sliced bread magazine

a collection of student art and writing at the University of Chicago
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DEAR READER,

“Dip a slice of bread in batter. That’s September: yellow, gold, soft and sticky. Fry the bread. Now you have October: chewier, drier, streaked with browns. The day in question fell somewhere in the middle of the french toast process.” — Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*

We proudly present the Fall 2015 Sliced Bread issue, served to you, as Tom Robbins so beautifully described, on a day that falls right in the french-toast making time of the year. Mixed with the varied content of our contributors, kneaded by the insightful comments of our staff, leavened from the hard work of our editors, and finally, baked into the final print magazine you now hold, this issue truly is one heavenly slice of bread.

This particular slice marks the tenth publication of our humble bakery, and we would like to celebrate this by looking back at — dare we say — our most ambitious year yet. We introduced our biannual production schedule, hosted a stellar storytelling event with 2nd Story, launched the Bread Beat podcast, and restructured the internal processes of the magazine. Looking back on the past few years, we hope that the next ones bring many more wonderful pieces of art and literature.

We at Sliced Bread pride ourselves on our process, which, in the true spirit of the University of Chicago, involves a vigorous debate of the merits of every piece we receive, while maintaining the anonymity of our contributing artists and writers during the review process. Our staff members hold each piece to very high standards, and their energy pushes every aspect of the magazine ever closer to bready perfection. Due to our new publication schedule, we have been fortunate to work with our current staff on not just one but two issues this year.

Our magazine is constantly reforming itself to best suit our authors and our readers, and we are excited to announce the introduction of a digital serial. Due to our page count, we have previously been unable to accept supreme works of equally supreme length. We have thus decided to create a place for our more loquacious authors to fully flex their writing muscle. We will launch our debut serial to our email listhost subscribers in the fall, with our first piece being “The Hiroshima Reverb Job,” a cyberpunk tale of thievery by Lucia Lu. We hope to see you, dear readers, digitally, in the very near future.
We want to extend a special thanks to Elizabeth (Liz) Bynum, our outgoing editor-in-chief. Liz has been with Sliced Bread since her first year, and is an integral part of who we are today. With her passion and devotion to Sliced Bread, she’s kept the magazine together through thick and thin. We’ll miss you, Liz, and we’re so grateful for all you have taught us. Our gratitude also goes out to our fearless advisor, Derek Bundy, for handling everything from budget cuts and new ventures with a pep in his step and no breaks in his stride.

Readers, we now invite you to explore the amazing pieces in this issue. So, turn the page, read on, and enjoy yourselves, bite by delicious bite!

Panivoriously yours,
The Editors at Sliced Bread
This year, Sliced Bread renewed our partnership with the Study Abroad Office to offer another avenue to publish submissions, from both their Why We Travel: Writing contest and their Photo contest. Pieces submitted to the Study Abroad contests were also reviewed by our staff for publication in our magazine. For the works we selected from the Study Abroad contests, we have listed the locale that served as the artist’s muse alongside the usual author information. We would like to extend a special thanks to our contact at the Study Abroad office, Naomi Patschke, who was instrumental in the fruition of this collaboration. We are pleased to present these unique submissions and invite you to turn the page and travel the world!
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UNTITLED MORNING BULLSHIT
ALLISON TOREM

She sort of spit it out, let it sputter out with extra chalance and none of the cool omniscient coyness that smart people have in the movies. “Believe me, Peter, it is only a matter of time.” She said his name as if it were spelled “Petre.” Spelled wrong. Spelled douchily. She knew her comment was insensitive toward her mother and did the thing where she pinches herself to remind herself that life is real, not reality TV.

Peter stood, blank, stared at a corner of some distant something, gulped, scoffed defensively about his vulnerable, adorable gulp — he is cutest when he gulps — a thing big male boys would never do, least in the presence of their women — and spun right round.

Our girl closes her eyes.

She wears knee-high socks but they’re not required. Wishes to see lights, many colored lights. Only sees lid. Opens them: Peter is gone, in the distance, talking to other people. No, pretending to. He’s not listening, not really, he just opened his jaw and Ha’s came out, but his eyes were normally uncreased. He’s a small, phony, little bitch bastard when he wants to be. Class is about to begin.

Mr. Lancing, Bob, to be called Bobby for short, stands legs far more than appropriately shoulder width apart, facing the class only his jaw twisted so he looks just rugged enough to tame a pack of sleepy lab rats; he’s talking about trigonometry and his subject does not match his sexual pose. Our girl’s thinking about transitive property and if it means she’s enemies with Peter’s enemy if she remains secret lovers with Peter, or if the whole secret thing does away with the laws of human relationships. Or if it enhances: makes them more fiery? And hot.

She visits Mr. English’s class. Jimmy English was always terrible at English, great at math, probably at trigonometry, but loved English, probably because it was his last name like since he was born, so he became a teacher of it, probably because he’s a big sad mean wreck of a person.

Our girl pops a zit and leaves another concealed by her new bangs between class periods. The five minutes is just enough time to do one but never more than one of the following five things: pop a zit, ask a friend how they are but really ask it, finish a problem set for Regulars Trigonometry, memorize one vocab word for English, like, “obfuscate,” or contemplate lunch or the afterlife. That may or may not be five things. She thinks it’s more, but she’s no good at math. On the safe side, she decides to think of a sixth, and can’t do it.

Our girl splays her bangs like a girly dress over her forehead. It looks funny and, her goal in life not to look funny, she wets them, wincing under the
bathroom sink water, neck bent, people walking in to actually use the bathroom. Our girl wonders why it’s the most vulnerable feeling she’d had all day is asking her class if someone could lend her a pen. She asked everyone and nothing. She breathed, then asked the girl in front of her, who was busy neatly holding the back of her newly half-shaved head. That girl has the worst pens. She said yes and gave you one but it was the worst pen. Like at their normal function, it feels like they’re running out of ink. Like being attached to an IV for oxygen. Like our girl’s mother, Nancy.

She wants the movie Mr. Raymond is showing to include sex. It would also be okay if the movie were all sex, and even titled “Sex: The Movie.” Our girl is a virgin and even the image of two salamanders hugging by lowered human standards on a Gif is enough to wet her seat. It’s 11:49 am. Lunch comes at too perfect an hour. Really loads on the pressure. Our girl wants most to skip not math not U.S. History but lunch. Other people will be there, as they tend to be every day because they are hungry too. She has undiagnosed anxiety and it will remain that because it’s no worse than anyone else’s. It’s part of being a teenager but at the moment it only seems like the whole story. Our girl pulled herself this morning putting her neck in the sink. She feels average all the time. Her neck feels terrible. It is Monday and her secret relationship is on the fringe: may have ended today, and her mother is dying in the suburbs, and the earth still turns.
FOR THE MOST GOLDEN RATIO OF ALL
AUD MADRONA

when sounds mold the geometrical and emotions watercolor thought reality is enslaved creativity and your kiss becomes lopsidedly trapezoidal as grey-blue as the glacial water of lake Washington where we submerged our naked toes splash concentric splash baptizing our innocently pythagorean love on yet another skycrying april afternoon when my ears grab your humid hands and my feelings see you pull away reality is cloud’s reflection in choppy water the 12 knocks of the radiator become 13 bullets perforating my triangularly supported brain my fear is as red as the lipstick you refused to wear unwilling to match your pursed trapezoid to my bloody thoughts when shapes sneer and emotions gnaw reality devours 3 psychologists tell me you never existed but why should i believe their shapeless voices? they do not know your river-like touch our mathematically proven love — when mind becomes mirrored cloud and body uneasy water reality is provable memory it does not exist my mind sees a knob-kneed body below distorted by the pulsating waves of puget sound it ebbs between imaginations this is illusion this is fact you are mine you are of mind i am water i am water
THE BUOYS
LEILA SAFAVI

Silver buoys line the rim of the ocean
bobbing in the distance
like stitches on a rippling flag
or wind breathing quietly
through chiffon skirts and wet tresses.
Young girls on the boardwalk
I see them all
barefoot and lopsided smiles
with soft fleshy hands that still
don’t know where they should go.
I often wish I could yell at them
you do not have to be good
like the princess in the story
where the queen dies
and someone somewhere
told you yes but was lying no
because sometimes we are not the princess
but the dragon
and we scream red
longingly into the swift currents of the universe
tearing at fingers and knuckles
now born to stain cloth and lie fabric flat
on sharp crags in the world.
I wish I could tell them
you do not have to be good
because you want to be the cruel woman
and I have been this woman amongst many
many times before.
I wish I could yell anything
that would not be lost to the crashing of
waves and the songs of gulls
but this is the sea and there is nothing
more beautiful to the ears of young girls.
I can only hope they swim
far past the buoys
where the water is frightening and deep
and learn that there is ocean forever.
Maybe then they will know
it is not so bad to stay close to shore
as the buoys announce over and over
that you have a place to be in this world
if you want it.
Once, there was a young girl.

She had been born many times, like all of the other young girls of the world. She was a young girl at heart, deeply, in the sort of way that no one truly recovers from. People told her that being a young girl was a good thing, that in the time of fairy tales, young girls were princesses.

She was a young girl then, too, but she does not remember it being a good thing.

She remembers one life where she was lost in the woods, frightened and abandoned with her useless brother, he was crumbling the last of their food and scattering it for the birds, the trees bent in on them, the thorns scratched their legs, the sky got darker and darker and the night in the forest was the most scared she had ever been, and her brother cried and asked when Papa was coming and she knew, somehow, by the gleam that had been in their Mama’s eyes, that Papa was not coming. They found a house, her brother ran to it and begged for food although she told him they had to leave to not get caught. They were caught and the woman promised them sweets then didn’t let them go, and she saw what was happening but her brother was stupid and slow and finally she pushed the old woman down one day and ran, when the woman said that she had no use for little girls, ugly little girls who were trouble and rail thin and had gristly black hair that would stick in the teeth.

In her next life she had golden hair, smooth, fine. She had too much of it, too much, and the witch would climb it, tear it, make the ends split, and she would have to hold on oh-so-tight to the bedpost to avoid being pulled straight out of the window every time, her arm muscles grew stout and strong, and she would lay in the small bit of sun she got from noon until sunset on her small balcony, naked and letting her body warm, and the witch called her ugly. One day while in the sun a man climbed up her tower and in this life she did not remember men, and this one took her by the hair and yanked it too but in a different way, and she held onto the bedpost with both hands as he straddled her, and months later she told the witch what she felt inside of her, her body growing, and the witch pounded at her stomach trying to get it to go away. And the witch was disgusted even as she insisted it couldn’t have been her fault, where could I have gone, I didn’t know what he would do, I was left here unprotected in the sun, and the witch cast her out into the world, her hair ragged and torn and dirty and matted, her baby in her arms; she saw her prince in the woods and he couldn’t see her, and her skin burned in the sun which she could not escape.
She wished, as she knelt by the river in which she’d thrown the starving child, that in her next life she might never have to see the man or the sun ever again.

In her next life, she was the daughter of a king who locked her into a room for which only he had the key, he could not reach her and neither could any others. She sat atop a mountain of glass that reflected all the sun away from her windowless tower where she sat and read, where her skin was soft as cotton and she cut her hair short once a month, and she grew up lonesome, frightened of her father, having known no one else. When she was still young the king needed help funding the kingdom, needed alliances for winning the war, and so he called upon men, men and men, to save her for her hand in marriage, and yet hundreds died tumbling down it, and she held the counterfeit golden apple the king had told her to give to the one who reached the top desperately in her hands, in the darkness, praying no one would ever open her door. And one man did and a knock was heard, and she was waiting, and she tumbled past him, falling down the glass mountain and falling hard against the ground at the bottom, but the royal doctor was well-trained and despite the blindness that assured she would never see the sun or her husband ever, and despite the broken bones, the wedding was held and the man was a drunk in the end but at least there were no children.

