprised me how long it took for the fish to die. Miki hadn't said anything about the time, only that I had to watch. Every time I thought it was dead a fin

would twitch, or a gill would gape, and I'd keep staring at it, hoping it wouldn't move again. A sense of morbid power filled me, and I wanted it to be over but at the same time I didn't, so that when Goldie finally stopped moving I was filled with a mingled sense of regret and relief.

I picked the fish up and set it on the table. The cockroach Miki had given me was struggling inside its plastic container, and I stared at it for a long time before I opened the lid. A voice in the back of my head told me to stop, but my body moved as if someone else was at the controls. Lying on the table was a needle, already threaded. I took a deep breath and blew it out, ignoring the sick feeling in my stomach. Then, using a pair of tweezers, I tilted the container toward me and grabbed the cockroach.

Moving quickly, I picked the goldfish up off the table and thrust the cockroach at its mouth. Its lips remained sealed for a painstaking second, and then the skin pulled apart with a wet sucking sound and the squirming insect slid inside. My stomach heaved. The part of me that wanted revenge pushed forward. I held the fish's mouth closed with my other hand as I pulled out the tweezers, and then picked up the needle.

The cockroach squirmed as I made jerky, uneven stitches. I could feel it moving against my hand, pushing against the sides of its fleshy prison, and my throat clenched. I gagged as I finished the last stitch and made a hasty knot, dropping the fish onto the table as soon as I was done. The force of the cockroach's struggle pushed it unevenly across the table, and I watched in disgusted fascination as the fish's body moved, as if possessed by an inner demon, while I cut the thread.

For a moment, I was overcome by the wrongness of what I was doing. I had killed something, and watched it die, and I was going to kill the cockroach too. A heavy sense of shame filled me, and I thought of the way Miki would smile, how her eyes would mock me. I reached out toward the fish, and then I remembered why I'd talked to Miki in the first place. What was done was already done; there was no sense in stopping now. So I picked up the goldfish, cradled it in my palm so I could feel the struggling from inside of it, and whispered a name three times.

"Keith. Keith. Keith."

Pain wracked his body. It was a struggle to breathe now, each gasp to fill his lungs harder than the last. The sun was blinding through the windshield of the car, and his mother's hand held his in a tight, cool grip. He coughed, and could feel the fluid rising. He wished he could sleep, but he was afraid if he tried his lungs would stop fighting and he'd die. Fear filled him, and as the rumble of the asphalt under the wheels marked the passing time, he prayed that the doctors would be able to fix him.

Keith didn't come to school the next day. I looked for him in homeroom, but he wasn't there. It was a fluke, I told myself, but fear rose in my throat. The rest of my classes passed in a haze. I watched for him each morning that week, and each day his seat was empty. On Friday the whispers started.

"Did you hear? Keith's in the hospital!"

"Oh my God! That's terrible! What happened?"

"He's really sick."

"Yeah. I heard the doctor's can't figure out what to do."

I tried to ignore the voices and listen to Mrs. Donaldson, but I couldn't focus on what she was saying. Had I really cursed him? My stomach rolled. Don't be ridiculous, I told myself, struggling to get my breathing back under control. It was all just a coincidence. But something inside of me believed differently.

At lunch, Miki came over to me. I was sitting at a table outside of the ramada, letting the sun blaze down on my back and head. My body was overheating, giving me that half-nauseous, half-stupefied sensation. The inability to think felt good.

"You did it," Miki said. I nodded slowly, keeping my eyes on the ground. I didn't want to look at her, because I knew what I would see.

"You're scared," she observed. I shifted uncomfortably. I could feel her eyes on me, the smile on her face. Suddenly I wanted her to leave.

"No, I'm not scared," I lied. "I just don't want to joke around with you anymore. It's not like magic really exists anyway." My words were purposely spiteful. I meant them to hurt her. Instead, Miki laughed.

"You're a bad liar Jackie," she said. "You wouldn't have done it if you didn't think it was real."

"Shut up," I snapped. The fear inside of me was rising. I wanted to deny it, but Miki was right. The urge to stand up and hit her filled me, to wipe the smile off her stupidly smug face, but I reigned in the feeling. Somehow, I knew that was what she wanted.

"You're trying to blame me for what you did," Miki said. "It won't work. You're always going to blame yourself."

"I haven't done anything!" My words rang out across the surrounding tables, and people turned around to stare. Miki smiled at my outburst, and my hands clenched into fists. The violence inside of me churned, and the worst part was that I knew she was right. Whatever happened to Keith would be my fault. I was the one who had cursed him.

Miki touched my arm. Her fingers were frigid against my sun-warmed skin. "It's up to him now," she said softly. I turned my head away. When I looked back, she was gone.

The hospital room was cold. He shivered under his blankets as the steady drip of the IV lulled his senses. He could feel himself slipping in and out of consciousness, and dimly he was aware that it was a bad thing. His eyelids flickered, and then closed. Something inside of him gave up with a sigh. Distantly, he could hear an urgent beeping sound, the commotion of people around him. The noise was getting softer as he moved away. Then, finally, everything was quiet.

UNTITLED

Rosy Hao

I like the way words
fall from her lips

“C’est tout?”
she asks

“Non plus”
she begs

I grin, a sneer
and twist the knob further

PORTAL

Bob Hackett

deep inside the
 outskirts
 of some inner city
 a laundromat hums
 busily
 on a sunday morning

at the portal of one
 frontloader
 is a laundress
 drizzling
 the last bit of her detergent
 on the last load
 of her soiled clothes
 and sheets

she drips
 a
 little
 of
 it
 on herself
 and on
 what she is
 wearing
 but no one
 seems to notice

so she strips
 down
 to her
 downy integument
 and stands
 on full display
 to the others
 inside

who still do not
seem to notice

her pliant
plying
flesh

she adds this too
to her final load
after
brusquely decorticating

she stands now
to the others inside
fully flayed
while they
busy
satisfy themselves
with their own
soiled thoughts
and sheets
of various newspapers
fingers blotted
humming
fully clothed
to themselves

her machine hums also
sending
its tremulous
cyclations up her
stark-naked femininity

until
at last she
throws herself
in
head back
exasperated
lacerated
soiling herself
ecstatically

I SENT FORTH A RAVEN

Scott Reu

The rain came
in those slight hours
as we all slept.

Last night it stopped for seconds, yet
the dripping of the gutters crept
and schlipt and clept
on the thick, tortured mud outside.

Perhaps I only dreamed surcease.
Fourteen days and raining yet.

Water erodes,
slinks southerly
down declining streets.

There is a weird sickness in our hearts this season.

The strangeness of familiar blocks
in early light, at five o'clock;
this bitter season's afternoons
sought and distilled
and sipped, and spilled,
in frank, infrequent coffee spoons.

The old men place bets on the torrent
and collect rainwater in bronze cans.
Dented and deformed,
they ring like stale bells
on the splintered railing
of the bar's wooden porch.
With every impact, the world gets a little heavier
and the air rings thick with their atonal symphony.

What can we do?

There is a communal look of abject horror,
betrayed for a fleeting instant on calm faces,
each one petrified in turn.

What can we do?
and
what can we do?
Assault the sky?

The machinery we were given never worked that way.

All of the women wear long black dresses.
Nothing works,
or, if it does,
it works with sadness,
cold to the touch.

A terrier sighs plaintively.
The forecast doesn't tell us much.

TO SLEEP

Ian Walker-Sperber

Miss not the moment devoid of expression, meaningless codical. Inarticulate will.

Colorless. The Unwedded error of vision, or parables lost in mortality's endless recreation.

In the unwinding heat of human despair I sit, eternally.

