

RAINY DAY

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VOLUME XLIV, No. 2 / FALL 2015

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Dear *Rainy Day* Reader,

Hey there! If you're looking for great stories and poems, you've stumbled into the right place. Maybe you've heard of us. Maybe you haven't. Maybe you've been anticipating this new issue for months and can't contain your excitement. Maybe you found this magazine lodged between the loaves of your PB&J.

In any case, what you are holding is not just a collection of poems and stories, but a collection of poems and stories from some of the best writers from across the country, and a product of several months of debate. This semester alone saw hundreds of submissions pouring in from writers hoping to put their work on stage and expose it all to the elements, to you, Dear Reader.

I have been with *Rainy Day* for years now, beginning with my first wide-eyed appearance at a staff meeting back in 2012. Now, as Editor-in-Chief, I had the privilege to work with *Rainy Day's* wonderful student staff through the careful process of discussing and selecting the pieces for the final publication. For much of the magazine's history, we've prided ourselves keeping the show running with some of the best student work out there.

Selecting what we, by staff consensus, feel are the best works is a difficult and humbling process, yet none of our efforts even come close to the talent and passion exhibited by the authors whose works you will find within. We at *Rainy Day* are merely the stagehands, the guys and ladies running the soundboard, playing little flutes in the pit orchestra, and throwing props around backstage.

The writers featured here are the ones in the limelight. Silence your devices, sit back in your chairs, and enjoy the show.

Yours,
Mark Kasvin

RAINY DAY

an independent student publication

Volume XLIV, Issue No. 2

Fall 2015

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FOUR PORTRAITS

Miriam Goldman

I

No one better knows
the shape of things than she – No.
Sapphires, emerald-cut.

She colours herself
as the dawn – russet. Purple.
A seafoam sunset.

To see her eyes, bright –
brightening – A privilege.
The soul learns stillness.

How cruel life can be!
Does she know? How it is. How
she disproves the pain.

II.

He dreams in calmness.
He must. He is thrown curveballs;
he's too strong to swing.

The softest are the
unexpected spots. Wrapped in
impatient and brief.

Under his brilliance,
his smug insecurity,
nestles a true warmth.

He couldn't play his
cards much closer to his chest.
No, nor to his heart.

III.

I hail from a place
flattened by unhappiness,
sour with loneliness.

I've met the cool breeze
that freezes and dries the sweat
beads from my forehead.

She is compassion
fashioned of flesh. Beauty dries
the blood from my arms.

She is truth serum
to an already honest
soul. And she will hear.

IV.

This boy is only –
This girl is only a girl –
A boy, girl, a child.

Gentle at his core,
no matter what the spectres
might see us to see.

From within his heart
he protests his guilt, only
no crime's committed.

How can he be so
caring, and yet hurt so much?
Kindred spirits, we.

CONSERVATION OF MATTER

Imogen Rosenbluth

i.

They say that we breathe
the same air that filled
the lungs of
Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ,
Mammoths and Mussolini;
that life fades, but particles,
they last.

There is power in particles;
life-giving
and
war-making
are not so dissimilar,
after all.

I wish to last.

ii.

I wish to fall apart,
to disintegrate into my
elemental parts and
scatter,
never to re-cohere.

The opposite of
reincarnation,
from phoenix
to ashes;
this is my nirvana.

Not death but disassembly.

iii.

When I die,
do not cremate me,
darling.
Separate my atoms
and start a
war.

FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST

Kai Parmenter

The two figures appear before him, coming together in a mass of arms and legs, grinding against one another in wild pulsations, grasping for leverage amidst bodies gleaming with sweat. The man lifts the woman off the ground entirely, grasping her behind as she wraps her short legs around his torso. Then he's pushing her down on her knees, thrusting into her from behind, head cocked back, mouth agape. She moans in perceived ecstasy, leaning forward on her elbows, hands clawing dramatically at the thick, off-white carpet underneath. They continue in this way for a minute, finding a sense of rhythm, a cadence of heavy breathing and guttural exclamations wafting through the computer's small speakers. The man grabs her hair, pretends to pull her violently towards him. She arches her back in response, eyes wide in feigned surprise, and then she glances towards the camera and smiles.

Raymond pauses the video and leans forward in his chair, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his stubby nose. The iridescent glow of the computer monitor shades the otherwise darkened room a ghostly aura of electric blue. He studies her face, searching for meaning in her half-open, heavy-lidded eyes, the parabolic arch of her spine beneath pale, translucent skin. This was always his favorite part, when the illusion was somehow broken, whether by a knowing glance or an awkward fumbling. Sometimes the guy would stop and turn away, calling for the camera to be switched off because he was ashamed of the suddenly, uselessly flaccid instrument before him. Most guys in the porn industry are gay anyway, Raymond thinks, having read as much somewhere on the Internet. He imagines someone snickering off-screen as the cameraman reframes the shot, while the director sighs, twists in his seat and yells for everyone to reset for the first scene.

"He shouldn't have done it," he says aloud, as if defending himself from the silence that envelops the room. He turns his head to the side, waiting for a response from the darkness. Nothing. He looks back towards the monitor in front of him, resumes the video. Once again he is drawn to the expression on the woman's face. She seems to hold his gaze for a moment, the corners of her mouth curving upward into a small, knowing smile. Like it's meant only for him. I understand, her eyes say. Once again Raymond glances behind him, half expecting that there is someone else in the room, hovering just over his shoulder. When he turns back to the screen the woman isn't looking at him anymore. She's on her back, gasping for breath as the man presses down on her from above as if impatient for it all to end. Her eyes are closed.

Of course Raymond knows it isn't real, in truth it's nothing more than some crude arrangement of tumbling bodies, grasping at fulfillment in the one place

that leaves them most empty. Yet he is drawn to it nonetheless, habitually returning to the websites out of some vicarious and entirely misplaced notion of empathy. He rewinds the video to the moment where she glances straight into the camera, pauses again. How can it be fake, he thinks. If the façade crumbles then surely what's left can only be the purest form of humanity. The idea makes him feel safe. Raymond shivers.

He looks back at the monitor again, where the man is now standing over the woman as if triumphant. Apparently finished, he waits there partially outside the frame as if unsure what to do now. The woman wipes at her face with a towel, sighs. People off-screen can be heard conversing. They ignore the man and woman in front of the camera, their bodies still glistening and radiant under the harsh lighting. Raymond watches all this with the utmost interest, transfixed. The woman's gaze wanders through the frame, comes to rest on the camera one final time. Once more she seems to appraise him through the screen, but it feels different than before. There is no longer any hint of understanding in her eyes, only fatigue, as if she were saying is this it? Raymond shivers again, realizes that what he's feeling is, oddly enough, guilt. His face flushes—he is ashamed for having so eagerly intruded upon such an allegedly personal act. That it was obviously devoid of passion somehow only makes it worse, and Raymond decides that he never wants to see her face again. Make it new, he thinks, as he reaches out to switch off the computer. The screen wavers for a moment, slowly fades to black. Raymond sits there, unmoving, breathing in the dark. Trying not to think.

The morning air was freezing, and Raymond, in his hurry to escape the apartment, had forgotten his gloves. He groaned under his breath, thrusting his hands into his pockets and stamping his feet. Little pools of icy water squished under the heels of his boot, flooding the cracks in the pavement. He leaned against the side of the bus stop, hiding from the incessant wind. An old black woman looked up at him from the bench, her face blank. Her lip twitched, then she looked back at the ground. Finally the bus arrived. Raymond couldn't be sure, but he felt she was watching him the whole way there. When they reached the hospital he hurried to disembark, and the doors whooshed shut behind him. The wind hadn't stopped.

Raymond walked around the outside of the hospital so he didn't have to see the fat nurse at the front desk. One time he'd ran to catch the door on one of the main elevators and she'd thought he was holding it for her. She'd smiled at him shyly, and he'd grimaced.

He reached the side entrance by the E.R. and slipped through, half-jogging down the long white hallway. Raymond slowed his pace and stared ahead whenever someone in a white coat or scrubs passed by, then hurried on. There was a door at the end of the hall, which he stopped at, fumbling around in his pocket. Clutching the laminate in his gelatinous fingers, he waved the badge over the magnetic reader

by the door. After a second it beeped, and a small LED over the reader flashed green. There was the sound of a lock clicking from within the door, then Raymond opened it and stepped into the morgue.

He'd wanted a Bachelor's in mortuary science, but the shoddy community college Raymond attended had only offered a single two-year program. After graduation, he'd been fortunate enough to land a job for the Burns Funeral Home, under the advisement of a former instructor. He'd briefly served as a transport technician, ferrying the deceased from their place of passing to the table of the embalmer, who then carefully filled the body with a solution of formaldehyde and methanol before applying a layer of moisturizer so it didn't dry out before the family had a chance to cry over it.