She had only one wish, then. She wished to not be born a young girl.

There were many other stories, many other lives. People retold them to her now as if she hadn’t heard them before. They said that rescues were the things of fairy tales, that being a young girl was being a princess and that being a princess was wonderful and that being a princess meant having a Prince Charming and the rescue and the lovely children and hair soft as silk and skin pale as milk and she tried to explain how little she wanted any of those things, and they didn’t understand.

She brushes her hair in the mirror and the people in her life tell her about being a young girl, and she is skeptical. She remembers those past lives and wonders at how people remember them, she thinks about the princes and what happened to the prince who tugged her hair then couldn’t see her, or why the king with his possessive glance was then so willing to sell her, or why the old woman craved her brother and not her. Her mother came into her room and told her what being a young girl meant. She listened to the stories of young girls, and saw herself in the mirror, she saw in the mirror a young girl and she heard from her mother what happened to young girls, and she realized that she was one, and she realized that the age of fairy tales never left, but that everyone seems to remember them differently.
O.R.

STEPHANIE BI

The vitals on the monitor are an ignored beacon
Sine waves on the screen silently shrieking security
The heartbeat is a muffled undercurrent
To the Maroon Five and Coldplay and Five for Fighting playing in the operating room
From Doctor’s iPhone
“What kind of music do you listen to?”
The resident asks me
“Uhm, hip hop.” I answer,
My focus transfixed to the
To the
That once resembled a breast, only a foot away from my face.

I forget if I am looking at the inside of a woman
Or the inside of a canyon
The once-breast is a crater, folds of skin wrenched about by
Metal retractors boomeranging the harsh overhead lights
The abdomen sliced
Into deepening, fecund, yellow valleys, pulled aside by Doctor into Veritable tectonic plates.

The Singaporean medical student with small ears and bright eyes
Makes small talk with Doctor
Reminiscences about the street food in Singapore
(So cheap and so yummy)
As they cut, burn
cut, burn
pull

A breast reconstruction.
Reconstruction - a curious word.
But the word captures its significance well:
Meticulous demolition
A moment of silence
Then a calculated knitting of fragments, birthed from the rubble.

Doctor shrugs,
“It’s just
Skin origami.”
CRIMSON
JASMINE MITHANI

there is no quicker way to make me bleed
than one mismatched hair
on your sport coat.
COLD HANDS
JESSICA COVIL

You should know by now
to bring a pair of gloves,
despite the false pretenses of the wily sun
which offers you no warmth, despite its brilliance.
Like the artificial keenness of your peers,
the sunlight here is dazzling;
but the ostentatious air is strange and bitter,
and your hands grow cold and cracked
from want of simple, honest,
snug-fitting reassurance.

On days like this,
you question your existence here
and wonder if your hands feel just as frigid
from the outside
— if the cold is just a feeling that you have
or one you give.

You remember how your Mimi always said,
“Don’t come back all haughty-taughty like that cousin of mine did
after going to Brown a while, you’d think she knew everything
and forgot who she is.”

But Mimi rarely uses words to cut.
Her tongue is home to scriptures,
raised up in grace and earnest like a Sunday hymn,
her hands held high to praise Him.
And the knives she wields
are purely aimed at pleasing
most of the time;
her practiced hands bring back the taste of childhood
when her recipes were truths you never doubted,
when you hadn’t lost your taste for daily bread
and your faith was just her cooking
ingrained in you.
Her love is what sustains you even now,
her Southern sense of comfort passed down
like honeyed heirlooms, jam-preserved in you,
her touch of soft humility
like something you could sink your teeth into,
her heart like ripe tomatoes and peach cobbler
sometimes sweetened by a pinch of salt
— a paradox you’ve never wrapped your head around
but picked up from her hands that feel
so cold, it seems ironic to you.

You wonder if this cold exists everywhere
and in everyone,
or if warmth is just something we eventually learn
to convince ourselves of.

Perhaps you only imagine
things are different here
— wherever you happen to be at the time.
In retrospect, you might think that
someone is waiting,
their hands outstretched and wanting you;
or maybe contentment is kindled with distance
and absence feels like a promise
that no one will touch you
with hands so cold, they steal the last heat from your body.
Or maybe the bitterness doesn’t live here,
but steadily grows in your chest
and has already clutched
every inch of you.

But —
these are fleeting thoughts,
chased away by the cold hands of a clock
that won’t stop for you
and couldn’t give a damn about your Mimi’s Southern cooking
or these existential questions that you ask
as if you weren’t already fragile
without forcing yourself to think deeply about it.
Breathe deeply and pretend that
warmth is merely in the eye of the beholder
and not something you were meant to feel. 
Feel nothing and get moving; 
let your pockets warm your hands and 
keep moving 
and be done with it.
 VALENTINE’S DAY ON A THIRD DATE AND I’M A CHILD  
ALLISON TOREM

This has been written to be read aloud, preferably in front of a mirror. For when I am thirty. And with boyfriend.

The boy across the room wore the back of his hair in the front like as if they were bangs. I closed my eyes to the sound of loud guitar on an earlier Valentine’s day in my life, Dear, and imagined going over there, but him meeting me half-way and telling me Hi. I’d tell him “I appreciate your bangs” and he’d know that what I really meant was that they looked stupid. He’d take the compliment for what it was. He’d be humble, and I digress: it’s true I’m not grabbing yours back, I’ll tell my perfect boyfriend in the future on our third date. A boyfriend who will understand. Thank you for understanding. I am only thirteen now but I have a very good handle on my fears.

But it’s nothing personal. I’ve tried it and it’s just not for me. There were lots of people and a few of them stepped on my foot. I was thinking about why it’s hard for me to laugh when I know something funny’s about to happen and wondering if it was connected to my incapacity for orgasm— that I’d become the kind of wound up lady who’d finally get a man because of her love of dogs but then he’d leave me because he couldn’t make me Happy and it’d be my fault. Then someone stepped directly on my toe. Was it my fault I wore Sandals to a mosh pit? Yes and no. First, I didn’t know it was gonna mosh pit, and second, my very tiny sister misplaced my left Reebok on purpose because she still hates me. And inside me boiled like hot soup at all the Pete Wentz fans for screaming along with his woman-hating lyrics and even at myself because I came here at all to be a part of my Saran Wrap generation of Slacktivists and internet trolls. And then the boy with the bangs was beside me and it seemed necessary to grab him there, and so I reached. And I cupped.

And clasped.

And held.

And it was already hard by the time I squeezed. Hard as a rock. Like a grapefruit turned into a lemon. Big and soft no more: sharp, like ten pens rubber-banded together. Frenetic. Gross. And I screamed! Oh, Man, I did. But it only made me fit right in. (Sweating teenagers screaming about sex.) I wet myself, but out of fear, not enthusiasm: Your dick, boyfriend of my dreams, is the only one that I would want to touch if I ever wanted to ever touch one again, ever.
And everyone’s filed out now, and I met up with my friends but they had left so I didn’t. (Being in 7th grade is the shittiest tiniest of all minor things that don’t fucking matter.) Bangs Fucker emerged from the crowd. I waved before I knew I did, but he looked through me and at someone else. I suppose he didn’t know that it was me who had groped his dickness! Or perhaps my extemporaneous massage had driven his… cock-hard genitals to deep, pulsating surrender and maybe the… joy… had… obfuscated his otherwise miracle of a short term memory. I bet he did well on standardized tests. He had smart, butterfly eyes. At least he would have if I had looked into them. But either way, the smug, satisfied smile, a Very Sexist smile he smiled at randoms right past me, no friends around, that smile sprang from my left hand yes it did. PRIDE. That’s the hand I write with (but not the hand I use to cut scissors with — the lucky bastard). And I have man hands. *Fall Out Boy* was the best, I’ll tell you.

And I realize the Fall-Out-Boy-in-7th-grade-detail will date me just a little, but I’m a mature woman now and if I’m too old for you even though we’re the same age, go to fucking hell, I’ll think to myself but won’t have to say, because you’ll be Perfect. And you’ll understand that as time goes on, things change (and bodies are things) — but not completely. I have some wrinkles now between my eyebrows, but they express the same skepticism I came into this world with.

*Hi* future boyfriend, your eyebrows are furrowy and we’re both thirty but I don’t touch dicks. If I had one, maybe We’d touch dicks, but I don’t, I can only touch your dick with my hand, but I don’t want to and I’m deeply sorry. As irrational as this is, it should feel deeply impersonal. If it makes you feel any better my desire not to touch your dick is all about other men and there’s nothing you can do about it. So that should relieve you — of distress of the emotional sort. I used to think I would be dead by the time I was 18, but I made it. And I went to a club.

Eighteen. And then we weren’t. Dancing’s for slow old people and free spirits in the rain. Kids stomping in a puddle they feel genuinely stuck in. It’s hard to dance with other people. Dancing with him made me miss myself. Miss being at my own side. Miss how my hands spread like moss across my knees and how my light little leg hairs stick out so long and then I come, and I come, and I come. Not grab at my skin like a witch who wants to be my very best friend but seriously needs a fuhhhhhckin’ manicure. Not like an infant who pokes at your eyes and rubs their shit on your clothes and thinks it’s PLAYTIME PLAYTIME PLAYTIME. He was older than me. Much older. But he knew a lot less things about introducing yourself to people. Me, I’m trained. I got my degree with no cost at The Female Experience. So I grabbed him back, and I felt his stupid ugly boner, and I ran the fuck out the back door. *Dear Perfection*, please don’t look at me with those eye-
brows. Remove them. They are too expressive and I can hear your every thought. You think I’m a tease. A slut. A whore, aging like cheese!

But I’m just a child.

Twenty-one. Legal. When I was in college I acted in a campus porn movie. Illegal. I played a Feminazi who just wants to pay her taxes— my line was “I just want to pay my taxes” — but who (whom?) gives a hand job to the doorman using her own free will as soon as April 15th swings a dick on by. I have to tell you, it was a lot of fun, but my heart aches now and I don’t ever want to touch those rhino-noses ever again. Elephant legs. Hard worms. Witch’s necks. Just brutal.

But it’s Valentine’s day, and my dress is red and you’re perfect, so can we just stand still and grow old together like, starting as early as right away?

And then he’ll take my hand, tell me it’s the hardest thing he’s ever done because he was born with a rare disease which makes him hate physical intimacy, and I will look at him with my most sincerest puppy-eyes and say I apologize. I might apologize for not wanting to touch his dick. And he’ll say:

“Really, honey, I’d prefer that you don’t anyway.”

And he’ll put his hand on my Happy spot, and I’ll tell him he’d be wrong to assume I have no interest in being touched myself, and he’ll tell me he owns a GREAT, EXPENSIVE back scratcher and that we’re both so crazy this just might work.
The fact that the gravitational force between two ordinary-size objects is so small is the reason we are not aware of it. As you sit there reading, you are being attracted to this book, to the person sitting next to you, and to every object around you but the forces are so tiny in comparison to the normal forces and friction forces acting on you that they are completely undetectable. Only when one (or both) of the masses is exceptionally large – planet-size – does the force of gravity become important.

Although weak, gravity is a long-range force. No matter how far apart two objects may be, there is a gravitational attraction between them given by Equation 13.2.