What was lost, then and now, drifts. Incense crawls out of ash, act of some small god sputtering at the end of a stick.

Bells ring relentless for the lost and the forgotten.

See behind the mountains. Even morning, that naked thief hidden under a diadem of running gold, cannot escape. He hides but birds flit and twitter around his great heaving shoulders. He inches an eye above those razor peaks.

What birdsong bleeding. Uninterrupted jest of a swan's sweet call.

O the evening cricket. An Autumn night, when the wind blesses memory and grass stirs, a cool air is struck and sense is excited from a hanging bough. Listen to the evening trumpet.

In the shadows of a sleeping head pressed against the clovers meaning must unfold, as do tulips from the earth in early spring.

Our eyes cringe into the mellifluous folds of the moon.

Evanescent spectator, impartial being breasts the pallor of his dead morning. Hear the Cherubim.

Beneath an awning. In the space between us stillness swells a moment into an impassioned silence that with the rain's persistent patter speaks more than well wishing fancy could ever know, even now as motion slows along its cam and the last jets of luminescence leave our stare. The arrival, long expected, of sleep.

Hushed night. The dim intimacy of a filament. Our bare flesh.

I dream of a shadow upon the moon's bright star.

In the midnight hour the sound of all unending, again as it had once before, struck relentless into the heart of sense. The stirring of an arm, the limbs of time lolled across dread deserts stitched in blood and bone roiling beneath the sun, drab markers of an unknown beast who cruelly nursed its destiny at its breast only to let it rot in the scattered ruins of history, where breath is lost in the monotonous whisper of the red sand's moaning, stinking and signifying nothing, and loss itself is buried beneath the dunes of the desert in the undying catacombs of death.

Images I saw at waking, seen like wrack upon a dry red shore.

HABIBI

Melissa Young

Lemon tree grove left patient in Ramla
 I circle Arabic words I can sound
 and grasp on the flight to our haflah:
 fleeing, for my beloved I am bound.
 To hear his people's musical prayer call
 in a Palestine grove with lemon peel,
 Love not contained by the armistice wall
 a golden headscarf no longer a seal.
 Nature painted a green boundary line
 splitting the olive fields and black soil
 Concealed with me a citrus branch so fine
 to nurture a new life and be loyal.
 to breath your fragrance and love for me
 the beauty of our child in thee

يبيبي ح

THE SNOT-ROCKET

Trevor Fuller

There are three essential components to a snot-rocket: 1) Plug or (preferably) depress unlogged nostril; 2) Adjust angle of head accounting for snot-confec-tion's projected levels of velocity, density, and fallout; 3) Expel a blast of CO₂ out the undepressed or unplugged nostril and repeat if said snot-projectile fails to rocket.

On May 14, 2011, at 10:14 a.m. or 1014h, one Nithkels Allen, age 13, blonde, anhedonic, rosacea-faced, malnourished to the point of disorder, nicknamed "Nickels", self-ordained superfan of WE tv's critically reviled reality tv show Bridezillas, right eye darkly haloed with ecchymosis (source of contusion unknown; bully's "Obese" Heath and "Karate" Jimjin suspected), while thinking about Bridezillas episode 5.2 (Season 5, episode 2), the one where Shawn's mother selflessly attends her son's wedding despite the explosive tension between her and bride/bridezilla Jennifer, he snot-rocketed from his right nostril an amoeba-shaped bogey onto Draden Shale's brand new Converse All Star hightops. It's important to note that everyone at school thought Draden Shale's brand new Converse All Star hightops, which were charcoal-black and expensive, had an unadulterated air of badassery about them. Or used to.

The incident occurred in the Quad. The Quad is a giant cement rectangle at the center of the junior high school Nithkels and Draden attend, unroofed and spangled with other tinier cement squares that are all three feet tall and that the children like to sit on or huddle around while they chew on their craisins (cranberry raisins) or their potato chips. The Quad is separated into two sides, the 8th grade side and the Sevi (7th grade) side, by an expanse of featureless cement that frequently has sunshine on it and that the kids call The Great Desert. Nithkels likes to think of the tinier cement squares as watering holes that the kids migrate to according to degree of popularity/coolness and grade level; like, if you cross the Great Desert as a Sevi to any of the 8th grade watering holes, that means you're pretty damn cool, and but if you huddle around the northeasternmost watering hole on the Sevi-side of the Quad, like Nithkels generally does, that means you're pretty damn uncool and nerdy and probably bullied at a significantly greater rate than the rest of the Sevi-species and that there are probably malicious rumors metastasizing through the school that you are some kind of homosexual.

The incident occurred at Snacktime, with the sun still shrouded in metallic looking clouds and everything feeling unusually heavy. MidSnack, Draden migrated over to the northeasternmost watering hole to engage in some standard bullying e.g. grabbing craisins without asking, screaming "dweeb" or "faggot" at a rate of 2 times/min, knocking glasses from noses, etc., etc., nothing especially violent. Stan-

dard operating procedure for the northeasternmost watering hole gang during times like these was to bow their heads and stand there with the kind of instinctive and breathless stillness helpless prey resort to when threatened by particularly blood-thirsty predators. The incident occurred midway through this visit. Nithkels's nose started to smart and so, at great risk to his own well-being, he inhaled and executed a snot-rocket as discreetly as possible, which was not discreetly at all, cause snot-rock-er's are notoriously loud and disgusting and wet. The projectile exited his right nostril at an angle perpendicular to his body (sideways) and landed squarely on Draden's left foot. Nithkels sniffed and pretended to examine the heel of his shoe. His neck was painfully tense.

"What the fuck, Nitwit?" Draden said slapping Hank Teddilbins's bag of Doritos Cooler Ranch up into the air so that the chips came bursting out like tossed graduation caps. He overset Hank with an elbow and moved passed him towards Nithkels.

More on Nithkels: This is a boy who has spent the predominant part of his prepubescent life in the shadowy corners of classrooms, sitting at desks with little tide pools of bubblegum coagulating on the bottoms, unconsciously rubbing at his scrotum, buzzing to himself about reality tv and Kim Kardashian's hips, aloof from the daily swing of things and its usual swingers. When he sleeps, he snores, and his snores are of the serious adenoidal kind that sound like the angry snarls of an accelerating Harley Davidson. A distinct air of hittability hovers around Nithkels Allen; his features are perpetually hyphenated, as if he sees the potential for being hit by a hostile fist everywhere he looks. It is not unusual to encounter Nithkels with multiple limbs plaster-casted and in repair. On January 26, 2009, he famously arrived at school by Mom-pushed wheelchair mummified in plaster from head to toe, with every nonfatal bone fractured in his body. His best friend is one Grimble James, a huge Deadhead and with the Rapunzelish hippy hair to prove it. Grimble James fancies himself a scientist and a damn good one, but also a philosopher, and according to Grimble, one along the lines of the great Nederman Britziv, a Ukrainian man you or I or anyone else will never have heard of but who occupies a singular spot in Grimble's personal history as the man who taught him at the age of ten how to play the ukulele and make love to "ze beautiful women of ze world".

"Do you wanna fight, Nitwit?" Draden asked, now in Nithkels's personal space, huffing on the back of Nithkels's folded head, Nithkels's hair flattening wherever Draden's morning breath hit it.

"Yes," Nithkels replied without hesitation.

"You wanna fight?" Draden's voice had devolved into something low and sinister and conspiratorial. "Okay. The park below our street. Four o'clock. We fight."

Draden migrated back to his watering hole in the southwest corner of the Sevi-side. Nithkels sniffed and returned to eating his craisins.