Raymond had aspired towards the position, however, his upward ascent was ended one day when he'd taken a corner too fast while driving the van, causing the body he was transporting to slam against the side of the interior. In a panic, Raymond had driven to a nearby mall, where he'd run into a cosmetics store and, doubled over, asked the middle-aged woman at the counter for something approximating a natural skin tone for a "pale" woman. Hurrying back to the van parked in a darkened corner of the Dillard's garage, he sat in the back opposite the deceased, rubbing furiously at the purple discoloration on her forehead. Yet no matter how many times he ran his little swab over the mark, it refused to disappear, until he'd used up most of the small tin and her forehead and left temple were several shades brighter than the rest of her face. His boss Michael called asking where the hell he was, and Raymond had said the van was stalling because of the cold, but he was on his way back now. Michael had sighed, told him to hurry his ass up before ending the call. Raymond had driven much more cautiously the rest of the way to the funeral home.

Raymond opens his eyes. He's slumped over in his chair in front of the computer, head listing to one side, a thin fiber of drool running from the corner of his mouth onto the floor. There's a shaft of sunlight coming through the small, high window behind him. The darkened monitor catches the light, reflects its glare in his face. He moans pitifully.

Absentmindedly he draws the back of his hand against his brow, comes away with a fine coating of sticky wet; he's perspiring all over. He looks at his quivering hand, now shining under the beam of light. His back aches, and he slouches down further in his chair, which creaks in response. It sounds like a question. Raymond stands and stretches, arms cutting slow circles through the motes of dust that languish in the oppressive air. He scratches himself where no one scratches, hand pausing over his unit. He looks down, considers masturbating. He gives it a few experimental strokes, decides that some breakfast would better suit his needs at present. Tiptoeing around the many piles of books on his floor—Joyce, Pound, Kafka—

he crosses over to the closet, pulls from one of the hangers an old and severely frayed plaid robe, enshrines himself within its musky embrace. He doubles back, reaches for the handle on his bedroom door and, nearly tripping over a balled-up pair of blue-green scrubs, exits.

Once in the narrow hall, he moves quickly for fear of disturbing his mother. He'd heard her come home early that morning, laughing and banging into things as she groped her way down the hallway. She was probably drunk again, maybe even off her meds. Raymond sneaks down the hall in what he presumes to be a highly furtive manner, careful not to drag his feet. In passing by the small apartment's only other bedroom, he increases his gait, favoring speed over stealth lest the door suddenly be thrown open to reveal before him one of the habitual lovers she so frequently brought home. Often the only evidence Raymond perceived as to his mother's foolish trysts was the recurrent dead jellyfish of a condom discovered floating in the toilet, lingering on after the anonymous male donor had long since departed. Fortunately no such incidents occur, and he reaches the opposing end of the hall, enters the kitchen.

They'd wanted to fire him, of course. Almost immediately after his arrival at the funeral home Mr. Burns had questioned him about his tardiness, and Raymond's handiwork was discovered. Michael had come to his defense, but Mr. Burns insisted the young technician be let go on account of his deception, to say nothing of his carelessness. A long debate played out in the director's office before a silent Raymond, after which Michael conceded, however when the irate Mr. Burns left Michael turned to Raymond and said he knew someone in the hospital morgue who needed a guy. Raymond was there within the week.

Stepping through the entryway of the morgue, Raymond set his bag down, took off his coat. He could hear the faint thumping of hip hop through the door leading to the main room. That meant Jorge was working. Raymond finished removing his outerwear, revealing a pair of teal scrubs underneath. Inhaling slowly, he retrieved his glasses from inside his coat pocket, then opened the door.

Upon entering the main room he was immediately hit by a wall of bass and a string of profanity-laced shouting from a portable stereo on one of the empty tables, the latter of which was echoed by a wiry little Hispanic as he bent over the corpse of an elderly man. Evidently suturing an incision on the stiff's upper abdomen, he leaned over further, so it appeared he was yelling about bitches and hoes right in the man's face. Raymond suppressed a chuckle, half-expecting the deceased to sit up and chastise him for a lack of culture or respect for his elders. Jorge finished, looked up and noticed Raymond staring at him across the room.

Jorge had only just arrived in country, or at least that's what he always told everybody, and as such had yet to develop notions of society beyond a fabled land of opportunity. He'd even changed the pronunciation of his name, continually insisting everyone call him "Georgie," a big gap-toothed grin on his face. Raymond liked Jorge.

The latter reached across the chest of the dead guy to turn down the stereo. He ran up to meet Raymond, wiping his shiny, gloved hand on his scrubs as he crossed the space.

“Raymond, my man, what’s happening?” said Jorge, clasping Raymond’s hand with his gloved one and shaking furiously. Ever since he’d known him, Jorge had gone out of his way to shake everyone’s hand each time he met them. Something about his having watched too much TV growing up. Raymond always tried not to imagine what it might be like to run into him in the employee bathroom.

“Hi,” said Raymond, looking over Jorge’s shoulder towards the guy on the slab.

“Oh, that guy?” said Jorge, turning halfway. “He came in early this morning, poor bastard. Lung cancer, stage four. Died with a cigarillo right in his mouth. His wife was sitting next to him, didn’t notice until the filter started burning. She finally stops talking, looks over and he’s just staring ahead with the ash hanging there off his lip. Then she screams and the ash falls, but he just keeps staring.” Jorge shook his head, taking a little orange pillbox from his pocket.

“Oh,” said Raymond, shifting his weight. “That’s too bad.”

“Yeah,” said Jorge, twisting the cap off the pillbox. Shaking it over his palm, he poured out a bunch of little multicolored tablets, arched his head back and slammed them into his open mouth. He was still wearing his gloves. He swallowed, looked back towards Raymond, shaking his head vigorously. “Hey man, forget that. Check this.” Jorge ran back to the guy on the table, muttering under his breath as he wheeled it off to the side of the room. He walked over to the fridge on the far wall, motioning Raymond with a big wave. “Come over here, man.”

Raymond hesitated, walked over next to Jorge, who opened one of the fridge doors and yanked on the board, which slid out in a hurry. Once fully extended, it slammed to a halt, jostling the body under the sheet. From its contours, Raymond could tell it was female.

“Look at these tetas!” said Jorge, pulling back the sheet with a flourish. Raymond’s mouth hung open slightly. She was definitely female.

“Beautiful, no?” said Jorge, leaning forward over her torso. “This one came in last night, right before I got in. Blunt force trauma to the back of the head. From this angle you can’t even tell.” He sighed appreciatively.

Raymond stared, glanced about the room, stared again. There was goose-flesh trailing up her abdomen towards her breasts, nipples erect from the cold.

“Well, go ahead,” said Jorge. A pause. He raised his hand, cupping her right breast as if in demonstration. Raymond continued to stare down at the woman, curiously drawn to her face. Jorge nudged him in the side, tilted his head. Raymond extended his arm, wavered, gently placed his hand on her other breast. He exhaled loud.

“Pretty great, no?” Jorge grinned. “What I wouldn’t give...”

Raymond nodded, not understanding, feeling only cool flesh under his

palm. A tightness rose up in his chest, like someone had tied a wire mesh around his ribs and was now yanking on the loose end.

Raymond coughed, stared at the floor. “So,” he said, frantically searching for the one thing that would allow him to escape this moment. “How’s your mom?” He cringed.

“You know,” said Jorge. “She’s good,” all casual-like, nothing out of the ordinary. His hand remained on the woman’s breast.

“Good,” said Raymond, shifting his gaze from his shoe to Jorge’s face, careful not to make eye contact with the woman, except her eyes were closed, and she was dead. “She’s still in Jalisco?”

“Yeah,” Jorge said this as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Raymond nodded. Overhead, the fluorescent lights buzzed hypnotically.

“Hey,” said Jorge, causing Raymond to jump. He looked over, noticed Jorge’s eyes. His pupils were huge black gateways leading to some foreign interior or nowhere at all.

Jorge glanced towards the door then back at Raymond, smiled. “I’ve got an idea.”

Crossing the small kitchen, Raymond sidesteps a rickety wooden table buried under stacks of paper, and proceeds to the refrigerator. The door whooshes softly as he opens it, stands there basking in the pale, predawn glow of its single, tired bulb. Leaning forward, he shuffles the condiments around the fridge’s interior. He sighs, finally settles upon two brown, fissured eggs hiding behind a Tupperware that sloshes with some viscous yellow substance as he pushes it aside.

Straightening up, he closes the door and scuffs over to the stove, frayed robe-ends trailing behind him. Setting the eggs on the countertop, he reaches up for one of the pans hanging above. There’s a sharp crack behind him, and he starts, turns to his side and promptly brushes the eggs off the counter, which crash down upon the cold linoleum with a decisively wet thud. He looks back, sees his mother standing in the kitchen entryway, expectant.

For a moment they look eyes, then Raymond looks down at the floor covered in yolk and broken eggshell.

His mother clears her throat. “Good morning, Raymond,” she says, sashaying across the cold tile on her bare feet, twirling the belt of her robe with a finger. She dances around the mess on the floor, her hair pointing all directions simultaneously. When she reaches Raymond she lifts her hands up, cups his cheeks between them, cooing softly.

“Mother,” says Raymond, “where is your lithium?”

“I don’t want the fucking pills,” she says, too loud. She pulls back, looks at him as though just now seeing him. Her eyes are wide, face taut. Then she relaxes, leans into his chest. “No more pills,” she says, beginning to rock back and forth

slightly.