Consequently, gravity is the most ubiquitous force in the universe. It not only keeps your feet on the ground,
it also keeps the earth orbiting the sun, the solar system orbiting the center of the Milky Way galaxy, and the entire Milky Way galaxy performing an intricate orbital dance with other galaxies making up what is called the “local cluster” of galaxies.
“It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity”
— Albert Einstein

New York, 2175

From the top of One World Trade Center, It could see the entire city: a sprawling, ordered mass of humanity. Mag-lev train lines and sky-lanes wove between the forest of skyscrapers in an intricate highway of light. Hover-cars darted between towers like schools of fish, peeling apart and separating to make way for the great tankers that loomed up from the smog-choked depths of the streets below. It watched this all from Its perch, nestled against the radio wire that peaked from what had once been the city’s tallest tower: A humanoid figure that was not, under the terms of the 2115 Geneva Convention, human. Not technically. It wore a suit of paneled mesh-weave so black it seemed not to reflect light but absorb it, and a helmet that covered Its face with an arachnidan array of lenses and sensors hardwired directly into Its nervous system. The sensors superimposed an electronic HUD over Its retinas, overlaying the visible world with data.

With an ease born of practice and genetic encoding, the masked figure hefted the sniper rifle into place. The matte-black weapon was sleek and finely engineered, like the one that bore it. It fired custom made depleted-uranium tipped rounds that dissolved after impact, making identification of the bullets impossible. The silencer built into the muzzle rendered each shot as quiet as a whisper.

It cradled the rifle delicately and knelt by the ledge. Perched at 541m above ground, the streets below looked like glowing veins; the pedestrians amoebas indistinguishable to an unaugmented eye. A thin antenna rose from Its mask, letting out a single, muted beep. A millisecond later, data poured over the HUD: cell phone numbers, IP addresses, radio signals, wireless passwords, and a thousand different faces, all gleamed from the crowds below. It had only one target tonight, however.

Run Program://Search<br>Start_Parameters>Alessa_Howard<br>End_Parameters>

Its vision cleared of information, leaving a picture of a smiling Caucasian woman with red hair. According to the data skimmed from her mobile-net profile she was Alessa Merkel Howard, age 30, married to Mark Howard, age 32, with two children: Alex Howard, age 3, and Triss Howard, age 5. She worked for the U.N.
Council of Bio-Ethics in genetic modification. It all matched the information in the dossier provided by Its handler. It knew everything about the target, save for one thing: why she had to die.

Such information was irrelevant to the mission parameters and had not been included. All that mattered was that the target had been confirmed; marked on the HUD by a single, green dot on the street below. It recalibrated the targeting array and Its vision zoomed past the smog. It could see the target now in perfect detail: she was standing on the street outside her hotel, unaccompanied as the dossier had said she would be. It could see the phone she was checking, the knock-off Armani coat she wore, and the scarf which framed the beaded string of pearls about her neck. Even from here they gleamed.

Red markers came into focus around the target, identifying vital areas: the heart and brain were instant fatalities, while the lungs and stomach would result in prolonged, but inevitable expiration. The legs were non-lethal, though the arteries were highlighted to afford an eventually fatal crippling. Its instructions had been clear, however. One shot through the target’s center mass.

It inhaled slowly, lungs clamping to lock in the air. It had been designed for this, bred and modified to maximize lethal efficiency. It could hold its breath for well over 15 minutes without suffering a loss in performance. It wouldn’t need that long. It activated the audio dampeners, phasing out the chatter of the streets and the roar of the hovercraft, till the only sound that remained was Its own heartbeat — thumping in turn with each click of the targeting reticule, till red rings about her chest flashed green. Lock confirmed.

As It wrapped a finger around the trigger, the doors of the hotel lobby opened and two children ran towards the target. The HUD confirmed their identities: Alex and Triss Howard. The target hugged them as the husband came into view with white stubs of paper in his hand. A quick scan of the bar-code identified them as tickets to-

It twitched, breaking the flood of irrelevant information. This was wrong. The target should have been alone. The dossier had been clear on that. Protocol was similarly clear; when circumstances complicate, utilize any means to achieve mission objective. The target was hugging the children. It had a clear shot to the head. It should fire.

*Run Program://CommsRelay:Open_Secure_Line:<Handler>*
The line was ringing in its ear as it continued to watch the family below. Its handler picked up, vocal fluctuations displayed in a wavering bar on the HUD. There were other voices in the background, other calls. The sound of an office It had never seen; never would see. “What is it, number 67?”

The voice patterns indicated irritability. This call was unexpected. It replied in a flat voice rendered into an electronic rasp by its audio-encryption suite. “There is a complication.”

The handler sighed. “And that is?”

“The familial unit is present.”

“So?”

It did not know if It was surprised by the reaction. Human behavior was something It had analyzed but never known. “The familial unit is present. Dossier stated the target would be unaccompanied.”

The pattern changed, vocal pitches highlighting exasperation “67, do you have line of sight on the target?”

It hadn't taken its eyes off of her. She was talking to the children while the husband stood by the curb, arm raised. It recognized the behavior: he was trying to hail a cab. None had yet responded. “Yes.”

“What are the chances of collateral damage?”

A brief calculation flitted over the screen, displaying altitude, wind-speed, temperature, smog; all the factors that would affect the bullets trajectory to the target, still kneeling and holding the children to her chest. It read back the result. “Probability of collateral damage is .000137 percent.”

“Then I don’t see what the problem is. Take the shot, and don’t waste my time with something like this again.”

The communication ended before It could reply, and now Its heartbeat rose, the one thing the audio dampener could not silence. A hover cab was coming down the street, moving towards the curb. The target hoisted up the youngest child while the husband took the other, both moving towards the vehicle. It waited. The cab pulled up and the husband opened the door, helping the female child inside.
The target knelt to set down the child she held, targeting reticules glitching as she was obscured by the body of the car.

When she rose to her feet, the red markers re-appeared about her chest. The children were beckoning her inside, fingers curling. Plaintive.

It pulled the trigger.
I AM ERROR
JULIAN SPERGEL

I am error.
I am banging on the empty metal corridors.
I am scratching on the doors.
I am “unexpected mass in sector alpha, wobble
detected, thruster E firing, trajectory restored” and
before that I had a name,
but now the computer monitors speak
error, error
when I run pass their camera eyes.

I am error,
and I am alone.
I am error,
and I was the one who left dents
in the computer console. I had
forgotten what it was like
to not be gnawed by
silence. It was
pleasant to hear
“Error, error, central CPU malfunction.”
And to know that someone knew
of my existence.
I am error, error
ship is overheating. To hear my name now
is bittersweet.
I am error,
I am the reason the cryo-stasis pods
in sector alpha
blink red instead of green today.
Their frozen eyes seemed
filled with hate. They were
silent, but they knew
what I had done.
Error, what are you doing here?
The green lights blinked.
You should not be here, error
Error, life support systems failing.
The monitor lights turned red with fury,
Their thawing lips dripped with
accusations. That’s why,
I am error, error, error.
They said my name so cruelly,
Error, error, critical malfunction.
And I was so very hungry.
WHY I WILL NEVER MAKE CHOCOLATE BABKA
EZER SMITH

1. If you have never eaten chocolate babka, never torn into it with your bare hands, never found the chocolate filling under your fingernails days afterwards, never stretched horizontal on your couch with doughy pangs shooting through your abdomen and the flimsy metal pan lying empty on the kitchen table, you must find your closest Kosher bakery and obtain some. To my knowledge, all chocolate babka spills over the side of its container, an undisciplined mass of chocolate filling turned hard and crystalline by the oven heat, piles of flaky dough puffing out in a great expansionary mass. I get the feeling that if the world were as hot as an oven and made of babka dough, it would never stop expanding; infinite babka for an infinite universe. And I suppose that means we would all suffer death by pastry: I think I would become entangled in a rogue sheet of dough which would wrap around me and squeeze all the air out of my lungs like a python. And if this Great Babka to end all babkas were served in a restaurant to beings larger and more ancient than the universe, one of them would call over the waiter and say, “There’s a human in my babka.” He would become ornery, stamping his feet and causing a scene, and I, in death, would provide a patron with a dessert on the house.

2. I do not know how chocolate babka is made, nor do I ever want to. I do know, however, that when I say the words “chocolate babka” around another Jew, their eyes light up. “Chocolate babka!” they’ll exclaim. “Why didn’t you say so before?” And thus, I make another friend. But this is not a risk-free proposition: woe betide me if the babka is gone when they get there. I will be the object of all their heartbreak and fury, all the loneliness they’ll feel when memories of grandparents and holidays and Shabbat dinners line themselves up in the back of their brain, only to disappear — poof — at the sight of that empty tin, those few sad crumbs at the bottom. Everyone has seen their fair share of empty babka tins — but I’d much rather contemplate the look on their face as they hold up a thick slice of the cake, a Pollock in tar black and golden brown, many Yins and many Yangs ribboning together like a frozen dance. If this is a girl, she will kiss me full on the mouth after taking the first bite, leaving, of course, some streusel crumbs on my lips and chocolate on my tongue. If this is a boy, he will kiss me as well: he may be gay, he may be straight or bisexual or asexual or any kind of sexual at all, it does not matter; chocolate babka transcends sexuality. The reason for the kiss is simple: they want me to have some too.

3. Let us say that one day I become impatient and lazy, that I do not want to make the drive to the Kosher bakery. Let us say that I am in no mood to make small talk
with the frum lady at the counter who is responsible for so much of my earthly joy. Let us say that I see her hair tied back with a colorful rag and, knowing her devotion, am ashamed that I have not been to synagogue since Yom Kippur. Let us say that I google “chocolate babka recipes” (my shame recorded in my search history forevermore) and click on the second one down because it has 4.7 stars out of 5 and the first one only has 4.4. Let us say that I happen to have all the ingredients on hand because the Jewish God is a glutton for punishment. Let us say He denies me the dignity of being swallowed up by the earth before I can get to making the babka and that I prepare the dough and the filling in separate bowls, thinking all the while about how my great-great-great grandparents would have kneaded the dough by hand and used cinnamon because chocolate was a luxury. Let us say I begin the process of twisting the dough into its proper shape, setting it in the pan, spreading the filling inside. At the moment I finish, before I put it in the oven, I will have a vision: I will see the raw chocolate babka in full IMAX 3D, inside and out, the camera swooping and zooming across the surface, diving into the center, swimming around, surfacing. And then, in 1080p high definition, I will see the precise way in which the dough rises and bakes, the way the filling melts and oozes into nooks and crannies, the way it bubbles up out of its pastry prison and over the sides to land, sizzling, on the oven floor. I will know every inch of my chocolate babka before I even take a bite. There will be no more mysterious crevasses, no more flaky peaks, no more purple prose. And once I know my chocolate babka, I will know all of them. I will see them all bake.

4. So what is chocolate babka, you ask? Well, I’ll tell you. I have no clue. But if I ever find out, I can promise you this: I won’t let you know.
SMALL DARK SPACES
CHRIS FINCHER

Now it is my turn to tell a story

Listen carefully

I.
It was only a few months after launch
when the first child went missing; gone
somewhere in the deep bowels of the ship
They looked in the control room but
He was not there
They looked in the cargo hold but
He was not there
They looked in the engine room and
There he was. The Mechanic feeding the boy
What was left of the boy

He smiled
a rotten smile
Twisted radiation scars
The ship needed him
The ship told me
He gave a
KNOCK
on the reactor core

The crowd descended
He was a big man
and it took a crowd
to drag him down
He roared
She told me
She needed him

What to do with the Mechanic now? Should
not be jailed, could not be shot, must be destroyed
What to do with the body?

He roared
She told me
She told me
All the way to the airlock

II.
He loved the ship
And the ship loved him
Something of him remained behind inside her

Something of him remains behind
in the vents
in the pipes
in the small dark spaces between
the wires and the walls
And when the ship needs another
she gives a
Knock knock
And he replies
KNOCK
And he pulls you inside her
into the vents
into the pipes
into the small dark places between
the wires and the walls

I rap my knuckles on the floor behind
my back
Knock knock
I rap my knuckles on the floor behind
my back
Knock
Everyone jumps
But you are too smart to fall for my tricks
III.
You lie in bed
My silly story far from your thoughts
Recall you find the noises of the ship comforting
The windy whirring of the life support
The easy sighing hum of the engines
The faint rivers of nuclear coolant
A little pocket in the great dark space
A living bastion of the light

Knock knock

Knock knock?