Eginhard Klineman was 13 years old when he beat up Bobby Dates on November 4, 2003, or, more accurately, when Bobby Dates beat up himself while trying to beat up Eginhard Klineman. Eginhard Klineman was 5'2" and bespectacled and had a star-shaped mole in his left armpit. His nose, which protruded from his face at a perfect 45 degree angle, was bent abnormally towards his left ear and looked like a collapsed dorsal fin. This collapsed dorsal fin of a nose had made Eginhard Klineman the victim of violent bullying and many homosexual-rumors since the first grade. Eginhard Klineman loved Roger Zelazny's *The Great Book of Amber* and carried it on his person wherever he went, specifically, in the crook of his left armpit, on top of his star-shaped mole. Eginhard first read Roger Zelazny's *The Great Book of Amber* in kindergarten; it took him six months of uninterrupted perusal. Eginhard remembered spending all of his post-school afternoons during that time in the middle of his marshmallow-white room, legs intersected Indian style, with *The Great Book of Amber* unfurled in his lap like it wanted a big reassuring hug; and he remembered that at 2:00 p.m. or 1400hrs, a diamond of sunlight from the window would always wander onto the page and highlight all the words. When the 2nd grade rolled around, Eginhard didn't need to open the book any longer: He could splay himself on his bed, shut his eyes, and recite the entire novel to himself unaided; and by the 5th grade, he could recite the entire book from memory while also simultaneously commenting on how you looked that day or whatever. By the age of 10, he had what could legitimately be called superhumanly hypertrophied concentration muscles. When Eginhard Klineman was in the midst of some heavy duty concentration, his face assumed the spacey, slack-featured, drooling look of someone unambiguously bored out of their mind. Eginhard Klineman didn't have many interests outside of *The Great Book of Amber* and was kind of stutteringly useless in a non-*The Great Book of Amber* conversation.

Bobby Dates challenged him to a fight at Lunch over a chair. They both wanted the same chair in the back of Mrs. Tuel's Pre-Algebra class. At Lunch, Eginhard hung (out) alone on the football field's bleachers and recited *The Great Book of Amber* to himself in the glassy afternoon heat. His standard lunch consisted of a PB & J "switchwhich" (his word for sandwich), an overripe-green banana, and a Fruit Punch Capri-Sun that never quite quenched his thirst. Bobby came for him midlunch, his posse of uber-cool, baggily clothed friends revolving around him like planets, hissing to each other, pointing and staring and giggling at Eginhard on the bleachers by himself, slack-featured and drooling-faced. Bobby Dates was 5'1" and his nickname around school was "The Adult" and the way he spiked his hair made his head look like a pint-sized tumbleweed. He was AIDS-skinny and his lips were cartoonish and bright red and looked like the lips from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. He and his posse paused at the base of the football bleachers and told Eginhard to get his ass down from there or else. Bobby was distractingly Adams-applied and rumor had it that he was seriously considering chondrolaryngoplastic surgery,

at the age of 13. His voice sounded broken and rodential, like he had just inhaled a balloon of helium. Eginhard remained inert at the top of the football bleachers, currently in the midst of reciting Chapter Eight from *Sign of the Unicorn* (Book Three of *The Great Book of Amber*), the chapter where Corwin wakes up in his old house after being attacked and stabbed in Chapter Seven. Bobby's footsteps sounded like cymbals crashing as he bounded up the bleachers and shoved Eginhard towards the ground. Eginhard spun and bounced, fracturing his nose with a burlesque crunch! on the second-to-last bench before landing with a thud on the hot, autumnal yellow grass of the football field. Bobby's posse backpedaled from Eginhard. In Chapter Nine, the next Chapter in *Sign of the Unicorn*, Corwin returns to Amber after learning about the car accident he was in during his escape from the mental asylum. Bobby hopped down the benches like a Satanic little tumbleweed-headed leprechaun, screaming, "You're such a fuckin faggot, Klineman!" at the top of his rodential lungs. Two years later, Bobby Dates will be diagnosed as clinically sadistic, meaning some psychologist out there (Bobby Dates's psychologist, to be specific, who he will stop seeing cause the woman will diagnose him as a sadist) will be using an outdated version of the APA's (American Psychiatric Association's) DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; don't ask me why Mental Disorders is not acronymed), which, in its future edition, will exclude Sadistic personality disorder as a legitimate personality disorder diagnosis for various scientific and political reasons that would be superfluous to go into here, right now, in the midst of recounting the attempted beating of Eginhard Klineman by Bobby Dates. Bobby strutted up to Eginhard and slugged him cleanly across the left buccinator, right smack dab on the left buccal nerve. In his life, Bobby Dates has disabled two children: He took a bat to his sister's parietal bones and mentally retarded her; he also took a bat to his next door neighbor Dennis's pelvis and now Dennis is paraplegic; somehow, these two incidents were never traced back to Bobby and he got off scot-free. Eginhard was surprisingly sturdy and remained erect even after multiple left buccinator-hits. He was now in the middle of Chapter Nine. On Bobby's twentieth attack, he connected with Eginhard's philtrum and managed to loosen one of Eginhard's permanent maxillary central incisors – the right one – though he failed to dislodge it. The lunch bell trilled three times: Everyone had five minutes to travel to their 5th period classes. Bobby's friends were standing in a Big Dipper-ish formation off to the side, though the boy posing as *Eta Ursae Majoris* was slightly north of his correct position. Bobby Dates was starting to grow visibly exhausted and infirm: He was leaning on Eginhard for support while simultaneously trying to club him in the diaphragm. Eginhard had moved on to Chapter 10 in his head. School had ended two hours ago and the sky was starting to turn dim and shadowed. The school's football field had no lights. The boy posing as *Eta Ursae Majoris* had inched further north, warping the Big Dipper's handle uncharacteristically. Bobby Dates was on his knees now, weakly batting at Eginhard's gastrocnemius.

Bobby Dates collapsed against Eginhard Klineman's foot from myasthenia (muscle weakness or physical fatigue) at 7:23 p.m. or 1923h. After he collapsed, his posse of grumbling and embarrassed uber-cool friends dragged him from the football field to his one-story home a mile away where his pasty-skinned, cadaverous mother turned frothily violent at the sight of Bobby's myasthenic body and immediately phoned and complained to Bobby's principal, a globular man named Chaldry Buss who had two pink minor veins for lips and who Bobby's mother was having an affair with. The next day, Eginhard was suspended from school for harming a fellow student; Eginhard sat in the chair opposite Chaldry and absorbed the news with all three Le Fort fractures of the skull, both of his eyes deeply, violetly contused and resembling plums, one rib fracture, a fractured nose, and many minor bruises along his torso that seriously impaired his upper body movement.

EXCERPTS FROM PERSONAL JOURNAL OF NANCY JECKLIN, AGE 19,
ASSISTANT/INTERN TO DR. BETSY VET, LEAD PHYSICIAN ON THE
EGINHARD KLINEMAN STUDY AT STFEIFEL LABAROTORIES, INC.,
NOVEMBER 12, 2007 – APRIL 6, 2008

11/12/07 – Ascertained subject today; subject's mother was oddly passive and unemotional at subject's removal. Subject already demonstrating renowned abnormal behavior: He's unresponsive to physical stimuli and he's salivating excessively and his eyes are dilated and distant and his EEG recordings are off the charts, so to speak. His brain's concentration muscles are clearly functioning at a superhuman level. I find the subject's brain activity and his appearance powerfully attractive. I placed myself extremely close to the subject this afternoon and leaned in as if to kiss him, but there was no kind of unusual spike in the EEG recordings, so I must assume that he either didn't notice or finds me unattractive. I will repeat this same experiment tomorrow, though without my glasses and after I've once again attempted to eliminate the blackhead currently marring my left cheek. My roommate Jessica read my journal again yesterday and said she found my journal-writing-style "like super weird and robotic" and called me a freak but then said she still loved me. I do not love Jessica. I do not like Jessica. I hope she reads this.