Raymond sighs, puts an arm around her tentatively. There's another crashing sound, and they both turn to see a man partially clothed, stumbling towards the living room. He pauses in the act of hoisting his pants, stares at them. His hands move up to his shirt automatically, trying to close it but he can't find the buttons, he realizes there are no buttons.

For a moment, they stare at each other in silence. The man clears his throat, says "hi." Raymond opens his mouth to respond, but the man is already moving towards the front door, holding his shirt closed with one hand and claspings the front of his pants with the other.

"Bye, Walter!" says Raymond's mother, waving emphatically as if he were much farther away. Now in the living room, he doesn't look back, but stares at the front door as if unsure how to operate it. After a beat he reaches out, tests all the locks, opens the door. Squinting, he shades his face against the light though the sun is still hidden behind the apartment building. He steps out, and the door slams behind him seemingly of its own accord.

Raymond abruptly realizes he and his mother are alone again, yet she's no longer standing next to him. He looks around the small kitchen, decides she must have returned to her room. Through his mother's door he can discern her soft, rhythmic sobbing, and he imagines her throwing herself around the room or curled up in bed. He knocks, but she doesn't answer. He opens the door slowly, pokes his head in.

She's sitting on the floor next to the closet, hugging her knees to her chest. She doesn't look up when he enters. With difficulty, he takes a knee beside her, places an arm on her shoulder. "Where's your lithium, mom?"

She curls inward, hiding her face. "Gave those pills to Walter. Pills to Walter. Walter." She draws the arm of her robe across her nose, making a big wet sucking sound. She looks up at him. "He likes them," she says, her eyes shrink-wrapped in tears. "He takes them."

"Okay, mom." Raymond pats her shoulder, keeps patting it as if this alone will solve the issue, given enough time. "Okay."

Raymond shoved his feet into his boots, nearly tripping in the process. "Shouldn't have done it," he muttered, kept saying it, like a mantra. He looked over the room, all harsh lighting and surgical edges. Everything felt so much smaller than it had that morning, a tiny room overfull of death. He looked towards the fridge, wondered why they didn't have locks on the doors. They should have locks. Raymond pulled on his coat, wrapping it about himself as tight as he could.

The door to the other room flew open, bounced off the ceramic wall with a sharp report. Raymond jumped. Out came Jorge, taking these long, slow strides. To Raymond it seemed the sun rose and set and still there was Jorge, striding across the room like a man with too much time and he knew it. Raymond stood motionless

wringing his hands, until finally Jorge reached him, stopped, them almost touching. Raymond started to shy away but Jorge grabbed him, pulled him forward while attempting to shake him menacingly.

"Listen here, you," said Jorge, pointing a finger in Raymond's face. "It's no my fault you were too chickenshit. You say anything and I'll have your fat ass. I'll make sure they fire you this time." Jorge stepped back, crossed his arms. Raymond stared, began nodding vigorously. Jorge grinned.

Raymond left the morgue, exiting the same side door he'd used earlier. Boots crunching in the snow, he hurried past the E.R. out towards the street and the bus stop. He didn't look back at the hospital. On the bus he sat perfectly still, staring blindly out the window, until the driver yelled for him to get off because hey, this was his stop.

Feeling for his keys, Raymond climbed the stairs up to the apartment, realized he'd gone up one too many floors. He went back down and, stepping into the apartment, quickly shut the door behind him. He rushed through the living area and down the little hallway, dropping his bag somewhere along the way. Once in his room he pulled off his scrubs, crushing them in his hands and throwing the little bundle against the wall, where they fell to the floor. Raymond stood there in the center of his room, breathing through his mouth. He felt too big for everything.

After a moment he sat at his computer, hit the power switch. The blue screen faded into existence, welcoming him. Opening his web cache, he leaned forward. Then he watched.

Bending over, Raymond scrubs away the broken egg with a towel, trailing little yellow smears on the cracked linoleum. Finally he wipes away the last bit. Straightening up, he eyes the towel, now wet, crosses the room and tosses it in the garbage. He sighs, moving down the little hallway. He doesn't hear anything behind his mother's door.

He steps into his room, stands with hands at his sides. The silence is still there, like the wind it seems to follow him. Home, work, home again. He sits, leans forward with elbows propped on the desk. The screen is dark. Raymond stares into it, waiting.

There's the sound of his door opening, and his mother glides into the room. He turns in his chair, notices she's still in her nightwear. Something on her chest reflects the light, and Raymond sees his work badge clipped to the lapel of her robe. She moves in and hugs him, jumps back, begins dancing in place. Her smile is larger than the room and everything in it.

Raymond stares, still in his chair. He watches her sad little dance, neither of them saying anything. She ducks and pirouettes, hands grasping at the air, feet rubbing against the worn carpet. Time passes, how much Raymond can't tell, and he opens his mouth to say something but there's a loud knock at the door. His mother stops

dancing, clasps her hands in excitement. “I’ll get it!” she says, dashing out of the room.

Raymond doesn’t move. He’s gazing at the empty space where his mother stood. The silence has become louder, and he cups his hands over his ears. He can still hear her laughter as she hurries through the apartment, in his mind’s eye sees her with arms outstretched and gaping smile. He hears the front door open, then indistinguishable voices. Raymond uncovers his ears, can hear the voices getting closer. He shuts his eyes, breathing in the stillness, wishing there was time for one more dance.

FONTS, A LOVE STORY

Emma Court

Arial

He loved, once, and some nights
 microwaving a single portion of limp noodles
 he fumbles for her name.

Beatrice?

She had long, delicate fingers.

Abadi MT Condensed Light

She swirls her lips red, leaving
 behind a trail of vivid smears.
 She may not be remembered but
 at least she'll leave a mark.

Big Caslon

It starts with the twitch
 of his lips and builds to a roaring
 crescendo
 by his eyes.

She loves his smile, so she
 forgives—
 they're just words.

Bookman Old Style

Victorian novels with a cup of tea
 at bedtime — cream, no sugar
 only then she permits her mind to wander.
 "I'm tired," she excuses herself.

Braggadocio

**He has a penchant for the theatrical
 and ends his sentences with sweeping hand movements.
 He only ever mingles with those of the theatre, but
 it never works.**

Chalkboard

His inbox is full of emails women from high school.
 He asks for their phone numbers,
 "I am done with the past, but it isn't done with me."

Didot
He buys a woman a drink,
Appletini, and then presses her
against the wall.
He always takes her number,
and
though he calls himself a gentleman,
he never calls.

Eurostile
His wife is Victoria, he calls her sometimes,
"Wictoria,"
his own failure ricocheting
down the steps.

Goudy Old Style
Halloween's crushed red velvet gown made a debut
at school one Tuesday.
She has never loved a man who could laugh at her.

Lucida Calligraphy
She purchases silky lingerie and returns to an
empty home.
Some nights she sits in black lace,
lit up by the audacious glow of the television,
wishing someone could see the pretty tableau.

Modern No. 20
Last Tuesday was her ninetieth.
She drinks a watered-down Scotch at lunch and
keeps his name on the answering machine,
helps her remember.

CORA

Suzanne Herman

Cora stood against the brick building, smoking, with her head tilted backwards and her eyes on the sky, like she was trying to remember something. She was trying to remember if, after leaving this brick building last night, she has turned left or right. Right was the direction of her home, where she had ended up, but the left-hand path held something familiar in its green and brown shades that she was inclined towards. Something about the way the bushes were aligned along the sidewalk, and the look of the gravel driveways stretching one behind the other into the distance, sparked a memory in her, buried deep within the many seconds of life that she had not fully attended to.

A girl in striped blue and white leggings with tall boots and an over-sized shirt approached Cora as she contemplatively smoked. The girl was a full three inches shorter than Cora and walked close, looking up when she addressed her:

“Do you have an extra cigarette?”

The girl didn’t look a minute over sixteen and Cora eyed her from above. She carefully placed her eyes on each article of the girl’s clothing, starting with the brown, fur-lined boots and travelling upwards to the gray cotton jersey of her top and then the straight, dark brown hair she wore cropped at her shoulders.

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“Why don’t you just go buy a pack?” Cora asked, pointing with her cigarette and the tip of her chin toward the familiar looking bodega on the corner to their left.

“No money,” the girl said, and she met Cora’s eyes.

When Cora was sixteen she’d done this. Everyday after school she’d volunteer to walk the household dog and then scan the neighborhood for loose cigarettes. She trained her eye to pick up on the small, delicate ribbons of smoke that floated from behind people’s backs as they walked in front of her, from their car windows stalled at traffic lights, from the remainders of half-smoked cigarettes left on the ground. Even now, years later, when she walked New York City she sometimes stopped suddenly in the street, jerked her neck like a dog pricking its ears, at the sight of a cigarette left whole or only partially ruined on a piece of dry ground. At sixteen she’d collected these lost, pilfered cigarettes and stored them carefully in a flat wooden box meant for jewelry. When the house was empty she’d bring the box and the lighter she’d stolen from her older sister and sit in the living room, window open to the winter air, and smoke them all one after the other, lighting the next with the end of the last. It had never occurred to Cora to try her luck buying cigarettes from the corner store. Neither had it occurred to her to join up with the shifty girls who stood in the corner

of the basketball court at lunch and afterschool. Smoking was a solitary, pensive activity done during stolen moments. No one knew about it and, except when she walked, searching, or when she sat in front of the window, Cora hardly thought about it herself.