Ships make noise
Windy whirring of the life support
Easy sighing hum of the engines
Faint rivers of nuclear coolant

Knock knock

The ship has always made noise
You’re being ridiculous
I’m being ridiculous
That’s what this is

Knock knock

You only need to hear another
Knock
To prove that I am wrong and you are right
A single lonely shipboard sound

Knock knock

Where is the third knock?

Knock knock

Where? Where? Where?

Knock knock

Where?
The difference between Jackson and Tam-Tam lay in how they used their words: Jackson smashed his together while Tam-Tam hoarded hers in tight-lipped silence. It wasn’t that Jackson had a penchant for portmanteaus, nor was he (too) poorly spoken; rather, he liked to throw words together in nonsensical arrangements and draw what the result might look like. Here was one, doodled in the corner of an English worksheet:

The combinations didn’t necessarily have to be alliterative. Here was another one, extemporized in the margin of an unfinished algebra assignment:

That one might have been brought on by less-than-divine inspiration, as Jackson was, incidentally, failing tenth grade math. Tam-Tam, on the other hand,
was a kid genius, although only Jackson knew it. As far as most people knew, including their foster mother, Liz, Tam-Tam was mute and most likely dumb. Tam-Tam didn’t bother correcting them because life with Liz was easier that way, and Jackson didn’t blame her. Any human relationship that did not factor Liz into the equation offended her chronically, and it caused her no shortage of grief that she could not penetrate her foster daughter’s emotional fortress. Only Jackson seemed to be able to do that.

But then again, Jackson and Tam-Tam were preternaturally close for foster siblings. They’d met two assignments ago, under the roof of a closet OxyContin addict who obsessively adopted stray cats and named them after Confederate generals. Both kids narrowly escaped the house after they came up with a plan to lash each other with rosebush branches in the backyard and blame the resulting carnage on P. G.T. Beauregard, a one-eyed orange tabby. Somehow, it worked, probably because it was Tam-Tam’s idea, and the two had been inseparable ever since.

The night Tam-Tam spotted an unfamiliar, dingy-looking sedan in the driveway and asked, with Jackson as her mouthpiece, if they were expecting company for dinner, Liz was dejected as ever. —Why can’t Tam-Tam ask me herself?

Jackson ignored her. The doorbell rang.

—I’ll get it, Liz crowed. Then, her voice arpeggiating mischievously as only a mother’s could: —And I think I know who it is!

Jackson wouldn’t know for another ten seconds or so, but said “company” was his new math tutor. Duly invested in her children’s lives, Liz had hired a tutor for Jackson without telling him. Wendy Tran had recommended one at the last PTA meeting, and Liz knew it would be a good recommendation: Wendy’s son Peter was the best mathematician in Jackson’s sophomore class, maybe even the best mathematician of all the tenth graders in Eugene, Oregon. It was hard to say with something like that. What Liz could say for sure was that the man she found herself facing upon opening the door was the most handsome man to grace her doorstep for a while — including Liz’s ex-husband, who, true to his word, had not come knocking for fifteen years.

At most forty, the man had a Roman profile and dark, wavy hair which grew away from his face. His face, brooding and inscrutable, lent him the sort of timeless stateliness only found in the subjects of old fin-de-siècle daguerrotypes: All he needed was to be sitting with arms crossed, jaw set, and head turned at a three-quarters angle, and the image would be complete.

—Afternoon. The tutor reached out his hand. His voice was unmistakably accented.

—Ivan Aleshkevsky. You must be Mrs. Hannover.

—I am! Liz smiled hard to conceal her surprise. —Jackson’s right here. Come on in.
Then, piercingly, unnecessarily: —JACKSON!

Jackson stumbled in from the next room in sock feet, startled, and tutor and tutee were free to regard each other for the first time. Stone-set daguerreotype met shaggy-haired teen, and one look was all Jackson needed to internally dub the intruder “Ivan the Terrible.”

But externally, both tutor and tutee shook each other’s hand with utmost cordiality. They moved to the dining room, where Tam-Tam was at the table pretending to doodle with her crayons while sneaking peeks at an old paperback Oxford Abridged Dictionary on her lap. The Oxford was a favorite of Jackson’s, too, and he liked to flip to pages at random to ensure the most ludicrous word combinations for his drawings. With its help, he’d scrawled a good one beneath the sparse, bulleted lines of his biology notes:

Jackson was pretty proud of that one.

When Liz introduced Ivan Aleshkevsky to Jackson as his new math tutor, Jackson, mumbling, asked if he could talk to his mother in the foyer.
—You got me a tutor? he hissed once they had safely turned the corner.
—Yeah!
—Without telling me?
—Oh honey, I think it’ll be good for you. After all, Mr. Alekshevsky is Peter Tran’s tutor!

Jackson blanched. —Mom, Pete Tran’s the smartest kid in my grade. He could even be the smartest kid in Eugene! Besides Tam-Tam, he added internally.
—So what? It means you have a great tutor!
—No, it means I have a tutor who’ll think I’m good at math. Which I’m not.
—Well, that’s what tutors are for!

Jackson, exasperated, plodded back into the dining room. The newly-christened Ivan the Terrible was busy pretending he didn’t hear a thing, meticulously arranging the pens from his briefcase on the table.

Liz drifted into the dining room. —I’ll be in the kitchen, she offered blithely. —You two have fun!

Though Liz, true to her word, remained in the kitchen, she constantly strained her neck to check on tutor and tutee, which the latter sensed seethingly. That, Jackson thought, was exactly why Liz couldn’t know that Tam-Tam was a kid genius, maybe even a bigger genius than Peter Tran. If she knew, she’d cling to her daughter’s talent white-knuckled, just as she did every living, breathing experience her children had. To Liz, the boundary between her children’s lives and her own was as penetrable and gaping as the archway separating the dining room and the kitchen, through which she peeked at two-minute intervals.

It began as a laugh and ended as a guttural moan, the whole Ivan-the-Terrible business, because, as their sessions continued, Jackson found that Ivan really was terrible. The tutor demanded plenty from his tutee and did so with a steely-eyed indifference that even the imperturbable Tam-Tam commented on later. After discovering what a lost cause Jackson really was, the tutor assigned him packet after packet, supplementary to Jackson’s own coursework and always to be completed by their next meeting. It wasn’t long before Jackson stopped attempting the packets and used them as doodle paper instead. A recent sketch:

[Drawing of a figure on the beach with the text "nautical bush"]
Jackson saw his laziness as a heroic act of rebellion against an academic tyrant. His tutor was Ivan the Very Terrible, indeed, and Jackson reveled in the fact that his intuition had not failed him. He was still pleased as a big cat after a meal, when, during their fourth session, Ivan the Terrible thumbed through his most recently assigned packet, which lay untouched on the dining room table. Liz was, thankfully, not nearby, as per Ivan’s careful request, and Tam-Tam was just out of sight, free to read *Naked Lunch* on the couch.

—You didn’t do it, Ivan observed flatly.
—Oh yeah. Jackson sniffed. —I guess I didn’t.
—You *guess*? Did you forget?
—I guess so.

Ivan the Terrible rubbed his temples. —The problems were not difficult. You would have seen that if you had at least attempted them.

—They were kind of complicated.

Ivan the Terrible shot him a withering look and flipped to the third page. He pointed to one of the lengthier problems:

Coarse sand is being filtered through a sieve to fill a 15.98 x 27.10 x 3.05 cm container. 1400 cm³ of unfiltered sand passes through the sieve, with some of the material being caught by the sieve in the process. When the container is full, how much material, in cubic centimeters, will have been caught by the sieve?

—Oh yeah, that one was hard, Jackson fibbed.

Ivan the Terrible shook his head. —Look: the question says to give the answer in cubic centimeters. One of the answers does not, so you eliminate that—Ivan scratched out a multiple-choice option with crisp flicks of his wrist—and even with three options left, you do not need to do written calculations.

—I can’t do this stuff in my head, Jackson objected. —I’m not Pete Tran.
—You don’t have to be. Approximate: 15.98 is close to 16, 27.1 to 27, so on. Even crude mental math reveals that the volume of the box exceeds 1,000 cubic centimeters, meaning that the remainder cannot be as high as most of the options. B is the only solution that works. Ivan starred the question with his pen.
—There’s a nickname for problems like this: they’re *Give mes*. You don’t want to be the student who misses *Give mes*.

—What?
—*Give mes*.

Jackson blinked uncomprehendingly. —Is that Russian for something? Ivan sighed and waved his hand dismissively, a tacit *Never mind*.

Jackson frowned. —What’s the point of doing a math problem and not doing any math?
—I don’t know. Your school system seems to love to do this.
—Well, anyway, I guess I just didn’t understand what the problem was asking.
—What don’t you understand?
Jackson fumbled for an excuse. —I didn’t know what a sieve was.
Ivan the Terrible frowned, and Jackson inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that he’d gotten away unscathed, that he could continue emerging from these sessions unbroken, a prizefighter crawling from the ring again and again like a series of rebirths. Then, the tutor reached across the table and, without invitation, rustled through Jackson’s biology notes. He pulled a page from the pile and turned it towards Jackson: a smattering of smudged, half-assed bullet notes on osmosis, and then

—I don’t believe you, Ivan said.

Session five. Jackson reluctantly began tackling the packets an hour before his tutor arrived, albeit only parts of them. Liz passed Ivan on her way out the door and called him Mr. Ashkenazy. In the next room, Tam-Tam waited until the front door shut behind Liz before she inserted American Beauty into the DVD player.

The prizefighter within Jackson was now biding his time, relenting a little more, uppercutting a little less. But he needn’t have acquiesced, because that
session, Ivan the Terrible was less terrible than usual. Bags were under his eyes; he
demurred too often before giving input. Jackson, noticing the change, wondered
what nights were like for Ivan the Terrible, if only for a moment. Boozy? Libidinal?
Studious? Or just lonely?
Jackson halted his train of thought before it veered too imaginatively. He
was already having difficulty focusing on Ivan, who seemed even more droning
and foreign than usual. Every other word seemed to escape the tutor just before it
left his lips, replaced by “Ums” and a grimacing massage of his temples.
—I’m sorry, I’m a bit tired, Ivan apologized with a caustic chuckle.
—It’s okay. So, uh, do you distribute here… ?
Ivan the Terrible peered at the equation. —No.
—All right, so then what do I… ?
—What do you think?
Jackson was stubbornly silent. Ivan the Terrible, evidently, was just as
dogged. He reciprocated Jackson’s stubborn silence, lining up his pens again.
—What was it, anyway?
—Huh?
Ivan idly poked at the last pen in his row. —“Alligator sieve.” What does it
mean?
—It doesn’t mean anything.
—Why would you draw something that means nothing?
Jackson chewed on his pencil, feigning concentration. —I like to draw
things that make no sense. “Alligator sieve” makes no sense, so I drew it.
—Why?
Jackson shrugged. —Why not?
Ivan crossed his arms. Then, as a statement, not a question: —You don’t
like math.
—Why would I like something I’m bad at?
—I bet you don’t like it because you find it. . . what? Boring?
—Also hard.
The tutor tapped his pen against the table. —You know, math can be cre-
ative. In fact, more creativity is required of mathematicians than of most artists.
When Jackson looked at him doubtfully, Ivan gestured to the paper. —
Give up?
—Yeah. I’m stuck.
—Then allow me to prove it to you. See, you were worrying so much
about computation that you missed another Give me. With a little creativity, the
equation can be factored like so—here Ivan quickly jotted a new equation on Jack-
son’s paper—which is then solvable for…
—Um… Nine and… ten?
—Exactly; positive nine and positive ten are the x-solutions. Ivan jotted
the solutions down on the page. —You’re improving, slowly. I am sure you would have found the answer had you approached it more creatively from the start.