11/15/07 – I kissed the subject today; again, no spike in the EEG recordings. I was unable to eliminate the blackhead from my map, though I did apply some concealer over it. The subject spoke to me yesterday. He asked me where he was. I didn't tell him. I asked him what he thinks about when he's unresponsive. He told me Amber, who I assume is a girl he loves. I'm strangely attracted to the subject and find myself thinking about him when I'm not working, which means I'm thinking about him all the time. Dr. Nancy stabbed the subject in the abdomen today during one of his

unresponsive phases. There was no response, meaning no spike in the EEG recordings, though the subject did go into hypovolemic shock from the bleeding. I do not fully understand what we're doing here or how the subject is able to accomplish what he's accomplishing and Dr. Nancy refuses to explain it to me. I regret applying for this internship.

01/25/08 – We amputated the subject's left foot today while he was awake and unresponsive. I think what we're doing is illegal. There was a mandatory lab-wide meeting yesterday where we were all sworn to secrecy. I don't think writing about it in my journal is a breach of my vow, though, is it? I cried when they amputated the subject's leg. He didn't seem to notice, though he went into hypovolemic shock again. I dreamt of rescuing the subject last night and fleeing with him to a Shaolin monastery somewhere in China where we made love like animals and raised a family of five together. Our children were all Asian for some reason, though both the subject and I are clearly Caucasian. I've had several conversations with the subject while he was lucid and responsive and it turns out Amber is a book and not a girl. I think I'm in love with the subject. I kissed him again today (while he was unresponsive).

3/04/08 – We are now shooting the subject in semi-vital areas where ballistic trauma could possibly result in death if he isn't carefully monitored and attended to. The subject's body looks like it's in a permanent state of hypovolemic shock. The subject's skin is wane and desaturated and moist and heartbreaking to look at. People are calling him The Zombie around the lab and I'm starting to lash out whenever I hear them do so. I need to control myself. I think the subject is starting to reciprocate my feelings. He told me his mother calls him Egg which, I assume, is short for Eginhard. I think this (him telling me what his mother calls him) was an invitation for me to do the same (to call him Egg). I hugged him while he was lucid today.

4/05/08 – Somehow our experiment has been discovered. It's all over the news and we're all apparently going to be tried and sentenced to life in prison. Or worse.

4/06/08 – Dr. Nancy performed one last experiment on Egg today by shooting him in the head. The EEG recordings didn't spike unusually, but after five seconds, they flatlined and Egg was dead. My internship ended today. I feel empty and wasted and indifferent. I'm pretty sure I'm headed to prison.

Draden could dunk on a regulation 10ft NBA basketball hoop with a regulation 22oz NBA basketball. Everyone saw him do it three weeks ago at lunch; Nithkels remembered that his (Draden's) friends charged everyone a bag of Doritos just to watch and when Hank Teddilbins materialized at the event empty-handed

cause Draden had growlingly seized his bag of Doritos at Snack earlier that morning, Draden's friends slapped Hank's face and spat on his hair until he retreated to the fringes of campus near the parking lot and the front office, a place where no one hung out cause the Principal ate lunch over there, and if you were over there, he would always try to engage you in awkward conversation and ask you about your classes and how your day was going, which meant, if you didn't want to be obnoxious and rude, that you had to stand there and try to think up monosyllabic replies to his stupid questions, and avoid fidgeting or massaging the back of your head so that you didn't give away that you were totally and unbearably uncomfortable. Anyway, the point being (about the whole Draden-could-dunk-a-basketball-thing) that Draden was tall and formidable and not to be messed with if you knew what was good for you.

The sun was in the midst of retiring and its light was beaming through the trees at a truly severe angle, distending all the trees' shadows so that everything below them looked starkly striped and imprisoned. Nithkels and Draden stood in one of these distended shadows facing each other. A small group of onlookers encircled them: Friends of Draden's mostly, though Grimble stood there in silent, frightened support of Nithkels as well. They were in the park below Nithkels's house; if Nithkels looked hard enough, he could see the window to his room looming over them on top of the hill behind Draden. Some leaves came diving and somersaulting into the circle, in between Draden and Nithkels. The wind sounded aggrieved and funereal. If Nithkels could describe how his chest felt at that moment, he would say anxiously electric. He was anxious because this whole thing was an experiment. He had been training himself for three years now, ever since he had heard this report on TV about a boy who was able to tolerate lethal amounts of pain from stuff like stabbings and ballistic trauma and limb amputations; Nithkels remembered that the blonde-haired female anchor with the abnormally pronounced Cupid's bow onscreen had said that the boy's concentration muscles were unnaturally strong and hypertrophied and that when he concentrated on something specific, he was completely ignorant of pain and touch and pretty much anything external. Nithkels disliked getting pummeled, but more importantly, he disliked the pain involved in getting pummeled; he disliked the sensation of having all of his peripheral nerves feel like they were screaming or on fire or being electrocuted. When nervous, Draden Shale sometimes pinches his facial features together, like he has just inhaled something rancid and gross. They were like that right now, his facial features. As of that moment, Nithkels could recite the entire periodic table from memory while FIFA regulation sized soccer balls collided with his head. Again, he had been training himself for three years. There are three exercises you can perform if you wish to develop concentration muscles like Nithkels's. First exercise: Memorize and sing Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's "Helpless" while at the same time listening to Hanson's aggravatingly catchy "MMMBop". According to a recent study in Rolling Stone Magazine, "MMMBop"

ranks as the single most annoying song of the past two decades, with Eiffel 65's "Blue (Da Ba Dee)" a distant second. This exercise took Nithkels four months to master and Nithkels could tell you from personal experience that "MMMBop"'s distracting power is truly formidable. If you listen to "MMMBop" exactly 3,222 times, the lyrics will actually begin to make sense, which, if you know anything about the lyrics of Hanson's "MMMBop", you know is a bad thing, mental-acuity-wise; and if you ask Nithkels what he thinks of CSNY's "Helpless" now, he will tell you he thinks it sounds an awful lot like Hanson's "MMMBop". Second exercise: Memorize the periodic table in stages beginning with the alkali metals and then the alkaline earth metals and then the transition metals and so on and so forth, working your way right across the table to Group 18 and the noble gases. Add soccer balls after this is accomplished. Grumble threw them for Nithkels, the soccer balls. Grumble had two pieces of heavy artillery for arms and could hurl soccer balls at speeds of 45-50 mph. Third exercise: Deliberately goad bullies into thrashing you, for periodic-table-concentration-practice. Nithkels was currently four months into completing this exercise. He still struggled with the lanthanides and the actinides. His worst thrashing thus far had come at the hands of Benny Mishtal, a skeletal, fish-eyed little boy, about 4'5" (the average height at Nithkels's school being 5'3"), who liked to cackle during class and throw paper airplanes at the teacher and render himself the center of attention pretty much at all times. Nithkels realized early on that most bullies weren't tall and pudgy and gluttonous like in all the Hollywood coming-of-age films, but were generally small and muscleless and the product of poor or broken households rife with domestic abuse. He realized that they were to be pitied, that is when they weren't out taking advantage of or demapping the weaker-willed.