Cora was just the mark she'd have picked out at sixteen if she were going to ask for a whole cigarette. You needed someone standing alone, already mid-smoke, with no place to be or in a very big rush. Anything else and they'd think too much. Someone young was preferable, or else someone so old as to not give a damn. Cora had asked a middle-aged man once, in a business suit, and halfway through the motion of removing a cigarette from his pack he had looked up, locked onto her eyes and told her to run home.

"Take the whole pack," Cora said now to the girl in the blue and white striped leggings. "I shouldn't be smoking anyways."

The girl's lips twitched, just for a second. She took the pack Cora offered and was gone without another word. Cora could hear her pace quicken after she rounded the corner. Another minute and Cora started off leisurely after her, towards the familiar left. Yes, she thought, this is definitely the way I started.

At the bodega Cora stopped for coffee. She had never been able to fully enjoy a clear, warm day on the border of spring, like this one, without something to indulge in as she walked. A cigarette, a cup of black coffee, a cold glass of beer – an almost-spring day went best with something slightly destructive, with a bitter after-taste.

"Good morning," said the man behind the counter as Cora pushed open the door. His simpering smile, this New York Mets baseball cap, and the rain-like sound of the bell above the door were all familiar to Cora, like *déjà vu*. "How did the rest of your night go?"

Cora could see a ghostly version of herself from the night before; in her loose purple warp dress and flat brown shoes, she'd scanned the aisles of this same store for a drink. She approached the counter now and played along with the memory.

"I came in here last night, right? I bought a soda and a pack of cigarettes?"

"Yes ma'am, pack of reds."

"Did I leave anything here, drop something maybe?"

"Not that I've seen, no. You don't remember me? We must have talked for twenty minutes last night. Talked about the Mets. You knew your stuff. Long night I take it?"

"Hazy night," Cora said and smiled. She placed her hands on the counter in a gesture of mock penance. "My father loved the Mets, he taught me everything I know."

"Ya told me," the man said, "You said he played in the minor leagues."

"That's not true," Cora laughed, "I'm not sure why I'd say that. He was a

professor.” She paused. “Do you happen to remember if I was wearing earrings when I came in here?” Offended and confused by her lie the bodega owner did not respond. He just shook his head, shrugged, and turned to arrange a rack of magazines next to the counter. Cora bought her coffee, thanked the man, and left.

Outside, Cora continued to follow the path that called to her. She kept her eyes fixed on the ground and let her feet guide her on automatic pilot. She made her way impossibly slowly in a zigzag pattern around the neighborhood – a place of small, irregular homes with miniature yards, brick porches, and collections of plants, children’s toys, and bicycles scattered outside. Her eyes moved across the sidewalk in a strict system: taking a few steps forward, she combed the right-hand edge, where the concrete met the grass, then she stopped and traced the left side backwards from where she stood to where she had started. Then she did it again. She took long draws of her coffee in between each minuscule advance. In this way she moved seemingly randomly for several blocks. Every once and awhile she bent sharply at the waist and inspected a patch of ground, brushing aside bits of leaves or grass that were obscuring the path.

The sun was at its hottest and the coffee was all consumed by the time Cora passed a house with four brick stairs out front. The black metal railings on each side of the stairs caught her attention and she stopped to look at the house, her hand making a visor. As her eyes adjusted she saw Matthew sitting on the topmost step, in the shade. His form developed like a strip of film the longer she looked. His back was against the railing and his feet were tucked in close to his body, like he was hiding from the light of the street.

“You said you’d be here at eleven,” Matt said, stretching out his legs and pulling himself up to a standing position, elongating and enlightening himself in two motions like a the unfurling of a colorful flag. His pants were a dirty purple corduroy and his shirt an equally dusted green.

“I don’t remember saying I’d come, much less what time,” Cora said. She was neither surprised nor unsurprised to discover she’d come by Matt’s last night. Part of the thrill of attending a party on Elm street – the street with the brick building – had been the knowledge of its proximity to Matt’s place: a cramped two-bedroom in which she’d once spent so much time, and then suddenly none at all. Now that she thought about it, Matt was probably the reason she’d put on the diamond earrings in the first place.

“I thought that might be it. You were in prime form last night.”

“I take no responsibility for anything I might have said or done. Or anything I might have not said, or not done.”

Matt laughed. “You didn’t embarrass yourself, I promise. I was walking the dog and then there you were. Party at Emily’s, right?”

“Right, I remember the dog. Glad I didn’t come inside. Yes, Emily’s. She finished her dissertation you know so she had a group of us over for drinks. Art history

professors-to-be are extremely dull, I found out last night.”

“You mentioned that. You kept saying that Emily must have majored in not having anything interesting to talk about.”

“That doesn’t really make any sense.”

“No it does not. But I found it funny.”

“Why was I supposed to meet you at eleven?”

At that Matt smiled only with his lips and sucked his teeth. He walked down the stairs into the sunlight and shaded his eyes like Cora had done. “We were going to get lunch.”

“And why would we do that?”

“To discuss something you said last night.”

“I thought you said I didn’t embarrass myself.”

“I wouldn’t call it embarrassing.”

“What did I say?”

“I’m not sure it matters, since you don’t remember.”

“That’s true. Do you happen to remember if I was wearing diamond earrings when I saw you last night?”

“That feels like a trap question.”

“How?”

“If I tell you I noticed then I was looking too closely. If I say I didn’t then I wasn’t looking closely enough.”

“Women don’t play all the games men think they do. And certainly not once they’ve stopped seeing the person.” They both did tip-lipped smiles.

“I do think I remember seeing something sparkly. If that helps.”

“It does. I borrowed Emily’s earrings last night, expensive diamond ones, and now I can’t find them. I was retracing my steps from the party.”

“She’ll understand if you lost them, you don’t have to drive yourself crazy over it.”

“Well, she didn’t actually say I could wear them.”

“Did she say you couldn’t wear them?”

“Yes, that’s what she said.”

What had happened was that Cora had gotten bored of the party after less than an hour. She had had too much champagne and could no longer follow the conversation of the man seated next to her on the plush, orange couch in Emily’s living room. He had been telling her about his dissertation, which had something to do with the Greeks, and which sounded so terribly like what Emily had been rambling about for the last two years that Cora had at one point thought he was critiquing her friend’s work instead of describing his own. She had asked him what he liked to do when he wasn’t working and his answer had involved visiting art museums, so Cora had stood up, unable to make him understand.

Cora had wandered upstairs with another glass of champagne and had been

looking at a mounted picture of Emily and her younger brothers that hung in the hallway outside of Emily's bedroom. Emily had come out of the bathroom and Cora remembered realizing that she was wearing the same dress, in real life, as she was wearing in the hanging picture. It was her occasion dress. Without meaning to, Cora had complimented her on it. The two of them went into Emily's bedroom and flopped down on the bed. Cora raised her glass of champagne high as she lay down, so as not to spill any.

"How's work?" Emily had asked.

"I've got an office now."

"Really? You mean you got a promotion?"

"Oh no, not that. They just cleared out this storage space and now I get to use it as an office. I guess the girls sitting near me were complaining that I play music too loudly at my desk. So I got to move." Emily considered for a minute and then laughed. The two of them rolled and laughed, Cora's champagne still held in the air above them.

"Why do you play music at your desk at all?"

"I edit better when there's music going. It concentrates me."

"Read anything good lately?"

"We had a piece last week about women who melt their engagement rings down and have them made into something else. Like if the wedding gets called off or if their husband dies. I edited that one and I liked it. Did you read it?"

"Well no, you know, these last few months have been particularly busy with the final touches to my project and everything."

"Of course," Cora said, and had stood slowly. She paced the room and ended up at Emily's vanity, where tubes of makeup and loose jewelry dotted the table. In the dark of the room – the girls had not turned on the light when they came in, preferring to bask in the softer glow of the hallway light and the inner blush of champagne – Emily's diamond earrings had shone, reflected in the mirror. Cora picked them up. "These are beautiful."

"Aren't they? Thank you. My mother just sent them to me. A congratulations present."

"Really lovely. Can I try them on?"

"I guess so." Emily had said from the bed, and sat up to watch.

Cora examined the light, silver, diamond-studded hooped earrings in the palm of her hand. There was something ethereal about them in this half-light, and she imagined them so insubstantial as to be in danger of floating out of her hand if she wasn't careful. They reminded her of earrings her own mother owned, which her father had always complimented. She slipped them on quickly and turned her head in front of the mirror, back and forth, to watch the light catch and expand as she rotated. She was struck by an urge to be seen in these pieces. Someone might say to her, as her father had said once to her mother while cupping her chin, "You're glowing."

“Would you mind if I wore them tonight? Just downstairs I mean.”