—Math is way too black and white to be creative, Jackson objected. —There’s one right answer and, like, a million-trillion wrong ones.

—Well, aren’t your drawings black and white also? Ivan deadpanned.

Jackson didn’t respond. Ivan the Terrible, standing up, prompted Jackson to attempt the next problem while he excused himself to the restroom. Both Jackson and Tam-Tam’s eyes followed him around the corner.

Once his tutor was safely out of sight, Jackson reached across the table, grabbing a fistful of Tam-Tam’s crayons. He tore through his biology notes until he found the grubby page with ALLIGATOR SIEVE on it and began scribbling over the sketch: splashes of yellow on the eyes, a streak of visceral, meaty red on the tongue, evergreen and lime and turquoise all mixed together and smeared haphazardly over the alligator’s scales. Outside the lines, inside the lines, it didn’t even matter; it was all technicolor madness and he colored like his life depended on it.

Jackson didn’t even notice Ivan at first when he walked back into the room. But, sensing movement out of the corner of his eye, he looked up, deer in headlights, and astonished tutor and guilty tutee locked glances. There was a moment of pregnant silence.

Jackson wasn’t sure what he expected to happen next. Whatever it was, it was the opposite of what really happened next, because Ivan the Terrible doubled over, leaned against the wall, and chortled deeply. It was not a long laugh, but it was a loud, throaty one, one that was robust and organic and, to Jackson, almost terrifying in its spontaneity. He saw his tutor’s teeth for the first time, and he saw that they were small and square and had tiny gaps between them. Even Tam-Tam swiveled around to watch, her owllike eyes peering over from the living room.

—Okay, Jackson, was all Ivan the Terrible said when his laughter had subsided. —Okay.

Liz was suspicious when Jackson approached her after his sixth session and asked if he could see the tutor three times a week instead of two.

—I thought you were too busy, she said, narrowing her eyes at Jackson over the scarf she was crocheting. The leaves had begun falling outside the living room window, under which Tam-Tam pretended to stupidly fumble with a Rubik’s Cube she’d already solved twice that afternoon.

—Yeah, but I think I need his help for weekend assignments, too.

—Isn’t that something Ivan should have taken up with me?

—I dunno. He asked me to ask you.

—That’s right, because he insists on being left to himself and his student when he teaches, Liz muttered. —Why do you need more sessions? Wendy Tran
says Peter has just one a week.
—Because Pete Tran isn’t working on school stuff with Ivan, he’s working on multivariable calculus for fun, Jackson replied, exasperated. —Ivan told me so.
—Oh, *did* he? What else has Ivan told you?
—That he thinks I’m making progress. I got a C on last week’s test, remember?
—It was a C-!
—Whatever. Jackson stood up from the sofa indignantly. —I mean, I don’t care about seeing Ivan in the first place. It was your idea.
—Well, let’s just forget about it for now and talk about it more another time. Liz set down her scarf, as though something had just occurred to her. —In fact, I’d like to talk to Mr. Alkaminsky about it face-to-face. Why don’t you invite him to dinner during your next session? We can take him out to the sit-down place down the road. I’m sure it’ll be a nice treat.
Jackson couldn’t argue with that; moreover, he didn’t want to. With each step upstairs, he reassured himself, with mounting vehemence, that he was right; he didn’t need Ivan, nor did he *want* to need him. So why on earth had he tried, even for a second, to ask for more sessions?

It was almost like having a normal family, Jackson thought, going out to dinner at Shorty’s Bar-&-Grill — except that Liz was not really his first choice of mother, Ivan the Terrible was his tutor, not his father, and Tam-Tam was anything but a normal sister. Hence why he thought it only in the split second he caught a glimpse of the four of them, off-kilter but convincingly nuclear, in the panoramic mirror at the entrance of the restaurant. It was almost comedic: the stately, Slavic Ivan amidst the restaurant’s suffocatingly kitschy Americana, Liz’s persistent (and ignored) glances at their guest, and Tam-Tam’s impossibly vacuous stare, which stared back at him through the mirror. Jackson saw, too, what he realized others must see when they spotted him — an aloof, simple-looking teenager, slouchy and squeezed into a wrinkled polo a size too small.

They were seated at a booth. Somehow, Ivan the Terrible seemed to stiffen even more once he sat down. His hands, folded in his lap, moved only to reach for his water glass.

Liz was the first to break the silence. —So, Mr. Alexevsky, have you been here before?
—Never, he responded curtly. When the waitress returned and asked if he wanted anything else to drink, he declined. Liz ordered a glass of cheap red wine and Jackson ordered Cokes for himself and Tam-Tam, who was folding a torn-off section of her napkin into a tiny paper crane.
—So, do you go out often? What do you do after you tutor Jackson?
—Well, see, I tutor quite a few other students, so sometimes after I leave I’m not yet finished for the day. Sometimes I go to another student’s house in Cottage Grove.

—Really? It must be dark when you get back!
—Yes, Ivan nodded.
—What do you do when you aren’t tutoring?
—I teach classes at night on Tuesdays and go home Thursdays if I’m not tutoring.

—Night classes? Really?
—Mom needs to stop saying “really” before she has an aneurysm, Jackson muttered to Tam-Tam. She snorted under her breath.
—And what do you do at home?
—What most people do at home, I suppose.
—Like what?
—Eat. Sleep. Relax.
—What do you do to unwind?
Ivan the Terrible examined his hands, thinking. —… Crosswords. I like crosswords. I doubt I’m as good at them as Jackson or the little one, he said, gesturing to Tam-Tam.

—Tam-Tam? Liz peered at him oddly. —Why Tam-Tam? She’s eight-and-a-half.
Ivan blinked, as though the answer was obvious. —She reads the dictionary.

Tam-Tam’s eyes shot up, saucer-like with surprise. Jackson almost laughed aloud. It was the first time he’d seen his foster sister outwitted by anyone.

Liz resolutely shook her head. —That’s impossible. Tam-Tam can’t read.
—No, I don’t tutor students her age. I do want to talk about your son, though.
—What about him?
Ivan’s hands unwelded themselves for a moment to smooth his napkin over his lap. —I want to follow up on my request to increase our number of weekly sessions.

—Ah, yes, I heard about this. Liz crossed her arms. —Why does Jackson need more tutoring? He’s already improving.
—Yes, but he could improve more. At present, I only have time to teach him the basic information, but what Jackson struggles with is spending his studying time effectively. What he needs is special academic attention which has, unfortunately, been lacking. When Liz opened her mouth to protest, Ivan the Terrible continued. —It has nothing to do with you, Mrs. Hannover. But what would be best for your son is an hour extra a week with someone who knows the material
—But Jackson’s stressed as it is; he’s told me so himself! I can’t put more on his plate.
—If either of you are concerned about stress, I can make the third session, the Friday session, a shorter one at my home. Ivan pulled out a pen and began jotting down his address on a napkin. —I don’t usually give instruction there, but I’d be willing to make an exception.
—So you’ll do it for my son, but not your other clients? Does this mean Jackson’s special?
Ivan the Terrible slid the napkin across the table. —I don’t know what you mean, “special.” Have I taken an interest in him and his education? The tutor paused. —Yes, I suppose I have.
Jackson looked up to see if Ivan was kidding. Instead, the tutor’s face was more serious and daguerreotype-worthy than ever.
Liz peered over her shoulder cautiously. —Mr. Alexovsky, I don’t know how to say this, but your “interest” in my son is beginning to seem very uncomfortable.
Liz paused meaningfully, but Ivan the Terrible just gazed at her, brow only slightly furrowed. —I don’t think I understand what it is you’re saying.
—Asking to spend more time with him alone? Inviting him to your home? It all seems rather… —she pursed her lips— … rather sexual, don’t you think?
There was dumbfounded silence around the table. No one moved except Tam-Tam, who, mortified, sunk under the table until only her towheaded hairline was visible over the tabletop. Jackson, more immobilized than before, just gaped. To Ivan’s credit, his face didn’t budge an inch. —… No.
No one had much to say after that, except Liz, whose way of smoothing over the awkwardness was flailing to defend herself. —Look, I don’t know what you all in Russia think is appropriate between two unrelated men—
—Bulgaria, Ivan coolly corrected.
—Oh my God, Jackson incanted into his palms.
—Well, all I’m saying is I think it’s weird! That’s all! Liz waved her hands dismissively. Luckily, at that moment, the waitress arrived to take their orders, after which the four waited for their food in uninterrupted silence.

Jackson lounged on the couch the following Tuesday reading a student edition of *The Odyssey* and expecting Ivan the Terrible to walk in any minute. He had to admit that he was looking forward to that day’s session, as he’d gotten back his latest grade in math: his first B, although Liz would be quick to remind him it was actually a low B-. Nonetheless, it was the best he’d done on a test all year, and he was curious to see how Ivan would react, as well as what he had to say about
the previous week’s Dinner from Hell, if anything.

He checked his watch as he read. Fifteen minutes passed. Then another fifteen minutes.

Jackson padded into the dining room, where Liz was reading. —Is Ivan coming today?
—No, Liz said. —I fired him.
—What?
—Well, it’s better to say that I “let him go.” He’d run his course.
—Without telling me?
—Well, you told me I could.
—No, I didn’t!
—Yes, you did! Remember? You said you didn’t care.

Jackson reeled, groping blindly for the back of one of the dining room chairs. Liz blithely continued. —It was about time. He was so hard on you! I couldn’t stand it.
—I think I’ve gotta go, was all Jackson said.
—What?
—I said, I think I’ve gotta go.
—Go where?
—Gotta go, gotta go, Jackson heard himself repeat again, like a mantra.

He fumbled through the papers on his desk.
—Go where?

Jackson bolted out the door in his socks, leaving Liz wailing in the kitchen. He bunny-hopped over Tam-Tam, who was dissecting worms on the patio.

Once a safe distance away, Jackson plugged the address — which he’d saved on his phone — into his GPS and saw that it was partway across town. Nonetheless, he kept running, and running, and running. As he ran, he thought about Liz and Pete Tran and just about everybody. But what was funny was that he found he didn’t really feel anything towards any of them, except Tam-Tam, of course, and — inexplicably, inevitably — Ivan the Terrible.

Soon enough, he found himself in front of a small, squat apartment complex. It was an older development, with an overgrown lawn and cobwebby porch lights. When he found the apartment number, he paused in front of it. It looked normal. In fact, it looked like every other apartment in the complex: gray, slightly dank, a bit bleak. But Jackson knew it was the right apartment because — and he checked — there were no cobwebs on the porch light. There were not even leaves on the walkway. It was immaculately kept, but still just as dark and sad as the others. The lights were off. No one was home.

Jackson pulled the paper from his pocket and carefully tore off a piece from the bottom. He wished he had a pencil; he hadn’t thought to grab one on the way out of the house. The recipient would just have to figure out what he meant.
The cleaning lady let me in and had me wait in the living room. Old wooden tiles and high ceilings. A carefully arranged collection of mismatched stuff. Stiff Victorian sofas, a minimalist red coffee table and Hollywood chairs. A five-foot globe and a Turkish rug. A dark painting of dead sunflowers next to modernist doodles and World War II propaganda. From the couch, I could see yellow-red-blue cloth laid out over a long oak dining table. At its center stood a large origami swan made of magazines. Trinkets were scattered on the shelves: a silver-painted Buddha, collectible race car models, a vintage china dish. Yet despite all its seeming incompatibility, it wasn’t messy; it wasn’t cluttered. It was a harmony of here and there, of then and now. A confusion of cultures and eras balanced in their differences.