Exactly behind Draden, in a pair of maroon slip-ons and a neon swing dress and with her red hair all ponytailed and pendulate while she bounced up and down on her toes and her arms intertwined tightly over her chest against the cold, stood Sheena Lawd. Sheena Lawd sat two desks ahead of Nithkels in History and was the girl who Nithkels had a hopeless schoolboy crush on replete with lunatic fantasies of Sheena-wooing, -marriage, and -coitus. Consequently, Nithkels was achieving an almost impossible F-grade in Mr. Ellis's ridiculously easy History class, which even Calloway Neds, the dumbest boy in school (reported IQ of 35, but for mysterious bureaucratic reasons not considered mentally handicapped), was somehow passing (probably because he was cheating off of Murph Greeds, the second dumbest boy in school, who always sat to Calloway's immediate right in class and hung his test-Scantron off the left edge of his desk so Calloway could sneak little furtive glances at Murph's mostly wrong answers). Unlike most girls, Sheena never wore makeup; and like most girls, Sheena prided herself on being unlike most girls. Nithkels and Sheena had been neighbors since the first grade and had worked on many school projects together, including a finger-painting project back in the second grade where they had been asked to draw something the two of them had

in common, and in which they had drawn their houses right next to each other and themselves both standing in their front yards stick-figured and smiley-faced and their hands practically touching, with like three millimeters of white paper in between them, their little stick-figure hands, and looking like a sweet, happy, romantic couple in the picture, or so Nithkels thought; and, anyway, the point being that at that moment, while Nithkels was standing in the park below his house facing Draden, who had started taunting him and calling him a pussy, this picture was hanging over his bed, a triangle of sunlight from his window sliding across it. Nithkels wouldn't say he loved Sheena Lawd, but he would say he possessed the potential to love her, if that makes any kind of sense whatsoever.

Dirt makes a static-y sound when you walk on it. Draden was approaching Nithkels, his nose pinched and compressed and scrunchy-like. The wind had devolved into a rustle. Fistfights are rare, and it is possible to live your entire life without participating in one, even if you're like Nithkels Allen and possess an abnormally hittable face. From the outside looking in, Draden appeared hesitant to harm Nithkels, who was in the midst of reciting the alkali metals, his eyes distant and spacey, and his arms down, unthreateningly parallel with his body. Draden slugged Nithkels across the mandible, causing Nithkels to pause before moving onto the noble gases. There's this dream Nithkels has sometimes where he keeps using the word "erstwhile" wrong because he has no idea what the word means, in the dream or in real life, and, at the end of the dream, this old woman in a blue bonnet and with a gnarled nose resembling a misshapen walnut finally explains the word's meaning and usage to him. The whole thing's hair-wringingly paradoxical: How can a person in his dream explain the meaning and usage of a word he has no idea how to use in real life? Her explanation must either be wrong or Nithkels must know how to use the word correctly, at some subconscious level. But really, she goes into this bloated and pedantic explanation of the word's etymology (erstwhile (adverb): erst, from Middle English's *erest*, meaning "soonest, earliest," which itself is from Old English's *ærest*, a superlative of *ær*, + while, from Old English's *hwile*, an accusative of *hwil*, meaning "a space of time," which is from the Proto-Germanic *kwhilo* ... etc. etc., you get the picture; basically, an etymology of "erstwhile" and then subetymologies of the words from which it sprang, plus digressive explanations of somewhat esoteric words like "superlative" and "accusative") and when it first appeared in the English language (Edmund Spenser's translation of Jan van der Noodt's *A Theatre of Worlclings* in 1569), the tedium of which could kill a man. He frequently woke from this dream glazed in sweat, like from a nightmare. None of this has anything to do with the fight, by the way. Nithkels had stopped reciting the periodic table and begun singing – like out loud, for everyone to hear – CSNY's "Helpless". Here's how he remembered the lyrics:

There is a town in north Ontario
 With dream comfort memory to spare
 And in my mind, I still need a place to go
 All my changes were there
 Can you tell me who will still care?

Yellow moon on the rise
 Okay, yeah, mmm-bop,
 Dah-bah doo-wop,
 Dooey-dah-bah doo-wop,
 Dah-ban-doo

Throwing shadows on our eyes
 Yeah-ee-yeah, say, oh yeah, enay doo-bop de-gone,
 Enay doo-bop de-now I'm there
 Enay doo-bop de-gone,
 Enay doo-bop de-now I'm there eh-air
 And they say you lose your hair
 Oo-oo-ooh, yeah, but you don't care

Okay, yeah, mmm-bop
 Dah-bah doo-wop,
 Dooey-dah-bah doo-wop,
 Dah-ban-doo

Yeah-ee-yeah, mmm-bop
 Dah-bah doo-wop,
 Dooey-dah-bah doo-wop,
 Dah-ban-doo

Can you tell me?
 No you can't cause you don't know
 Can you tell me?
 You say you can but you don't know. No-o.

After the punch to the mandible, Draden concentrated all of his attacks on Nithkels's supraorbital ridge. According to many anthropologists, mongoloids lack supraorbital ridges. Just FYI. Without realizing it, Nithkels had abandoned his confused version of "Helpless" and begun singing the Andrew Sisters' "Lollipop", which his mother, when he was five, used to blare across the house for entire weeks and sing along to while she cleaned or cooked or did whatever stay-at-home moms

do when they aren't out in the street congregating with other stay-at-home moms. Little rivulets of blood were yawing down Nithkels's face and some were threatening his eyes. When intense enough, you can actually hear pain: It sounds like a million crickets stridulating or maybe like a pneumatic siren. Thoughts slur and coalesce and become abstract. Nithkels felt unbalanced and steadied himself. This slight movement allowed him a better view of Sheena, who was still standing behind Draden, hugging herself. Sheena had held Nithkels's hand once, back in the second grade, beneath the jungle gym and all their fellow second graders weeing and laughing at the top of the slide, with little threads of sunlight dangling around them (Sheena and Nithkels), there, under the jungle gym, and with Sheena's head romantically backlit. They had been playing House. Draden hit Nithkels again and Nithkels could see himself capsizing, like he was watching a film of himself. All the trees did a cartwheel. The ground punched him and Nithkels tasted little bits of blood in the dirt in his mouth. He saw Grimble staring at him from between two of Draden's friends. You'll remember that Grimble claims to be a philosopher. He claims that all women need to be held like 2 times/week. Really, he says that. Nithkels doesn't know what women need. He knows his mom doesn't like people touching her hair and that she has tiny little epileptic fits when any one of the bathroom mirrors in her house is water-spotted, or worse, pimple-juice-spotted. Nithkels's mom likes Sheena Lawd; she says she's cute. That's got to be some kind of sign, right? How many girls will your mom actually approve of? Fate must be blatantly hinting at something. Nithkels doesn't remember why he began this experiment. He really doesn't like violence or hurting people or being hurt and he doesn't hate Draden for picking on him or Benny Mishtal or any of the countless bullies before them. It's not their fault, really. Nithkels firmly believes that, like all the way down in his asshole, meaning like that he's so saturated with this belief that he can physically feel it on the edges of his anus, if that makes sense. He also thinks that this belief makes him weak and that it probably contributes to the abnormal rate per year at which he's thrashed. It hasn't occurred to Nithkels yet that he has lost the fight.

DUSK ON THE THAMES

Rebecca Litman

And, so into the water she walked
stones in her pockets
Petechniae (puh-TEE-key-eye) was the last of her worries.

18 DECEMBER 2009

Rebecca Litman

I pray:

Every 30 seconds a plane takes off from DTW international airport (aluminum cylinders, squat bellies buoyed into the air, groaning engines propelling gross tonnage through the sky).

My knees are buried in dirt as I prostrate myself to pray, yes pray, for safe passage next Friday.