Emily hesitated, her hand already on the doorframe and poised to go back to the party. “Honestly, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not. I haven’t worn them myself yet, you know, and I don’t want anything to happen to them.”

“I don’t lose earrings.”

“You absolutely do.”

“I won’t lose these.”

“We can’t really know that. Put them back in the black box would you?”

So Cora had put them in a black box with a black velvet pillow inside. And she had returned to the party with Emily and sat back on the orange couch and apologized for disappearing to a man who turned out not to be the same one she’d left there. And then, maybe an hour or two and a few glasses later, Cora had gone back to Emily’s bedroom, pocketed the earrings, made her goodbyes, and turned left out the door. On her way to Matt’s she’d put the earrings on, careful to secure them tighter than she usually liked, to make up for her inebriation and also to feel their pressure, sharp and clear against the cool air on the street.

Somewhere between Emily’s brick building on Elm, the bodega, the small irregular houses, Matt’s porch, the winding streets, and her bed, Cora had forgotten about the pressure on her earlobes as well as the ephemeral silver and Emily’s dissertation and the compliments her father had paid her mother and her windowless office and Matt noticing or not noticing sparkly things and also her address and her actions and her name.

“I’ll look with you,” Matt said. “If you want.”

So the two of them walked the path Cora chose. Matt followed slightly behind, watching Cora’s method of search and trying to replicate it behind her back, to double-check her actions. Soon though he grew tired of the game and looked up at the road, guiding Cora with the tips of his fingers on her shoulders when she was too focused on the ground to realize she’d come to a turn, or a crosswalk. He was like a seeing-eye dog, or a parent casually guiding a child so that they won’t notice the guiding.

“Tell me what I said last night.”

“When?”

“The thing I said that meant we had to have lunch and talk it through.”

“I really wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried about it I just want to know what it was.” Cora had come to stop at a corner and was panning the intersecting streets, deciding which one she had been on most recently. “Does it really seem fair that you can hide something from me that I experienced with you?”

“No, not really.”

Before Cora could respond she saw it: a flash of silver reflected against the

aluminum pole of the nearby stop sign. She had hawk eyes now, meant for nothing but the detection of these tiny bits of silver and diamond, as essential as food. She lunged after the stop sign as if it might try to evade her. Matt watched, slightly horrified; it looked like she was launching herself into the street.

"Watch out!" he cried. There were no cars coming and the spring air was completely still. He tried to take back the warning by coughing very loudly.

Cora hardly heard him because, on her knees in the short and dirty grass surrounding the stop sign, one earring in her hand, she was searching the ground for the other. She passed her hand quickly through the green stubble and circled the aluminum pole: nothing. Standing up she walked back to Matt with a half triumphant, half shocked look on her face.

"I'm halfway saved," she said.

"You don't even really like Emily," Matt said. "Don't be so afraid to piss her off."

"If anyone's going to stop Emily and mine's friendship, it's going to be me, not her. Plus, I really like these earrings."

Matt reached for the silver hoop and Cora reluctantly let him hold it. But just for a second, then she took it back and placed in it the front pocket of her jeans, resting her hand on top of the small bulge even after it was securely inside.

"Now tell me what I said to you yesterday."

"You told me your Dad was dying."

Cora smiled because she'd guessed correctly. "I'm full of shit. He's not dying he's just sick. My Mom said the doctor said he'll probably make a full recovery. Something about his lungs. He hasn't been out much since he retired anyways."

Matt hugged her and said how sorry he was to hear that and asked her to give her mother his sympathies or should he send flowers? Cora didn't put her arms into the hug but told him thank you and of course she would and really don't bother he's going to be fine.

"See, we didn't need a whole lunch for that," she also said.

"I should probably go back," Matt said. "I need to walk the dog again."

"Yeah. Thanks for coming with me. And if you see the other one, you'll call me."

"Of course."

As Matt walked away, Cora watched him and tapped the pocket holding the lone earring. She was staring rather intensely, sure of him not turning back, when he did.

"Did your Dad really play in the minor leagues?" He called to her, just a few steps past a comfortable talking distance.

"Yeah, Triple A."

"Very cool," Matt said and turned back around, stuffing his hands into his pockets – which did not have any earrings in them – and walking off.

Cora took out the earring, polished it with the sleeve of her sweatshirt, and put it back in her pocket. Then she picked a path on instinct and continued searching.

When she found the second earring Cora knelt down on the sidewalk a foot away from where it lay – perfectly centered on the next concrete square – and sighed with her whole body. She sat there, watching the earring be intact and close by, for two minutes before she reached out and took it. She wanted to run back to Matt’s and tell him. She wanted to call her mother on the phone and brag about what a productive morning she had had. Look at this determination, she wanted to say, and she would hold out the earrings, together, as proof. Anything is possible, she’d tell her, and you can find all of the lost things if you just try hard enough. Try harder. She wanted to tell Emily how wrong she was. She wanted to tell her that when she said something she meant it. Just because she didn’t go about it in the usual way didn’t mean she didn’t mean it. But none of these people were there and none of these options made much sense, so Cora just stood in the center of the sidewalk, three blocks from home, and smiled very widely at a squirrel.

Back at home, Cora laid the earrings out on a dish towel and cleaned them. She used a Q-tip dipped in warm water to wipe away the dirt and bits of grass and leaves that had invaded the space between inlaid diamonds. She polished the posts carefully and picked out two of her nicest silver earring backs from her jewelry box, and she polished those too. She blew the earrings dry and then set them back on the towel, careful not to rub them in case a setting had come loose overnight. All the while she kept thinking: “Thank you for waiting for me.”

She called Emily and had herself invited over. She walked back to the brick building, tired now and bored of the same landscape, over and over, from the last two days. She apologized for the night before, for drinking too much and ignoring the Greek art historian Emily had invited especially for her. She helped clean out the champagne glasses that Emily hadn’t gotten to, and then excused herself to the upstairs bathroom.

In the dark of Emily’s room – where the shades had been drawn and all the lights kept off – Cora felt her way around the vanity table until her found the black box. She placed the earrings gently inside and stood looking at them, two innocents, peacefully waiting.

A CERTAIN KIND OF TRUTH

Stephanie Liang

We didn't tell my grandfather when my father died at 42. When he called, we would say my father was too busy working to talk to him. Sometimes we'd put my little brother on the phone, goad him to say *yeye*. It would always distract him.

The only time my grandfather visited the United States, I was young and my father was still alive. Every morning, he'd sit at the table and ask my mother to pour him a glass of vodka for breakfast. She'd offer him orange juice, to which he'd chuckle. *Real men don't mix their liquor*. My grandfather's stench reminded me of nail polish remover.

When my grandfather was not drinking, he was complaining. He complained my father was too busy; he complained my mother wasn't busy enough. The one day my grandfather went outside to play with my sister, he complained that her arms were too weak. He dropped his glove on the grass and shuffled back into the house as my sister ran inside crying, asking mother what she did wrong. Why *yeye* didn't like her.

When my brother was born, years later, my grandfather would call from China and ask to speak to him. He'd never ask for anyone else.

After my father died, my mother hesitated before picking up the phone in the mornings. She would turn up the volume of the television to drown out its ringing, knowing it was my grandfather making his weekly inquiry. My father's family insisted that my grandfather couldn't handle the news of my father's death. He was so old, *let him die in peace*, they said.

When my grandfather died, he was an ocean away thinking his son was too busy to talk to him. But my aunt said up until the day he died, she knew of only two things that made my grandfather smile—his successful son in America and a handle of *baiju*.

Nowadays, my father's family rarely calls. My mother doesn't have to watch television in the mornings anymore. She tells me it's because there are, at once, not enough things and too many things to say.

NEW YEAR

Kimmi Pham

When I pray to my ancestors I press my hands together,
Leaving no space between palms,
No space for externalities, unwanted destinies to creep in.
That's how I, a sole operator, dial them and get the best connection.
In between thoughts I kneel and bow so long as my knees let me.
I deliver a thorough report, as their thoroughbred, and invite them inside.
When they leave and I lift the food off of the altar
And hold onto the hopes that my forefathers had, that my mother has
When she tosses a green mint tinted quarter into the mall fountain—

Why must my wishes
Take flight in the form of
Feathery remains,
What was once a flower,
Or weed,
Freshly plucked from the loam?

Why do I crane my neck and cry for mercy, for hope,
For your love,
Now that you are no longer with us, as they say.

I keep dialing, and blowing, and craning, and holding, and smelling the scent of
Forbidden grapefruit and earth
To remind myself that you are close, not closed.

RETURN TO SAIGON, 2009

Kimmi Pham

Squatting on a shin-high stool upon the sidewalk,
 eyeing a tropical empire, a swarm of motorcycles, a wrinkled soup hawker,
 I wanted to know what was happening behind my sunburnt shoulders.

But you asked me to wait with my back to the doorframe,
 so I watched as an orphan asked a pair of diners to buy his last lottery ticket.
 They sent him home smiling with a tamarind candy latched to the roof of his mouth.
 He told them that his name was *Phuoc* but everything here has two names,
 one from before the Fall and one from after.