A couple minutes later, Hugo stumbled into the room, panting lightly and apologizing profusely. You see, he had this hearing at the Tribunal and went out for a quick lunch and lost track of time but here he was and could he get me some water? When I told him that I went to the University of Chicago, he grinned and told me that the Chicago Boys did great things here. He was sweating through his suit. He wasn’t fit but he wasn’t fat, either. He told me he was 30 but he looked at least five years older. He kept running his thick fingers, tense and grey from smoking, through his receding hairline. His round face always looked a little tired, a little bit sad. He insisted that the other three roommates were young and everyone was cool, laidback and down to have fun. This year, there was a French exchange student, a Catalan Ph.D candidate in Antarctica international law, and Felipe, another environmental lawyer like him. A couple days later, I moved into the empty maid’s room behind the kitchen.

After a week of vagabonding through the city, I had finally found a home. I felt relieved. Yet somehow I still felt lost. My newfound apartment provided me with a bed and windows and old silver kitchenware that I could tell myself were mine but this stability was delicate and superficial. It was home and it wasn’t. It took weeks before I bothered to buy hangers, before I replaced the thin blanket on my bed with a duvet. In the five months I stayed there, I never bothered to buy a proper pillow, opting instead to sleep on a thin plastic cushion I found in the living room. I felt like I was just fleeting by, like this apartment, this city, this country wasn’t really my own and here I was, my days numbered, so why settle in.

What first struck me about my new Bellas Artes neighborhood were the stray dogs. They seemed to be on every corner. From the apartment terrace, I could watch them float by the dreadlocked street vendors who sold soy burgers and incense sticks. They snoozed by the subway entrance; they lay by the street-
side cafes. At peace without purpose. Despite the occasional limp or scratch or smog-muck greyness settled in their fur, they looked healthy. They rarely barked and never bit and in the winter months, some wore sweaters sewn by graceful Santiago souls.

Hugo and Felipe lived across the street from a park that stretched along the river Mapocho. That park became my favorite pocket of the city, tucked between the crown of oriental plane trees that lined the cobblestone backstreets. They lived on top of a French bakery in one of the last low-rise European apartment buildings downtown. After Pinochet took power, international real estate developers flooded the city. Tall boxy buildings swallowed up colonial houses. A few miles up the river, the business district with its glossy hotels and shopping malls towered above the city smog.

In this corner of Santiago was all of Chile. Here were its indigenous trees and rivers and roots, its European buildings and bricks. Here was the American neoliberal dream with its high-rises along the river like reeds. Here was a mutt of cultures and in some strange way, I felt like I fit in. Born to Mexican and Belgian immigrants, I spent my life split between the US and Spain. I was from all these places and I was from none of them. The European and the Mestizo. I, too, felt like the muddle of old world and new. It was in this context that I got to know Hugo and Felipe.

Most of what I learned about Hugo I learned through Felipe. They had been living in the apartment for four years, longer than anyone, and had known each other since law school. Despite his stutter, Felipe talked and joked profusely about the Chilean soap opera that he thought was his life. The day I met him he went on about this woman at work who he just could not stop flirting with but she was seeing someone else but the two were taking a break and man Chris do you think I should go for it?

According to him, Hugo's family was close to Pinochet, who sometimes used Hugo's family's summer ranch for low-key meetings with close confidants. He said that Hugo was not necessarily a strong supporter of the late dictator the way his rich, right wing family was but he sympathized with a lot of the regime's policies that he claims helped get Chile out of their third world status. Hugo's words, Felipe said cynically, not mine. Hugo's family owned a prominent pisco distillery in the famous Valle del Elqui and a beach house in La Serena, a sun washed city along the Northwestern coast. He grew up reaping the benefits of the lucrative copper industry. His dad and uncles and grandparents were all engineers or businesspeople who helped run the mines up North in the dry Atacama wasteland. After graduating first in his class from Santiago's Opus Dei university, he went on to join the family industry and work at a prominent law firm that specialized in defending Chilean mining companies against lawsuits related to the environment
and dangerous working conditions. Now he’s an independent legal representative for all kinds of companies looking to navigate Chile’s environmental laws.

Despite it all, Hugo would spend his weekdays getting drunk. He rarely woke up before ten. One Thursday afternoon after three days out drinking at a friend’s estate, he staggered into the apartment with sunglasses hiding bloodshot eyes. Despite his reserved disposition, Hugo was a charmer. He loved to flaunt his connections and his social circles. When my mom, a fashion designer, came to visit, he threw a small dinner party for her. Over white wine and quinoa, he told her all about his artist friends and of all the textile manufacturers he could put her in contact with.

People would trickle in on random nights as I was doing homework in the dining room. Hipster types with thick black buns and shirts buttoned to the neck. Girls wearing flashy bags and high heels. Mercedes, a sweet girl who liked to spend entire afternoons in the living room talking of opening a restaurant downstairs: stylish French-Italian bites, cured meats and good cheese. Sometimes, they brought in statuettes and abandoned art pieces from the flea market and they’d spend the night on the terrace spray-painting and collaging. She was a yoga instructor. Her dad had been one of Pinochet’s top generals.

Some mornings, I’d walk into the kitchen to find empty glasses and bottles, cigarette ash and the faint after-smell of his homegrown weed. His life seemed to be a string of lazy Sunday afternoons wandering from one boutique hotel bar to the next with his entourage of eccentric friends, wandering to and fro.

Sometimes, when Hugo brought people to the apartment, I’d go out for walks. I wanted to feel like I was busy. Or rather, I wanted to give Hugo the impression that I was busy, that I wasn’t just sitting there watching and listening, although most times I was. I walked through the dusty spray-painted streets. I walked by the street vendors with their antiques of gold and bronze and through the shady foliage of city hills, the soft hum of lampposts along the river. In some ways, I looked up to Hugo and Felipe. They felt like older brothers, like visions of what life might be in ten years. I was a tourist in my apartment and in this aimless adult-life that felt unsettlingly similar to what I had now.

After dinner one night in the business district, Hugo really talked to me for the first time. He told me about how his dad had died of cancer when he was a kid, leaving his mother and maid to raise him and his seven siblings. He grew up playing little league baseball in the upscale neighborhood of Vitacurra, where the American expats lived. When he moved downtown four years ago, his mother was shocked — over by where the Peruvians sell their plastic rosaries and stolen clothes, their used books and broken toys?

Felipe is Hugo’s isomer. In a lot of ways they’re the same: children of the
Chilean upper class and bright environmental lawyers. But Felipe is mestizo: thick black hair, a beard and dark olive skin. Hugo is pale and clean-shaven and proud of his European heritage. When I told him that my family was living in Spain, he was quick to share that he often visits his cousins in Madrid and that his family still has their Spanish crest. Felipe, though, likes to see himself as a patriot. He parades through the apartment with nothing but boxers and a vintage Chilean soccer jersey. Last summer, he spent thousands of dollars to go watch the national soccer team play in the World Cup. He cried when they beat Spain and again when they were kicked out of the tournament.

Felipe respects Hugo even though Felipe hates Pinochet unconditionally. He likes to think that Hugo is the product of his environment. The morning of September 11, he told me not to leave the house. It was the 41st anniversary of Pinochet’s coup d’état. On that day in 1973 Pinochet had bombed the presidential palace and took power. In his first month, he imprisoned 40,000 political enemies, causing thousands more to die and disappear. Every year since his ousting, protesters on both sides of the political spectrum take to the streets, setting fires and makeshift bombs. The wounds are still raw, he said. Although his parents hadn’t been persecuted, he had uncles and cousins who had been exiled to the Southern tip of the country where the winds are strong and it rains for days. Over breakfast, he showed me a ten-cent coin from the dictatorship years with the engraving of a woman breaking chains bound to her wrists. Under it was written: September 11, 1973: Liberty. Despite their conflicting family histories, he knew Hugo wasn’t to blame for his parents’ contribution to the Chilean dictatorship. They saw one another as constants, as anchor to their younger years. In some ways, Hugo saw Felipe as another painting on the wall that would always be there, a familiarity in an apartment of coming and goings. To Felipe, Hugo was the comforting reminder that he was no longer alone.

Felipe works ten-hour days as the youngest junior partner in his environmental advocacy law firm and teaches on the side at one of Chile’s most liberal universities. When he had spare time, he’d watch Chilean TV shows and have a few drinks at the apartment with whoever was around. One day we watched a soccer game together in his room. He was excited and giddy with liquor. Clutching a pillow and cross-legged on his bed, he’d shout and curse and laugh at the TV, relishing in childish delight. He wasn’t good with parties anymore, he’d say. Those days are gone; the hangovers last too long now.

Felipe worked those 70-hour weeks so that he could spend an extra week every summer falling asleep in the sun-soaked sand of some Caribbean island. Every year, he’d put in his 70-hour weeks and do it all over again. This year, when he came back from his trip, he told me that he had spent his time at an all-inclusive hotel in Cartagena. One day, he went scuba diving out into the deep. When he came up from his underwater exploration, he saw nothing but blue. Sky and water
and silence. His boat had left without him. He spent an hour treading water and waiting. If it wasn’t for a party boat passing by, who knows.

He said it had reminded him of the time he lived alone, before he moved into the apartment with Hugo. He never told me much about those days but it was the first time he had admitted to being truly unhappy. He said that in those winter months, he’d get home late and alone, waiting with the lights off for his Chinese take-out to arrive. That summer, Hugo took him in. They’d go to the farmer’s market on Saturday evening after the crowd had dissipated and stuff themselves with steamed artichokes.

I rarely ever saw them together. Even in the apartment, they almost never interacted beyond kitchen small talk. Sometimes, I would find them gossiping in the hallway about some mutual friend from law school. They’d share a quick story together over dinner about some legal project they’d been working on but for the most part, they kept to themselves. They had different friends and different schedules, different interests and conflicting opinions. One time Felipe was going on and on about this woman he met in Cuba who was coming to visit him. Hugo snapped. No one cares, I’ve heard this story three different times, told three different ways. I never heard them fight. To some extent, I feel as though they lived together out of habit and stability, like an old couple that had grown accustomed to each other’s presence.

But despite their differences, they lived a parallel life together. They mirrored each other. I could hear youthful carelessness in Hugo’s giggly snorts and in Felipe’s giddy nervousness. One time Felipe came home bruised and shriveled, like a kid scratched up from the playground. He had borrowed his friend’s motorcycle after work and spun around the office parking lot until he slipped off onto the pavement. Neither could cook nor clean. Their rooms were college dorm room messes. They seemed oblivious to the broken light bulb at the end of the hallway or the dust on the living room bookshelves. They lived harmoniously in their shared state of grown up boyhood.