CHINATOWN FROM THE MOVIES

Dorothy Chan

- I. This isn't Chinatown from the movies,
or that place where Jack and Faye rendezvous
on a neo-noir night—no soothing
glint of an eye, not even a sweet coo
from the starlet herself, trapped in that green
smoke of Jack's—she's got that nonchalant look
as if she doesn't care who kills the next
guy. But her eyes—those cat-like eyes lit by...
surprise—surprise, that she's not a sleazy
widow-fatale clutching her bijoux and
Shih Tzus. The bartender makes rum and Coke,
his gun ready to choke dangerous men
in boss suits—pin-stripe and slacks. The hostess
drops the fortune cookies as the gun cracks.
- II. The cookies smash, boss men attack, gunning
this heartbreakingly erotic mess. Pound,
pound, pound it until The End, gloss, call it
cinema. There's an end? No, it's The End
that rids the happy ending, making kids
Mew out. Let them watch that Pokémon film
circa ninety eight, outdate outdate—paint
rips off the kiddy billboard by the ma
& pa cake shop. No more drips, rips, ripping,
begging to be ripped off, so it can lose
its virginity and become big boy
cinema. A creep outside wants to sell
his sad sheep of a couch—white fluff stuffed out,
scares the lioness away. Baaaaa. Baaaaaaa.
- III. Ahhhhhhh scream the sheepish cakes who don't outweigh
the puffy ones, powder puffing the fluff—
an Asian delight, airy and light, do
re, mi...strawberry hearts and cantaloupe
balls with fresh honeydew slewed together
in some fruity fantasy elopement.

Minimal sprinkles—no cheap tricks, just bows
of sugar atop vanilla cream—salt-
like moist taste, subtle—this coy wet feeling—
the coyness of a milk black boba tea’s
anatomy, unzipping, revealing
black pearls of pretty, dancing up my straw
like sequins of a belly dancer’s skirt.
Brown suitcase man ogles, sipping coffee.

IV. Coffee brown bags suck duck fat the way girls
at clubs chug drinks, romping in suede rompers
and gold flats—hair tied in curls, violet lips
sipping hip drips of vodka and pear. Stare.
Ogle. Drips down their tops—cheap fabric tears
like brown bags in their ducky ecstasy.
Fatty and roasted are those duck wings and
ducky livers in this fest of layered
fat. Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Those ducky livers stomp
in their raw-tasting, hardened flesh. Chomping
through territories of Grade A goo, my
mouth feels the crisp of shiny skin peeling
like a dress ripped apart by that fat flesh,
not sleazy enough to ignore. Eat up.

V. Big scary sleaze fish head wants to eat my
head up so much he purses his lips and
gives me red eye glare. Oh, that bloody pink
stare makes the eels outdare each other to
touch the Hunchback of the grocery store fish.
Squirming in his greed, head the size of six
burger patties greased together and squished,
sloppily cut dark seafood nightmare fuel,
thinking it’s King of the Dead Fish. “Dish
the dirt on him,” gossip the leggy frogs.
Lip-sync, quick wink to the wealthy clams and
catfish earl, thinking he’s part of that world—
in truth a loner head on an island—
no Blue Hawaii, just ice on the rocks.

VI. Hawaii trips and Harry Winston rocks,
leather purses and sheer black socks. She dreams

of these while looking at knockoffs—"Mickey Rat" and that old beanie cap. Bantering in Cantonese with the other housewives—the best way to spend their lives. "My daughter reads at an eighth grade level, though she's in fifth grade." She can't let her son fade. "Well, my Timmy takes advanced algebra and just won a piano contest." The need to redeem comes—the others bite their gums, except for one—a beauty of silence, kind and demure, secretly smirking. She sees no allure since her son's a genius.

- VII. Cantonese squabbling—the genius language of spies. Sifting through the screams and cries. Ah, the wonders of being an Asian spy. The talking fast, bartering, inside jokes, and laughter. The walking past duck stores, red dragons, and egg tarts sought-after. Kids meet in Japanese-themed stores. Dogs can't stand on all fours, leaning it to get that fried pork. Teens gather at pretty glass bakery tables, with turtles housed in them like odd cages, a bizarrchitecture design for the refined. Rich gilded gold glammers all over the dragon-phoenix couple. This isn't Chinatown from the movies.

UNTITLED

Amrita Mishsa

you gave me silk because of how
I was created: fleshmeat stuffed with
wormwhisperings, limbs ladled in date

syrup, cheeks breathing like the morning
injera. you gave me clay because of what
I would miss: rivers in my veins coppertinted

ultramarine, a squelch flooded in
azangreen, his microphone heaved by sand,
loudening the smile in your voice.

your kufi you gave me once, a dollop
of raitha in a neon pumpkin biryani
of millions brimming faceless, a pillow

for your faith to curl up on: a tease
of cloud on skies for us only, a white
only so white in morning dew, before

the bees swarm the honeybush, before
they watch me returning the earth's kiss,
before they drape the breeze on me,

my burqa, hiding you with a universe folded within, these bees
my little gods.

PURGE

Kristen Angierski

The splash of vomit.
A frothy
Rush
of furious color. Meat-red
chunks

Of God-knows-what
Sneer.
Accusing me—
And what do you call this?
Feminist consciousness?

Looks to me, my dear,
like your head's in shit.
What's this?
Kneeling and praying to some goddess
Bitch

Who gets off on emptiness and rotting teeth.
Hollow. Relieved. The ecstatic aftermath, the
Manic
Warmth of a purge
Well-done.

It's almost—
Sexual.

Phallic fingers
Stab
The raw
Genitalia of tonsils and
The liquid

Release,
The wild
Discharge

Of the tension, the tension, the tension.
You must be joking,

Mocks the purge.
Feminist, you say?
Hypocrite
In plaid, that's all you are.
Don't lecture me.

Consumed
By calorie mathematics
And your pathetic treadmill, your shin splints,
Merciless
Chiseling of bone. A blonde

Sisyphus
Getting nowhere
But sicker, sicker, sicker.
Patriarchy's puppet
Wasting

Yourself and wasting
So much time.
Get up,
Off the floor
And look.

Look, wipe the vomit from your mouth. Don't
Cry. Now now, there there. See. The bloated
Face. The angry red dots, broken blood
Vessels that scream
Bulimic!

Denial.
The handfuls
Of treasonous hair, the disappearance
Of warmth. The dead skin tinged
Blue—

What more will it take, hm? Blood
In the throwup? Eruption

Of the esophagus, a
Rupture
Spilling wretched brown bile

Into the lungs?
Vomit for oxygen?
Well, yes. I suppose then
You'll be positively
Breathtaking.

Mission
Accomplished.

SAFE RIDES

Miklos Zoltan

Sour mash whisky tonight. Ten dollar bottle I split with Ronnie and I don't know what else—some pills he had. Midnight I'm out his door stumbling looking for a bus to catch back to campus. Leave Ronnie on the floor.

In the dark cold I don't walk. Wearing sandals. Short bus at the stop, looks like a holy ghost all white, but the engine an angry dog growling. Air wet like it's going to rain and like I said, I just don't walk so I go to the bus. Closed glass door, girl behind it though—arms up to the top of the door frame. Armpits clean and smooth, arms slender.

Can I ride, I ask through the door.

Girl looks back at the guy sitting behind her in the driver's seat. Says something to him. Turns, says something through the glass to me but I can't hear it. I stay standing till the door unfolds.

Where you going, she asks.

Denis Hall, I say.

Yeah, we can do that, she says. Turns to the driver. Billy, we can do that, right.

Billy nods.