Why do people ask, "What is taking place here?"
 as if only in fiction do we steal settings
 absorb every fiber of event and memory to
 conjure an atmosphere and put a new frame around history.

Whatever happened those evenings
 between you and your country
 I will never know.

With pollution dust I etched out on the plastic grain of my stool
 the letters *r* and *e*, for
 regime,
 recast,
 relive,
 reconcile,
 rest,
 the rest.

THE BOX

Alyssa Miller

They called him the man on fire, and though he had strong shoulders and a warm face, I did not love him. Not in the way I was supposed to, at least.

On our wedding day, as he slipped a simple gold band around a very particular left finger, he told me I am yours and you are mine and gods and mortals will all look down on us burning with the envy of a thousand suns and we will shine. And in that moment it was true. I was his, and he was mine. But all I could think about was the sad smile on his brother's face as he held the empty ring box at his side. He cried a single tear and all the wedding guests in their chiffon and silver would go home to their families and say, boy, that brother, was he ever the one who loved the man on fire, even more than the woman who became his wife that day, the one who was given to him by the gods. And they would be wrong, of course. That tear was for me, as I could no longer be his in the way that I was now his brother's. But I couldn't cry. I was made lively, and beautiful, and charming, and deceitful, but no god or goddess thought to give me the ability to cry, not even a single tear, not even on my wedding day.

I've always found weddings to be sordid occasions. People who you don't know well enough get drunk on rose wine and celebrate your union with another being for a lifetime, not considering for a moment that a life is really an awfully long time, especially if you have just begun living yours, as I had, and then assuming all the while that you are sure and steady like a compass guiding a sailboat, and then forgetting the occasion they are celebrating in the first place and instead reminiscing on their own wedding nights, and how their life maybe didn't turn out the way they thought it would when they were the ones serving, not being served, the rose wine. So imagine that is you, and you have champagne bubbles rising from your belly out the top of your head, and you would let yourself float away if it wasn't for the fire man holding you down with a matching ring on his very particular left finger, and his brother, the one with the sad face and the single tear, sitting in a corner off to the side, and the hundreds of guests giving you gifts you will never use.

This is why I don't like to remember the night of wedding. In fact, I don't have much in the way of memories at all, which I think is fine considering they only serve to take up space in your head and make you feel emotions at the wrong times, but I do remember that on that same night, the night I said yes to the fire man and wore his gold ring, my father came to me with a gift. Being who he was, he could not appear to me in front of all the guests the same way he had appeared to me when I was created, the day he said Pandora I am your father and you shall descend to the earth and marry the man who has given fire to the mortals. I thought it was awfully thoughtful of him

to come to the wedding at all, and he wore a graying beard and matching green eyes, and he took me to the rooftop of the building on which I was wed and handed me a simple wooden box. Then he revealed a small golden key and placed it in my left hand and it sparkled like the ring on my very particular left finger, and he said to me, my daughter, now you and only you have the key to that box but you are never to open it, and though I admit I found it strange that my father would give me such a simple gift, all I could say was, okay.

It was dizzying, to be up so high, weighing the box, talking to my father, holding the key, and looking down at my own wedding, the people sprinkled on the pavement below like powdered sugar.

When I descended I returned to my new husband's side, and I tried not to think of his brother, the one who didn't know that while the fire man was wearing the golden ring that matched mine, I wanted so badly for it to be him who was wearing it instead.

What is in the box, my husband asked me, and then I told him it was gift from my father whom he did not know and only knew of, and he gave me a dry kiss on my forehead and he placed the box on the table with all the other boxes in periwinkle wrapping paper and satin bows, and though I still had the key, my father's box was forgotten.

*

There are two types of people in the world; those who leap for change as if it is a thin sheet of glass that will shatter and break only to reveal a whole new world carrying with it the possibility of being better than the one in which they are currently living, and then there are those who learn the rules of their world and do not wish to disturb any part of that perfectly balanced order even if it is not the perfect world they once wished it to be, and so they recoil from change like it is wine turned to vinegar in the heat. My whole life, I have been the second kind of person, the one who does not enter through the door that says do not enter only because that is precisely what it says. I have been auburn curls and unopened boxes and running away from change.

And my world was a happy one. It was perfect, in fact, for bad things did not exist in it, could not exist in it, as the gods had made it so, and my fire man would always be there to return fire to the mortals if something bad did happen, by chance. And as I passed the days, which soon became years, practicing and getting better at bearing the weight of that gold band on my very particular left finger, I learned that love is an impulse, like running out in the rain or jumping into a river, so if I wanted to love my husband and not his brother it would only be a matter of applying the same impulses onto him as that man did for me, the one who sat in the corner crying a single tear and not even at his own wedding. I wore only white to match my skin, and blue for my eyes, and I learned to bake peach pies and my husband would tell me that I was the most simple and perfect thing the gods could have ever given to him, and though he gave all the mortals fire, he wanted to give me the world.

The problem with my good world was only that it was too good, the pies tasted only as sweet as they need not be salty, the air outside never too hot or too cold, and then one day I started to get a sort of sour smell coming from the living room and I forgot what good feels like at all because it all felt the same. My heart would beat neither slower nor faster from the moment I woke up in the morning to the moment I went to bed at night, for the world grew numb with so much goodness in it, and I had trained my heart to absorb sensitivity like the clouds bend for a bird passing through. Soon it felt like even the most pure happiness you could ever conceive of was crusting over in front of your eyes, and it started to taste like metal between your teeth or biting on sand paper.

Then one day I woke up and remembered the golden key that matches the golden ring I was still wearing, have been wearing, on my very particular left finger and I thought of the box that has been sitting on the top shelf for all these years while the good world around has started to go bad, and I asked myself for the first time in my short life if I would prefer instead to not be happy.

This was precisely the thought I was thinking when I took the box down from the top shelf and held the golden key in my palm that matched the gold ring on my finger, only now it was starting to leave a faint green stain on my skin. I looked at the box for a long time, so long, actually, that the sky began to turn yellow and then gray, until raindrops descended through the night and made an uncomplicated rhythm on my rooftop. I thought of the rooftop on the day of my wedding when I looked into the green eyes my father wore and I said okay like a small kitten waiting for milk, being very careful to keep all four paws on the ground.

The box was quite hollow and wasn't very heavy, though as I sat under the rain rhythm I began to suspect that what was inside was sure to be precisely the opposite of hollow and not very heavy, as the gods love playing tricks on mortals, like the one they played on the sad brother from the wedding who had to watch the fire man marry me instead of him. The golden key slid into the latch almost too easily, and all that was left was to turn my wrist to the right and shatter the glass world I lived in. Instead, I sat in my nightgown with the small box in my lap, and the golden key in the small box, trying very hard and for a very long time to make myself cry, which I could not.

*

Yesterday I attended my first funeral, which was a lot like my first wedding, all the same color and too many people and gifts that no one will ever use. The tulips and hyacinths in the garden turned their faces down as I watched the man from the corner of my wedding who shed a single tear for me be lowered into the ground, his heart having grown lukewarm so as to not take such an effort to beat when it knew it could never have what it truly wanted most, until it froze over and stopped beating altogether. A heart in so much pain did not belong in a world of so much goodness. Then when all the pairs of eyes and lips and ears passed over the grave and it came my

turn, I let fall a simple golden key that matched the simple golden ring on my finger that I so badly wanted to drop into the grave instead, to tell the sad man in the corner of my wedding that if I was not his in this life, I could most certainly be in the next one. And when I returned to my husband who just lost his brother, all he could say to me in that cold graveyard was that I am beautiful.

It is true; I am beautiful in a beautiful world, but I will always have the metal taste in my mouth from too much beauty, and I will always tell myself that there was once a man who loved me as naturally as the spring becomes the summer, and that instead of considering giving up my beautiful life, I married his brother, the one who brought fire to the mortals, just as I was made to do. And my father will always look down on me in the same way I looked down on the powdered sugar drops from the rooftop and he will tell me that I am perfect, though I know sometimes he wishes that I was not, since I am not a god but only human. And even in one hundred years from now my husband will dress me in kisses and honey and remind me every day of his matching gold ring, even though people will no longer call him the man on fire, and he will sometimes pretend to not wake up in the morning when I slip out of bed so he does not have to face me and the world at the same time.

And me, I will always be the girl who was made by the gods, who did as she was told and never let anyone know how unbeautiful a beautiful world can become when you are drowning in it, especially when you were too scared or weak to turn the golden key that matches the very heavy golden ring on a very particular left finger, so instead you bury it along with the only person who had ever made your heart want to beat faster. And even if I last an eternity, which is an awfully long time, no one, not even the gods, will ever know that I've lived my whole life wondering why I didn't open that box.

HOME DENTAL

Andy Kim

The shoebox was lined with photographs, all dated twenty, thirty years. A corner was bent. An edge, frayed. Within the frames, toothy smiles ground painfully tactile against our fingertips. Sal shifted uneasily at the sight of anything so real. At three years old, she was only accustomed to images trapped within black rectangles, and etched into circuitry. The contents of the photographs were equally unknown to her: sand and salt, tricycle rides down freshly paved roads. It struck me how Sal, in her youth, would never experience these things – or, at least, not as I had.