Although I should have expected it, I was surprised when I heard that Felipe was moving out. I only had a few days left in the semester when my Catalan roommate broke the news. We were sitting on a park bench, enjoying the early summer sun. He said that Felipe told him that he wanted to live closer to work. But it couldn’t be. Why now? It seemed too easy of an excuse. We lived a 10-minute drive from his office and I had never heard him complain about his commute. The rest of that week, before I left back home, there was an eerie quality to the apartment. It wasn’t that there was tension or resentment. It was the opposite. Things were too normal, too unperturbed. Felipe continued to stop by Hugo’s bathroom to ask for toothpaste. I never talked to either of them about it. They both seemed at peace with it as far as I could tell. Maybe they were pretending, maybe they were relieved. Maybe both. In a matter of a few weeks, Hugo would
be alone, the three of us students back home and Felipe gone. Each their own way and on to the next batch of students and lawyers and yoga instructors. I think that’s why Hugo rented out rooms to us. He didn’t need us; he didn’t need me. He had more than enough friends who could move in permanently with him. He had more than enough money to live alone. He enjoyed this in and out, this coming and going. I sat on that bench in silence for a few more minutes, watching the dogs.
we kissed under the opaque sky
glossylips sap-stuck together

slipping
strokings the melting conifers
(palpable ponderosas)
bent beneath our alpine campsite
encased in St. Helen’s fury
their amber colophony
crystallized in melodic moissanite

i drew my bow across your string-speak eyelashes
raining sapphires upon our conjoined hands

in my orchestration of emotion
pix graeca becomes your operatic laugh
pinus montazumae the timbre of orgasm
and p. ellioti sylvestrie halepintus
your last lydian embrace

a damp Pacific wind found us atop the half-mountain
purposefully sprinkling asters in your hackdyed hair
while course brittle gusts
blew perfection towards the gemstone stars
floating in false ink
their mined light
illuminated your steel-string smile
as you saw my atonal actuality

trembling as I began to rumble

so you tore away from my volcanic lips
your manuscript wings beating
destroying my perfect cadence

rising from the grey-sky ash
you left me
in firebird fear of forever
MOTHER — GRANDMOTHER EARTH, I PRAY FOR RAIN
RACHEL JOVITA CORRIGAN

This is the dawn where daylight blurs
atop the crackling earth
the desiccated soil

We are here,
parched, scorched
seeking for springs
to spill beyond the tempered
cusp of eroded stonewalls

A crater in Earth, cavity in heart
something irreplaceable, irrevocable
missing from the roots of vanquished plants
— my own roots

I could not bury her
for the soil crumbled when the shovel hit
fragments dancing, skittering
then lifeless as my Grandmother herself

I could only look into those wasted eyes
lose myself in a mirror of my past
and pray for rain
RELIEF
APRIL MCCALLUM
STUDY ABROAD: JERUSALEM

In this moment,
I would marry this cool, cool stone.

Finally I have escaped the heat of the sun
that has followed me as I walked the confines
of this city.

First it was the shadow
that offered me salvation,
but it was thin

and so I pressed my ragged body against this wall
so I might be enveloped
by this small sliver of darkness,
by this yellow stone with its little shade
which had a coldness to it
that my body lacked.

That I craved.

Abandoning my care for appearance as only those away from home can,
I turned to the wall,
spread my arms
and lay against it,
it cooling the red of my cheeks.

There is still someone talking.

The tour guide
who keeps leading me into the sun,
but I do not hear him.

The only sense I can comprehend is the cool,
almost wet,
feeling
of
this
wall.
September led me down the dock, all the while vehemently pointing ahead in the distance.

“What is it?” I asked repeatedly.

She didn’t reply. On either side of the dock, the water was covered with a thin layer of ice. Underneath the waves sloshed back and forth, hoping their kinetic friction would wear the frozen blockade. They didn’t. The air recovered the ice too fast.

We were alone on that dock, two figures barely visible in a fog composed of every opaque exhale. While we navigated the stretch of the dock, September moved so quickly that I had to jog to keep up with her. I feared that the fog would conceal her entirely and I’d lose her again.

But then, quite suddenly, we reached the end. September seemed uneasy. The dock came to a close too soon. She pointed again, into the fog-filled distance, longingly.

“We need to move forward,” she urged.

“There is nothing ahead but water,” I wheezed, out of breath.

“How do you know?” She turned to me, concern weighing down her eyebrows. She faced forward again. The fog made it impossible to see more than five feet past the dock. The ice-sealed ocean periodically sighed.

“There’s just water ahead, I promise,” I tried to assure her. “Water and ice.”

She ignored me: “We need to move forward.”

September clasped her jacket zipper and, moving her hand downwards, the zipper unraveled. The two hugging ends ripped apart. As she removed her outer layer and dropped it to the wood of the dock, every pair of eyes in the city behind us perked awake. Together, their chins rose from their magazines, their computers, their iPhones, and their shoelaces. But they couldn’t see past the fog and soon forgot why they looked up in the first place.

I was close enough to see through the fog, though. I watched, in a trance, as she peeled off her scarf and her cardigan — and then her boots and her jeans. Soon
she was down to her underwear.

I took a step closer to her, observant. She was shivering. Rocking back and forth, jaw quivering, shivering.

“September?”

“We need to move forward,” she said, quiet but firm.

Her skin grew pink, aggravated by the cold. I stood behind her and watched as the pink traveled down her spine, under her panties, and down to her ankles. Her toes, I noticed, clutched the edge of the dock.

She leaned forward suddenly, suspended herself over the water at a forty-five degree angle, and then returned, her toes still tightly clutching the wood.

“Try this with me.”

So I too removed my coat, shirt, shoes, socks, and jeans, and every chin in the city behind me bobbed up and down. The cold bit me endlessly, crawling into every pore and every hair follicle. Fighting the shock, I aligned myself next to her on the dock, and approached the edge precariously.

“Not like that.”

“Not like what?”

“You’re scared.”

“I’m just trying to be careful.”

“Do you want to do this or not?”

So I inched forward, practically hanging off the dock, hoping this would prove to September that I believed her. I was so far past the edge that in order to not fall off completely my toes curled all the way around the wood. I focused all my energy into those miniscule muscles.

“No,” she repeated herself, “Not like that.”

“What am I doing wrong?”
“Relax your toes.”

“I’ll fall.”

“No you won’t, just relax your toes.”

I wanted to argue and smear her fantastical world with sense. But I promised myself that I wouldn’t this time. I relaxed my toes.

Then, I began to drift forward. September drifted with me, watching me with her peripheral vision. The air around me began to whip forcefully.

“Is this normal?”

“Yes, just keep your toes relaxed.”

We drifted down, until we were parallel to the ice sheet. The reality of gravity crossed my mind for a short moment, but I hurriedly swept it away, fearing that logic at a time like that was unwelcome and, frankly, dangerous. My nose grazed the ice and, cross-eyed, I peaked downwards.

The ice couldn’t have been more than an inch thick. I saw the bubbles underneath slosh around and reach unsuccessfully for the surface, and even further below I thought I saw little orange fish – like koi fish in a pond. But maybe my eyes were just playing tricks on me.

“We’re going to have to swim,” she said.

I turned my head to her in a panic and lost my balance. The right side of my face slammed against the hard of the ice and I yelped in pain. The ice below me loudly cracked, and veins sprinted out from where my face and the ice collided.

“Relax your toes!” September yelled at me.

I relaxed my toes.

I drifted back up, parallel to the ocean, where the tip of my nose just barely touched the ice. My face throbbed and I thought my nose really should’ve been bleeding.
“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good. Well, the ice is definitely too thin. We’re going to have to swim.”

“Maybe we should wait a little while, September – at least until the storm passes. Maybe it’ll be better in a few months?”

She ignored me and began drifting upwards again. I followed.

Upright again, I saw that the fog had grown much denser. It was compacted by the continuing flow of exhales. I could barely see my feet, much less the ice below.

September’s eyes were focused on the ground. Her straight blonde hair draped her face and hung down so low it tickled her exposed belly button.

“Ready?”

“What are you doing?”

“We have to swim.”

“You’ll freeze.”

“No we won’t.”

“You’ll freeze.”

“We’ll be fine.”

I was silent.

“Ready?”

“Okay.”

“On the count of three?”

“Sure.”
“One… two…”

She stepped back with her left foot in preparation. I followed.

“Three.”

We jumped in, feet first, and as our heels broke the ocean’s seal, the jagged pieces of ice pierced our rigid skin, slicing deep into our ankles. The water was, probably, as cold as the outside air, but it seeped much deeper into me, burrowing into and corrupting my every reserve of heat. The moment I was submerged, I found myself incapable of moving. My organs contracted, painfully. I tried to wiggle my toes. Just one toe. Just one of those miniscule muscles. Nothing. I tried to wiggle a finger. Just one joint. Nothing. I tried to crinkle my nose. To twitch a cheek muscle. To close my eyes, even. Nothing. Like sleep paralysis, I watched the world around me go on as I failed to summon the ability to wake up. I floated downwards in a haze of pink.

September did not seem at all fazed by the cold or her hemorrhaging ankles. She looked around hurriedly, her green eyes illuminating the whole ocean. She looked awake.

When she turned back to me and realized that I was gone, she pivoted back around and, kicking her long legs, pushed away from the dock and me. She swam farther and farther away and left behind her long and vibrant ribbons of red.

Shortly after I lost sight of September, the swarm of koi fish reappeared. They weaved around my body, treating it like a jungle gym. They climbed my torso, and ducked under my armpits. They squeezed between my fingers and played hide-and-seek in my hair. As my eyesight began to darken and my ears filled with harsh monotones, I could still feel them gamboling around me, playfully pecking my numbing flesh. I couldn’t be comforted, though. I relentless hissed them away until the end.
I say this!: Fuck zoos! and Fuck you if you like zoos!
   and how bout this one!: move to the rainforest,
   don’t be a wage slave!
Either swat the hive w/ your own palm
   or LET IT BE! Buzz!
Give your iphone to your dog! Call it an uber!
Evade your taxes! Don’t be a pussy!
   Give unky sam the ol one TWO!
Be a cop or a robber! Come on, get BRUTAL!
   Hey!: fight ISIS!
   Hey!: be CIVILIZED!
Come on, now!
   What, do you want me spell it out for you?
   R-U-N-F-O-R-P-R-E-S-I-D-E-N-T-!
   A-S-S-H-O-L-E-!
Get a Talk show!
Im going all in, baby! Show me the money!
Opiums the opium of the ppl! That ones obvious!
Why be a capitalist if you cant ride the rocket ship!
   Boom, baby!
Run a 5k straight up your own ass!
   And another straight to hell!
Oop! A missed call from God!
Ha! Really got em this time!
   BamBOOZLED!
Rats! Foiled again!
   Gadzooks! This things about to blow!
   Yikes!
Hey!: Im not done w/ you YET!
CHING-CHONG
LUCIA LU

Ching-Chong the witch is dead.
She was born that way,
a still February morning on Chinese New Year.
(I, her almost-twin,
came with the blizzard the night before.)

Like all good witches, death does not stop Ching-Chong.
When I was eight I swung her fetus on my back,
and she gifted me her blood-knot placenta
as a worry stone.

Ching-Chong does not speak my language.
Sometimes she crawls onto my shoulder
and whispers Li Bai in my ear.
Sometimes she chatters like wooden chopsticks
dropped in a restaurant on Canal Street.

My sister loves cheap chopsticks.
When I split them with my hands,
I feed her the asymmetrical tops:
one a wedge of wood to choke her,
the other a splintered shank to cut her,
so her mouth-blood fills up her throat.
She likes it that way.
Ching-Chong uses blood in her spells.  
She collects it from the edges of my fingernails,  
from the cracks in my gums.  
She is teaching me magic too, dark magic, gui magic.  
The kind that monsters use to become pale princesses,  
bowing magistrates, slit-eyed students.  
Ching-Chong learned magic from the demons  
that followed Tripitaka far, far West.

My sister is a patient teacher, and I am a studious apprentice.  
Like all good witches, I am just a normal girl.  
I keep my cursed jade stuffed deep in my pockets.  
The bones of the monk I ate last night  
look just like my teeth in the daytime.

If the Monkey King himself looked beneath my skin,  
he would see white, white like a February snowstorm.  
I’ll ring a few bells for that.
“How do they endure this, Bilsin?”

The devil gave an affected shudder and drew his shawl more tightly about his shoulders.

“Honestly,” he muttered, casting a dark look at the snow swirling outside the drawing room window. “Disgusting stuff, winter is. Utterly wretched.”