Bus is warm, makes my foot blood flow. I sit in the back.

Girl and the driver are talking about something. Kind of angry.

Kid called me twenty minutes ago, girl says.

If he doesn't show up or call in two minutes we're out of here, Billy says. His voice like spaghetti being made.

Didn't ask her to, but girl turns to me and says that she wasn't supposed to let me on but I was on the way anyway. We're called Safe Rides, we pick up kids who call us, who need rides, she says.

Drunk kids, I say.

That's the idea, she says, then tells Billy still no call.

Billy says we're on our way. Billy says, let's go.

Rain pressing on the window now. No rhythm to it—streaks down the glass with gusts of wind or Billy's foot pressing either pedal. Rain and engine sounds, that's it. Girl's shut up. Don't know if I like her or not. She seems to enjoy this whole thing, to want to tell stories about it, not that motivation matters.

Drive right past Denis Hall—I think they forgot about me. By the time the next guy gets on the bus—a big guy, dark skinned—she notices me.

Sorry, we forgot about you, she says.

It's ok. Nice ride, I say.

New passenger sits in the back too. Across the aisle.

Big Jamaal, I say. My man.

Who the fuck are you, he says. My name isn't fucking Jamaal.

What is it, then, I ask.

Andre, motherfucker, he says.

Big Andre, I say.

Big Andre's face is like one side of a chipped bowling ball. All smooth except for problem areas—scars, disease. Smooth parts tell the ugly parts what they could have been. When he opens his mouth to curse at me again it's like the hole that thousands of people stick their thumbs into. Just like that, spent mouth. And the eyes for the two middle fingers, all angry at being used. Damaged. Two ineffective barriers. A guy I wouldn't want pissed off and on top of me. But I'm not scared.

The girl says from the front, would you mind if we don't take you home right away. We just got another call five minutes away.

Who are you talking to, I say.

I don't know, I guess both of you, she says.

We don't mind, I say.

Big Andre's mad. Who the fuck are you, he says. Speakin' for me. I don't even know you, and you're speakin' for me, he says. Being real quiet about it though. Doesn't want to cause any commotion for the girl up in the front.

That'll be fine, I don't mind waiting around, he tells her.

So you're not a mean guy, I say.

Shut the fuck up, he says.

The hum of the bus is sandpaper on my brain. Big Andre's growing teeth and my fingers in between them like mortar. My body an outdated vacuum cleaner. Andre's looking at me like what the hell am I doing looking around like a madman. I feel like a madman. If this bus was to stop and I was to get off I would drown in the wet night outside from the inside out. Suck all the rain into my body and explode.

Match the drone of the bus with my voice. Jumps with every bump in the road. Andre's eyes want to eat my skull.

Would you shut up, man, he says.

I close my mouth and nod and face forward holding my head very still.

Tough to do, I say.

What, Big Andre says.

Nothing, I say. I thought it was in my head, I say.

You got a lot in your head. You a weird motherfucker, Big Andre says.

I nod and face forward and close my mouth and try not to say anything in my head out loud ever again.

The bus filled to our shoulders with confectioner's sugar. Me sweating. Candy body.

I shake my head and try to clear my mind. I want to be in bed now, I want

a pillow that I know is mine, I want cool night air from a window and my warm body under a blanket. Simple things. Things I could maybe tell Andre and he wouldn't curse.

Now the girl looks back every other second at me but not making eye contact, like she's ashamed of me and worried about me all at the same time. I wave to her next time she sees where and what I am and she turns away and mutters something to Billy the driver. The bus slows down. She stands up and I know something's going to happen to me.

Nothing though. We just wait. Days and I can feel the sun setting and rising somewhere, the moon too. She looks back a few more times.

What did you say your name was, she asks after a while.

I tell her my name.

Well would you mind doing us a favor?

Course not, I say.

Well there's this girl who called us, but she's Japanese, girl tells me, like from Japan, and I don't know if she knows what she's supposed to do. You know, come outside and get on the bus. Would you go get her?

I say yes and stand up and forget about myself as an exploding rain vacuum.

Don't know how the girl knows our next rider's Japanese but don't ask. Her name, though. Need to know her name.

Grace, girl says.

I thought you said she's from Japan, I say.

She is, girl says. Barely speaks English.

Her name's English, I say.

That's just her American name, girl says.

So I'm supposed to find a Japanese girl who barely speaks English with nothing but her American name, I ask.

Girl nods. She guesses so.

Come into the party all wet. Japanese everywhere so I guess it's a Japanese party. I wonder about sake. I walk around hoping to find a girl with a HELLO my name is GRACE sticker on her chest. No luck. No Japanese corporate convention. I see a few other white kids and I don't feel any Japanese hate but more like quizzicality is on my skin. From their eyes, their mouths. Haven't spoken to anyone. Find a white kid.

Hello, my name is Ivan, he says.

Swedish.

Have you seen Grace, I ask.

I know no one, he says. Except for Jerry Ho, he says.

Who's Jerry Ho, I ask.

Just met, he says.

Point him out, I say.

Ivan turns around and shrugs his shoulders. I walk away.

Beginning to wonder about the bus. If they're swearing about me like the other kid. If I'm a failure in their eyes. If Big Andre with the heart of changing hardness is worried about me.

Need to be faster.

I grab a piece of paper and look for some tape. Bad luck. Scotch tape's no good, need duct or mailing at the very least. Electrical would work. Wade through plastic cups attached to hands and more and more vodka and soda on my shirt but my idea doesn't drown. Forgotten table with pools of wet sugar. Glue on my mouth and over my eyes. On my nipples in cute little X's but being ripped off. Again and again. My few chest hairs get sucked to the sticky side. Blind stumbling smelling adhesive but not Grace. Ceiling turns flat to concave and back again. Grace must glow, I realize. I look around for a glowing girl. Nothing. Light from behind a door with no one around it. Looks holy like the bus did.

Open it, basement steps with empty concrete below. Light still on.

Steps creak haunted, like kids go down here for more than a keg. Like I'll find something here.

On the basement floor I expect Jesus, but just find a disappointing pair of young Japanese drunk lovers on a couch, hands up skirts and down jeans and around sideways straps. Another door though with light behind it, maybe duct tape there, so I pass the two and head through the doorway. Grace still in the back of my mind.

First thing I see is duct tape on a shelf. Second is a bed with a lamp and carpet all around it over the floor, a bedroom, with a desk and a dresser and a TV and some clothes on the floor and other things that help me know that someone lives here. I grab the duct tape quick and run over to the desk for a marker with my piece of paper. Make my sign:

LOOKING FOR GRACE or Jerry Ho

Stick it to my chest. That should do it.

Door opens behind me, with questions to come. It's the man whose bedroom I'm in, I know before I turn around and answer him.

I'm Henry, he says with a smile.

I just needed a marker, I say. And some tape. Actually, it was more the tape first. I needed the tape more.

That's fine with me, Henry says. I'm the landlord. It's nice to meet you.

Sorry to trespass, I say.

No, not at all, Henry says. He offers me a drink and tells me to have a seat if I'm so inclined.

Henry thinks life's tough. He thinks that it's more important to be a nice person than to be a rich person or a successful person. I find out he's a Church man, a real genuine Christian, with better whisky than Ronnie or me ever buy. I ask him about why it's all Japanese all around, and he says that Japanese clean up and don't get too crazy. He asks me how I got here, and I tell him about the bus and my search for Grace and Big Andre. Henry likes me and my story, my night. A warm-souled intrepid, he calls me, a vagabond savant of the human race.