The subdued hues and overexposed flesh were “good ones,” I explained, much to her confusion. She had never once heard the click of a camera, nor the shrill of a kingfisher nesting in the sand. But she cooed nonetheless, waving a fist in the air, at familiar faces trapped within the frames. Many were of myself, growing up in the Midwest; others were of my own mother, Sal’s grandmother, who had not long since passed.

To Sal, I explained how in those days, we stood in the wet sand with the gulf at our waists. The sun revealed white sand, blue water, and brown eyes tucked beneath shades. We had conversations about that sun: its light, its temperature, its absolute magnitude. She would crane her neck to catch a glimpse of life, or what it used to be.

My mother had a way of cupping at the water, and pouring droplets onto her head. She asked if I had enough sunscreen, and I said that I did, as I lowered my body into the water.

“You know what?” she asked, sipping smoke from a paper tube. It lent her a quality unknown to me until then. I had never once seen her smoke in my life, although she said that she once had, and that it would catch up to her even though she had quit.

“Your grandfather,” she said, coughing into her wrist. “Thought it was funny that your father and I took our honeymoon in Hokkaido.” She blew smoke at her reflection, asking if I had seen the photographs.

I had, I said. A man and woman, in their youth, standing beneath a paper umbrella.

“He lived there as a boy,” she said with her cigarette stuck to her bottom lip. She walked away from the shore until she was deep enough to swim, before adding: “He moved there from Daegu when he was about your age.”

I pulled her words in through my nose, exhaling a few of my own. My eyes drank from the white expanse of Floridian sand, dotted with flocking infants, clapping hands, and sandy fingers spread wide. A tidal surge rolled over my mother’s mouth, and she spat soggy tobacco, saying, “shit.”

With her next breath, she claimed that her father lived under a straw roof – nights spent between clay walls and edges that scratched. She paused to wade towards the shore until her feet touched the sand.

“He asked us to see if it was still there,” she remembered. “But it wasn’t.” It had been replaced by a supermarket. She enjoyed the feeling of those words in her mouth, staring out of the photo and into Sal’s eyes.

I placed the stack of photographs into my coat, and carried Sal down the stairs. In those days, I explained, there wasn’t much for people like my great-grandparents, who were farmers and were now dead. They had long since made their peace with the snow, buried deep in mound-like graves, unlike most families of farmers with no land to speak of – no soil to seed, nor mulberry to plant.

I set Sal in the living room, before taking a seat at the dining table. The kitchen smelled of stewed pepper and sesame-roast beef. A cool fluorescent light slid from the photographs.

That day on the beach, I remembered, I felt as I usually did after long trips, looking up at the sky and into the sun. I held an immense curiosity about how things might have appeared, or how people thought. In those photographs, I remembered distinctly, thinking about my mother’s father. Thoughts seeded by a rare string of words, shrouded in cancerous smoke.

“He found it all very funny,” my mother said, reminiscing on how her father would never have guessed that his island would someday be filled with the wonders of spa and brewery for his daughter to explore.

I laughed, too, at the idea, a stark contrast to the university-owned apartment that my own nuclear family once occupied. We had wooden doors for fingers to get stuck in. They had nothing. Paper perhaps, but beyond that, a gaping nothingness.

“It’s kind of like Switzerland,” my mother threw back at me. “Back then, it was poor too, but look at it now.” I swam towards shore even as the water grew shallow enough to walk in. The carcass of a cigarette drifted by.

I didn’t tell Sal this, but I had talked more in those photographs – the actual words, syllables, and letters, lost in translation between reality and photography. It was difficult to tell what was actually said, constantly running my fingers against worn slabs of marble with little braille to be found. I could only grasp at how the words felt on my tongue. Everything before that moment, a self-inflicted, childhood tooth extraction by means of plastic thread and wooden door. I stared in terrific awe at the blood on my hands, and the tooth dangling from a noose affixed to a brass knob.

My mother – she screamed. She waved her hands in the air. She cradled me in her apron.

I saw it on tee-vee, I said, gushing with a drowsy pride. From that day onwards, I would run my tongue over an odd gap, a hole in the roof of my mouth and into my eye.

Whenever I heard stories about my grandparents, they sat similarly on my tongue. Like a ghostly tooth: tasteless and planted amorphously in my gums. They held a gelatinous texture akin to the stewed cartilage that my grandmother, my mother's step-mother, would serve with rice and pickled cabbage. I thumbed past the photos on the beach to a palette of browns, photos taken in this very home.

They appeared uneventful, cataloguing times when I placed rice in my stew, mixing it with the back of my spoon. It was a habit I picked up from my grandfather, my mother's father, who sat across the table from me.

During that visit, maybe a year or so after our trip to the beach, I had become engrossed in that ritual – the sitting across from him with a spoon in my mouth. There wasn't a day that went by where I couldn't help but wonder about him, probing further, digging deeper. My eyes had grown accustomed to picking at the wrinkles on his sullen face. Every line presented an opportunity to cut my teeth, and my gums ached in that house.

I reached out for any opportunity to dull its pain, pulling memories from the folds of his cheek. From under his stony eyes, I pulled a childhood memory, uneducated, untextured, in the snow, in hemp woven pants and a barley stuffed coat. I rolled it in circles around my palm, before placing it back beneath the folds of his skin.

Next, I grasped at a handful of dark, calloused flesh from the wrinkles of his chin. It was tattooed with faded letters. Back then, they lived simple lives, it said, a day to day kind of life, a struggle to stay alive. He was huddled next to a fire as his mother spooned barley into his mouth. By accident, the memory slipped from my fingers and into my bowl of stew. I pushed the bowl away with a budding frown on my lips.

As he chewed into his spoonful of beef, I extracted one last thought from his sagging jowls – the essence of him, closing the door and driving away. It seemed as though a thread was tied to that door, but a thread, much thicker, and a noose, sturdier. My mother and her sister were still asleep. My uncle was away at university. That day as he closed the door, he pulled at that thread, shattering a vase and waking everyone in the house. I felt a nothingness and sighed. Sal had fallen asleep.

"He was a real bastard," my mother once explained as she dried herself with a towel. All the ice in the cooler had melted. I reached in for a beer. "But between that and the wars, you can see how he turned out that way." She wiped a small blade on her towel, gripping at its green handle with three fingers and a thumb.

"I suppose," she said, as I handed her a yellow bottle, "the older you get, the more you understand these things." She placed another cigarette in her mouth, as I tossed her an uncut lime.

She thanked me, setting the lime on her armrest, and cutting into its thick, green skin. I accepted a slice, and bit into its fleshy pulp.

My mother lit her cigarette, and sat, for the first time in her life, relaxed. She even laughed, out loud at some thought, closing her eyes as the sun came down to rest

its chin on the water. She sipped from its fire with a knowing look on her face. “What’s more to tell?” she asked, breathing a cloud into the tangerine skies.

The question ran through my mind, as I realized there were photos missing from that day. I placed Sal in her crib, and made my way back up to the attic – sloped walls, and fiberglass.

I knelt beside the boxes strewn across the floor, and filed through the photographs. Beneath a trip to Switzerland was the rest of that day on the beach. More of my mother and myself in the water, a few of my father asleep on the shore. I turned the last of the photographs over, before noticing my hands covered in a wet blood.

Nothing made her scream louder than when she saw me standing in front of my room with a mouthful of red.

She had been in the kitchen with the dishes, her collection of dishes, when she heard a muffled bang and the squeak of a young child. She turned the water off, and listened. It’s nothing but the wind, she thought. She called my name. She called it twice. She wiped her soapy hands on the apron, and ran up the stairs.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she screamed. My mother knew the tooth wouldn’t grow back, but she hadn’t expected the sheer amount of fluid that would accompany its loss. She held her hand over her mouth. She held her hand over mine. I saw it on tee-vee, I said, swallowing bitter, red nectars. I coughed a metric litre of it onto her apron, she claimed.

From that day onwards, I would run my tongue over an odd gap: a hole in the roof of my mouth, and into a world where it always rained.

Memories were planted along the sidewalk of my mother’s childhood home: cabbage and plum, a flowering date tree. In her youth, she tipped a can over them, simulating a cooling rain. It trickled from a hole in the attic roof, and onto my forehead, cold.

I looked through the hole, and into a face, deeply distorted. Snowflakes drifted from the ceiling and into my eyes. As I wiped them away, I strained for a closer look at an image of my mother, worried, and a child again, but even younger, before cigarettes and checkered bathing suits.

Through that hole in the sky, I could see her, sitting in front of a television, no older than ten. On the screen, a stick of incense burned to the melody of a funeral dirge. I picked at that memory from the wrinkles of her eyes, until it gave away, and fell on my face.

Sal was still asleep by the time we pulled out of the drive way. The air was frigid, an autumn into winter, and red leaves littered the streets, as children tricycled down the sidewalks.

If she were to ask me now if I had found any good ones, I would reply that I had. But instead, I was turning over memories in my hands, as she walked into the ocean, pausing to swat a strand of seaweed from her legs. She turned to ask if

“I knew what?” But this time, I replied, calling out, finally.

I expected her to tell me everything, as she once had, but she continued to walk, free, and finally free. Before the sun had set, she told me everything.

And everything, I would eventually forget.

DARJEELING

Sarah Lazarich

In the weak
grey light of your kitchen
together
making tea.

You always begged me
never to cut my hair.
When I came home
head shaven
shoulders bare, you
pressed your mouth
to my skin
and asked me why.
My stark frame
a strange and
terrifying reminder
that you
have not softened me.

Teabags steeping—
to me, this
is the constitution of love
and loss.
Growing cold
on your counter,
going bitter
when forgotten.

THE RAISIN AND THE RAVEN, THE SECOND WEEK

Calvin Kim

THE bees were drunk on nectarines, the hose water became rain, and the daffodils bloomed bulbous star-shaped grapes. It was during this downpour on a late Tuesday afternoon, as the sunk-sun slipped behind the gray paper sky, that the dialogue between the raven and the raisin took place. Near an untraveled highway stretching out for extended miles, by a slightly slanted oak tree, next to the slightly less slanted 80 miles per hour speed limit sign, their conversation began like it would any other Tuesday, approximately at 4:02pm...

By 4:29pm the storm had passed and left the nostalgic scent of asphalt and moist leaves lingering in the air. This was the second week, the meeting of the raisin and the raven.

mm

THE raven never flew. He always walked. A strut with dwindling confidence. He had stopped the art of flying a couple years back, during his first existential crisis. He set his mind then—made an imperative commitment to only fly meaningfully. This promise held some kind of comforting gravity for him—he needed a reference point for his free will. Otherwise, he walked without compromise. It's not that he didn't want to fly, he didn't want it to become default. He wanted his every decision to matter. Sometimes he wished he never had feet, so that he could fly—over seas and under clouds—never stopping, never ceasing. He wouldn't mind death in mid-air. He had thought this through many times before. A falling apostrophe on a Tuesday sky; a nice way to claim himself. He had an irrational way of thinking when it came to ravens.

"Say, you don't look very well. Why the downcast demeanor?" The Raven said, as he took another drag from his cigarette (the one with the three golden lines).

"..." The raisin looked up at the gray-stained sky.

"I would like to be a cloud," said the raven.

"Why is that?" the raisin never asked.

"I want to dissipate, you know? The last breath is always a cloud." He watched the smoke, carried like peeling orange curls by the wind. The raisin made no reply. The raven took this sign as a form of agreement.

"But do tell me, raisin, what is bothering you? I am sincerely worried for your health—you look so frail—should I bring you some nourishment?"

"No, let's just talk," the raisin said. "Tell me about how you are," the raven heard the raisin say.

The raven decided to be honest for the first time in a long time. Only the remnant of a burnt stub remained in his beak.

**

“I wandered as a cloud, but the daffodils were already dead.” The raven looked up into the sky, a thin membrane of silver, no, a swelling bulge that would rupture in a few hours. He wondered what would come bursting forth from the pregnant sky...

The time was 5:10pm.

mm

THE raven hadn't eaten for days now, and he appeared as a tangled mess of hair from a distance. He hadn't talked to anyone in a long time, and so he felt the metallic removed third-person strangeness of his distant voice as he spoke. It was comforting, talking to this raisin. It filled some small portion of his vast emptiness. He thought of this relation as a seed to something bigger. Maybe, just maybe, he would one day show the raisin the view from above. It had been so long that even the raven forgot how it felt to sink into the sky. What if he had forgotten how? No, he knew he still had it in him somewhere.

He imagined the sea more and more. It was as infinitely vast as what he felt. He wondered, if he exploded, would everything inside of him fill the entirety of the sea? He was afraid to share this thought with the raisin. If the raisin left, he would have no one else left. Maybe the moon, but he could never fly there.

mm

AROUND 7:02pm a dark shadow came over the raisin, this sudden realization that he was alone. Maybe the world would reach a balance if the immensity of what lay inside him met with the unknown depths of the sea. Maybe it wasn't the sky he longed to fall in, but the water. He was so sure of this.

The raven looked tenderly at the raisin for the last time, as the raisin returned the warmth. What was not said was implied.

**

THE bees watched as the raven teetered away from a pebble by the long stretch of road, and the daffodil woke from her dream. Her cold-sweat mixing with the drops of autumn rain.

MERELY A BATH

Calvin Kim

It was Tuesday, and I always woke up early on Tuesdays—no matter how late I slept. The Peach Ring Gummies had run out the night before so I drove to the local farmer's store to buy another ten-pounds of it. Also a pack of Reds to smoke. Black coffee. I usually would've stopped by the gas station to buy a lottery ticket, but these days I didn't...

I had caught it at the lake—kind of. It sort of emerged out of the waters onto the muddy shore—flopping. Bloody-face and all, the hook dangling on its lower lip, fishing wire wound messily and dragging along like a leash. In its seeming pain and indecipherable muttering, it kept gnawing at the Peach Ring hanging from the bleeding hook. I had been eating my tuna sandwich, and I remember dropping it. Its body a strange gray catfish, but its head a fully grown woman's—in her mid-thirties I assumed. It seemed at the time proper, if not necessary to put her in the icebox. To drive it home to treat it...

It had started to rain on the drive home, so I rolled down the windows—I thought it would do good to have some water on its face. The icebox fit only its body, leaving her head protruding out like a jack-in-the-box. Only from hindsight am I surprised by my decision. It may have been the way it looked at me. It's silvery eyes, moist—reflecting passing street lamps. Any woman who looked at me that way was bound to take my guard down—though usually it would take a few more drinks, and a sultry voice.

I brought her home—all that was left of home at least, from after the split. I think we both had known two doctors and the same hospital wouldn't have worked out anyways. Lunch breaks, ER, favors, politics...

Pride...and still more pride.
Petty pastiche.

We still had had hope to try it at the very least. We were of a professional kind. Maybe we shouldn't have tried. Who knows? I don't know. It was much too late for regretting anyways. No point of wishing.

I fixed up the creature in no time, my thoughts elsewhere like this.

Might as well give it a bath.

All the while it looked at me with its pale silver face, dull fish body. It wasn't necessarily what you would call beautiful whatever that meant, but it had a certain gracefulness in her face that I found quite attractive. I almost kissed her then. I stopped halfway, suds lingering in air, turned-on and simultaneously left bewildered what to make of the situation and it.

What to make of her (in my bathtub), myself (besides her.) She was still chewing on the peach ring.

Contributor Notes

Miriam Esther Goldman recently graduated from Brandeis University with a double major in English and Creative Writing and a minor in Theatre Arts. She is now employed as a screenwriter by Welling Films, an independent film studio in Houston, TX. Her work has previously appeared in Brandeis University publications “Where the Children Play” and “Laurel Moon.”

Imogen Rosenbluth is a second-year undergraduate in the creative writing program at Brandeis University. Her work has appeared on the New York Times Learning Network, in the What About Peace? International Youth Arts online publication, and in the Nov/Dec 2014 issue of Ascent Aspirations. She won the Edith Garlow Memorial Poetry Contest in 2011.

Kai Parmenter recently graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Arizona with a B.A. in History and Creative Writing. His work explores the strange, multifaceted nature of human relationships, including an historical thesis recently published by the Cornell Historical Society’s Ezra’s Archives, and the short nonfiction piece Entropy published by Rocky Mountain College’s Sun & Sandstone. He currently lives in Tucson, Arizona with his parents and an ancient pug named Louie.

Emma Court is an aspiring writer, unabashed feminist, coffee addict and Nora Ephron disciple. On her 21st birthday, she saw Alan Cumming in an Ukranian diner at 3 am, and that’s probably the closest she’ll ever come to a religious experience.

Suzanne Herman is a recent graduate of Barnard College in New York City, where she majored in English. She is the winner of the Howard Teichmann Writing Prize and has been published in anthologies by She Writes Press and Wising Up Press. She is currently pursuing all forms of literary involvement - if you know of an opportunity that pays, please keep her in mind.

Stephanie Liang tries to be a relatively normal human being when in public. But when left on her own, she spends her days amassing quotes from mostly dead authors, singing to alternative folk music that alarms her mother, and brainstorming ways to seduce Brandon Flowers, the frontman of The Killers.

Kimmi Pham is a Baltimore native happily studying English at Cornell. She spends a significant amount of her time savoring good food, dancing freely, and delighting in poetry and fiction--sometimes, simultaneously and sometimes, unexpectedly.

Alyssa Miller is majoring in English at Yale University with a focus in creative writing. She loves traveling and the outdoors, and when she’s not thinking up stories, you can find her on a mountain skiing, running with her giant dog Mogul in her home state Colorado, or getting hopelessly lost in a foreign country.

Andy Kim is a Senior in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations with minors in English, Creative Writing, and Law and Society. He writes to keep his head on his shoulders.

Sarah Lazarich is a Senior Biometry major from Chicago.

Calvin Kim was born under the sun. He thinks of avocados, his brother’s dimples, and snow.

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Cornell University

mk46@cornell.edu