Henry's nice, with a talent for compliments—I like him. Him and his soft face, his genuine red shine, his chipped tooth. His thinning blond-orange hair. Makes me feel like one person, not hard when you've just swam a sea of Japanese, but sometimes hard at a college. And the feeling sticks around even when not among the masses. But meeting Henry's like meeting God who remembers creating you.

He's making lines on the table now. Don't remember saying yes, but I might have. Feeling drowsy anyway.

Just before we put our noses down he leaves for a second back through his door. Turns the bath on.

Flame's in my nose, in my blood in moments. I can charge through walls. Through boulders, through moving vehicles.

Henry asks who Grace is anyway.

A girl, I say. My mission.

He nods. Knows.

Henry's been all around the world, to the Sahara and beyond. He loves people. Meditates. Never been to Japan, though. Says he has it in his house. He asks me if I'm a betting man.

I'll go anywhere with you, I say.

Leads me to the bathroom. Gerbils can't swim, he says.

But he's got six of them in a bucket. Numbers one through six on their bodies. Bathtub's filled.

Fifty dollars and a little coke on number three, he says. He looks the strongest.

Freezing up. Drowning. Hands would kill a gerbil if they touched one. Looking around, want a place to sit so I sit on the toilet.

Relax, Henry says. They're just like mice. And mousetraps are legal.

His bare chest is hairless. Shirt's on the ground. Don't know when this happened.

I say number four, my lucky number.

Dumps the bucket in and I need to kick him in the head. Need to save them. Pick up the bucket and it's in his face with blood three four five times. He's slumped and swearing so it's more and more and I look back and the gerbils are still living. Henry grabbing at my ankle like a two year old. One wet gerbil, two—palm up so I don't squeeze. I drop number four but he tries to scurry away so I know he's

alive and I catch him and get him in the bucket. Five's having a tough time with the rest of his life. They're all in the bucket, all in order, Henry's stumbling around on the floor so I kick him again and run away with six gerbils in the bucket and I still love Henry but hate him too.

Out the first door, past the less-clothed couple and up the stairs to the party but I know the gerbils are scared. Grace is gone from my mind, I need the outside night or a closet.

Quiet bedroom will do. Just one rolling around slow on the floor. I take off my shirt and wrap it around the gerbils, and then a blanket from the bed but not too tight. They need to breathe and be warm.

I'm Jerry Ho, the drunk kid says from the floor. Bucket, he asks.

Gerbils, I say. I rescued them.

That's messed up, he says. Why would anyone need to rescue gerbils.

They were drowning, I say.

Grace left, needed to catch a bus, he says. Faces the floor again.

Through the outside door and through the night past some outside revelers to the bus. Girl says, took you long enough. Grace has been here forever. We were going to leave you in a minute. And you need to put a shirt on.

I nod and stride past with the bucket.

Grace is in my seat.

Me, Grace, she asks, pointing to my chest.

Yes, I say. I found you.

Yo man, what the fuck is in the bucket, says Big Andre.

I turn to him and say, you can't say shit these would die if it wasn't for me.

Let me see, he says. He quiets down.

Grace is a beautiful woman, damp from the rain. Belongs in arms and on trains, sober and going places. Stands out from the bus wall. Hair's above her shoulders, real straight and black and she's got a big smiling face and eyes to bathe in. Wish I was six inches tall so I could climb up and down her body like a perfect cliff face. Wish I was a giant so she could ride on my forehead and make me better.

She reaches for my chest and moves her hand along my little bit of hair. Soft, she says with a little lilt of sound.

I love her different than Henry, different because she can't betray me. Because I could only lose her.

Lurch, tumble, spin, crack. The gerbils are safe, says Big Andre. But Grace is not safe.

We hit a deer, Billy says. Grace is unconscious, I say so that Billy can hear. Grace is out. I run up to the front and say Grace is out, Grace is out, get an ambulance.

I did, I did, Billy says.

I had barely known we were moving.

Should I carry her outside, I ask.

No, no, no, don't touch her, Billy says. Her neck could be broken.

I say no and I'm in pain and do you mind if I go outside?

Rain's stopped but with cold wet air. SAFE RIDES on the side of the bus, blue letters lit up from yellow behind.

The deer. Underneath the back wheel, neck thrashing against death. Eyes if they had legs would run away, sprint up the road screaming. A sound like wind through an old metal door and I know it's the noise of the end of life tracking that deer's heart down and smothering it and not letting it have any light. And that deer knowing it. Must have been hit and gone under the front wheel but by the time Billy stopped it was under the back one with the tire always on it, always on it for the rest of its life. I reach forward to soothe it, to tell it about love for the last glimpse of anything it will ever have but it snaps and bears its teeth. Spits. Thinks I killed it. Makes sense—if I hadn't taken so long, bus wouldn't be here now.

Just a stupid deer. But a life ending.

Don't want to blame myself but I do.

Then big soft tears from behind me, and I know it's Big Andre and I look and say hi and I'm sorry and he says that's fucked up, man, that's fucked up. I go to hug him but he says, get the fuck off me.

I ask if he's mad at me.

No, just the fucking bus, he says, still weeping.

Still has the bucket. I offer to take it.

No, that's all right, he says. But he puts it on the ground and then himself with his head in his hands and the deer neck still whipping around. He checks through his fingers now and then and with a new curse puts his face back into his wet hands.

Nothing like death to slow my eyes down. The deer sucked the high from me, in all its frenzy setting me still. My arms useless, my legs petrified unbendable. Watching a movie, a film, not at all active. Coddled to sleep by the air, and the smell of the deer musk. Drunk with sadness. An observer. I bite my lip till blood. Can't shock my muscles to action.

The ambulance in the distance and I flex and look, the lights getting closer. Stiff walk to the bus door and through with more strength in every step.

Grace still motionless and I wonder how does that deer cause more pain to me than that girl. That girl who I love. Abrasion on her head, a little pinpoint of pain and damage but otherwise an angel face, still. I love her like I loved her when she was awake.

Get next to her and say, the ambulance is coming, you'll be all right. Her chest moves, so she's still alive but I knew already that she couldn't have died.

Don't touch her, says Billy from the front. Him and the girl together, kissing.

Want to stand and scream and shout HOW COULD YOU DO THIS and by THIS mean nothing. Want him to be weeping at Grace's side, not kissing ten feet away. But what could they do really. Crying won't wake her up and I'm not even crying.

When the ambulance arrives I move two seats away as they put her in a stretcher and real efficiently check her for life. I hear, neck's not broken. In and out in minutes, only the policemen linger around asking Billy and the girl questions.

Andre's lying on the deer's motionless neck, hiccupping. Body curled around the bucket.

Are those gerbils gonna be ok, I ask.

He nods and says he'll be going home in a minute.

Do you want me to wait around, I say. So we can walk together.

Fuck no, he says. I turn and head down the road walking fast. Solid air hanging off my hands.

THE GIRL AT THE 2ND STREET DINER

Amy Neish

She was the girl
Men dreamed about;
She served hot buttered buns
With mounds of sweet, sticky jelly.

Nagging wives be damned,
Like acid from a greasy meal.
A whiff of her molasses thighs
Neutralized the pain.

One too-slick side of bacon
And her curves poured
Like warm chocolate pudding,
Into their reveries,
As she leaned over the counter
To pick up the broken dish.

TELLER OF ALL TRUTHS

Alyse Chinnock

It was from the Lacewing
that the Neon was harvested; it is no element by theft.

I saw, ages ago
while resting on the black heat
of Tropicana. They came late,
with syringes,
and suck, suck
went the Neon from the little bug's bodies—
the procedure not deadly, but not unlike extinction,
after all, *who can find themselves*
in the dark?

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