“I hear that some humans prefer it, milord,” said his lackey as he prodded at the fire. “Particularly over the heat of a Parisian summer.”

The devil scoffed. “Don’t be daft, Bilsin. No human in his right mind would prefer winter. Who was it you heard say such a silly thing?”

Bilsin’s handsome face twisted in concentration.

“I believe it was the Duc de Villère,” he said finally. “The blond man who kept goading de Châtillon into raising the stakes.”

The devil snorted. “Of course de Villère would prefer this season, Bilsin! His mother lives in London, and like all humans she has a horror of winter travel. She will not visit him ’til the spring.” He gave another violent tremble and scowled at the hearth. “Do something about that fire, will you?”

“Yes, milord.” Bilsin set the poker to the flames for a moment or two, then sat back, frowning. “Why do humans have a horror of winter travel?”

The devil rolled his eyes. “It is one of their idiotish fears, Bilsin: totally unnecessary and wholly irrational. They are under the impression that the weather affects the quality of their journey. As if their fates had not been determined long before their insignificant entrance into this world! As if a dry, sunny journey could negate an accident prescribed to them centuries ago, eons ago, in a time far beyond their comprehension!”

He fell silent, glaring into the flames as though they had had the temerity to suggest that summer travel was somehow more pleasant.

“But milord,” Bilsin said suddenly, still frowning, “if all has been already decided, what is the point of a human’s existence?”

The devil sighed. “How often must I explain this, Bilsin? A human starts life with more than one story. He starts out with a dozen, a hundred, a thousand, all tangled together like yarn. As he lives his life the variations are slowly eliminated, until the endings narrow to one final death. If he takes his friend’s word on the romanticism of colonial life, for example, and travels to the Americas, he will perish at sea—but if he distrusts his friend’s advice and remains in the Old World, he will rather unwillingly sacrifice his neck to the Revolution. A human’s life might unfold in a million different ways, Bilsin. The precise way in which it unfolds is determined by his choices.” He paused, then gave the fire a cross look.
“Has that revived at all?”

Bilsin prodded the logs halfheartedly. “No, milord. I could bring in more wood if you would like —”

“No, that will not be necessary,” the devil interrupted. He huffed out a breath and was quite put out to see that it formed a little cloud in the air before him. “I hate to waste myself in such a manner, but I suppose it cannot be helped. Human means can only provide so much, after all. There comes a time when a higher power is required.”

He blinked twice and the fire burst out to thrice its previous size, blazing so brightly the whole of the drawing room veritably blistered within a matter of seconds.

Bilsin smiled and returned the poker to its stand. “It is like home now, milord.”

The corner of the devil’s mouth turned up. He removed his shawl and it promptly vanished. “Yes, it rather is. Toasty, don’t you think?”

The lackey nodded. “It is a pity that not all humans have the luxury of such warmth in this season.”

The devil snorted. “Even the ones who do have it complain incessantly. De Villère is an exception, Bilsin, and even then, as I told you, he loves the cold for an ulterior motive. Humans hate the cold. They loathe it more than anything, and every winter, without fail, they express that loathing in the loudest, most sensationalised manner possible. They make a grand effort to outdo one another with embellished tales of ice-cold wooden floors and frozen water in the basins, of uncooperative travelling weather and near-death accidents.

“It is nothing that this human was without a fire for six hours, for that one went without for ten; it is nothing that this human’s fingers grew stiff as a washboard, for that one’s turned blue as a corpse; it is nothing that this human’s hat blew off during his morning constitutional, for that one’s carriage broke a wheel on the way home, and he had to walk ten miles uphill in the biting wind and icy snow, without a coat to boot!”

He stopped for breath. Bilsin took a moment to reflect on his master’s infinite wisdom.

“So you see, Bilsin,” the devil said at length, “humans are very foolish. They exaggerate their own troubles so that they might more easily disregard the ones of their fellows, and all for something they cannot alter in the least bit. What is the point of their complaints about winter, anyway? They are accustomed to it, after all, and dislike it if it changes. If it is abnormally cold they say the crops will suffer, yet if it is unusually warm they lament the increased insect population come springtime. What’s more, humans have absolutely no control over it! Good Lord, even I don’t have control over it! Me, the devil himself!”

Thunder rumbled, low and fierce and quite at odds with the snow still...
falling softly outside. The devil tipped his head up to the ceiling and frowned.

“You’re not funny,” he said flatly, but the thunder just rumbled once more, this time shorter, choppier.

“I believe he is laughing at you, milord,” Bilsin ventured, shooting the ceiling a nervous look.

“Yes, Bilsin, I must agree that he is,” said the devil resignedly, his lip curling. “Then again, isn’t he always?”
Almost on time.

When he came through the doors of the coffee shop, he did not see her at first. In the corner, hunched over her phone, she did not notice him until he put his jacket over the chair opposite hers.

He said a quick apology, and she sighed. She knew full well he would always be late.

He ordered a chai tea. As he waited for the barista to make it, he looked at the selection of coffee cakes in the display. They certainly looked good, studded with blueberries or swirled with cinnamon or powdered sugar, but he knew they would be too sweet. They always were.

“Tall chai tea?”

Took long enough. He grabbed it from the counter and returned to his chair, sloshing a few drops of his hot drink onto his hand as he sat. He licked his burn.

She tucked her phone in her pocket when he sat down.

How had his week been?
The same as always. Hers?
Oh, pretty good, all in all.

A loose thread hung from the sleeve of her red blouse, and she fingered it as she spoke. She had just been assigned to work on some big, new project at work, which was exciting, and she couldn't wait to get married. Speaking of which, it was about time he found someone who made him happy. She had a couple of single friends she could introduce him to.

No, it wasn't necessary.
But she thought he could at least try. She didn't want to find him moping and drunk out of his mind again because no one was there to take care of him.
He would be fine. He didn't need a woman around to coddle him.
She wasn't so sure of that. And she was still upset that he had not gone to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting last week.

Drinking too much a couple times did not make him an alcoholic.
She understood that it was difficult to admit to having a problem. She laid a hand on his arm. He needed to do this to get better, and she would support him. It was nothing to be embarrassed about.

He moved his arm away. Of course not, because he had no problem.
He needed help —
He didn't.
She only wanted the best —
Of course. But it was the thought that counted, right?
He didn’t need to be so rude. She was only trying to help. And he was very politely refusing her offer.

She stood and grabbed her bag. She was only trying to help him, as a friend should, but if he was going to throw it all back in her face —

He sneered at that. She always had to be right, didn’t she? Always right and always the victim, the role she’d had the most experience in. A martyr like her should be worshipped as a fucking saint.

Blinking back tears, she told him that he was being cruel.

He laughed. Cruel? Men are cruel, and she should know that better than anyone. Did she think Matt had really changed? That he wouldn’t treat her like dirt when she was legally bound to him?

Stop. The thread in her sleeve was pulled long and taut, and as she tugged it again, it snapped. Stop.

What could she do to stop them? Nothing. She could sit there and take the cruelty like the victim she was, and keep hoping like a fucking idiot.

She shook her head.

What else could she do? Pray? Preach? Run? Yes, run from the cruel beasts. It would be best for a person like her to get away from them before they ate her alive.

Without bothering to put on her jacket, she hurried out the door.

Her coffee still sat on the table; he picked it up, examined it. Took the cap off and tasted it.

Irish crème.

* * *

Five minutes late.

When he came through the doors of the coffee shop, she had already bought her drink and sat with it at the corner table. Busy staring into space, she did not notice him until he put his jacket over the chair opposite hers.

He offered a short apology, and she waved him off.

He tried to apologize again, but she sighed, told him to order his drink, and took out her phone.

He ordered a chai tea. As he waited for the barista to make it, he assessed the other customers in the shop — a bit of mental exercise he liked to do now and then. How would they react if, say, a zombie outbreak suddenly occurred in the street? The woman in the too-tight short shorts looked like a screamer, probably one who would draw the zombies’ attention and die first; the man on his laptop would probably use the confusion to run away; the man in the sweatshirt who just walked in would charge first and —

“Tall chai tea?”

Jarred from his thoughts, he took it without a word and walked back to his seat. A drop of the hot drink fell onto his hand, and he sucked on his burn.
She put her phone away when he sat down. There was silence until she broke it.

How had he been recently?
Fine. How was her week?
Oh, pretty good, all in all. Work had been pretty busy, but she enjoyed it. Matt was helping with the wedding planning, and she had set up an appointment on next Thursday to choose her dress…

As she spoke, she picked at the end of a loose thread on the sleeve of her red shirt. He wanted to reach over and just pull it out for her, but he thought she wouldn’t appreciate it. She didn’t like change. In a zombie apocalypse, she’d make an excellent damsel in distress, waiting for some champion to fix the world.

Was he listening?
He hadn’t been, but he said yes and asked about her new project at work.
With a little huff, she lifted her cup to her lips and took a long sip. She didn’t want to talk about work on her day off.
So he asked about her plans for her honeymoon.
She wanted to go to France, but Matt wanted a cruise on the Mediterranean, so that was probably what they were going to do. Matt was also getting transferred, so they were moving to England afterwards.

England! So far?
Yes, but —
When were they moving?
Probably right after the honeymoon.
Silently, he pondered the implications while he watched her fingers tug and tug at that loose thread. He offered to help her with it and yanked it out.

Well. She gave a small laugh. He didn’t need to do that.
Her wedding was in April, right?
Yes.
He… wouldn’t be able to attend.
What?! Why?
He was being deployed in February.
That was in a month. How long had he known about this?
A while.
And he never thought of telling her? She was counting on him to be there; he was her moral support! And now he was abandoning her? If he had told her, she could have rescheduled the wedding, moved it forward so he could be there.

No! He cleared his throat. No. He couldn’t do that to her.
But it was her special day, and if he wasn’t there —
Exactly, it was her special day, and it shouldn’t matter whether he was there or not. She would get married and be happy. He had no right to get in the way of that.
At least promise that he would visit her when he came back.
He couldn't.
The silence lay heavy.
At last, she pushed back her chair and said she needed to go. Matt had planned a date. But they would meet again next week, wouldn't they?
He said nothing, only watched her go. The wind ruffled her skirt as she stepped outside, and then she was gone.
Her coffee remained on the table; he picked it up and sipped it.
Toffee.

* * *

It seemed like time was always slipping away from him here.
When he barreled through the doors of the coffee shop, he saw her sitting at the corner table with drink and phone. Not good. Busy rubbing her temples, she did not notice him.
He put his jacket over the chair opposite hers and muttered an apology.
She stared at him.
He repeated his apology, but she shook her head and told him to order his drink.
He ordered a chai tea. As he waited for the barista to make it, he leaned against the counter and gazed out the window. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still grey, and there was water everywhere. His cold, wet sock — because a stupid kid had jumped in the puddle next to him — chafed, and he resisted the urge to take it off and chuck it as far as he could.
“Tall chai tea?”
He took it and walked back to his seat, his wet sock squishing in his shoe, his very full cup of tea sloshing. Some of it spilled onto his hand. He swore. She handed him a napkin to wipe it off.
When he sat down, she leaned back in her seat and regarded him while he sipped his drink. Finally, she spoke.
How had his week been?
Fine, just like any other. Hers?
Oh, decent.
How was work? The wedding planning?
Work was the usual. Sitting inside at a desk for eight hours. Though she had been assigned a new project. The wedding, well, it was being planned. She hadn't realized there were quite so many things to do before you could have a wedding, and it was so much hassle she was beginning to think she didn't want one, after all.
He didn't know what to say to that. There was a loose thread hanging from the sleeve of her red blouse, and she kept picking at it. He wanted her to stop.
He asked about her project at work.
She snorted. He didn’t really want to know about her work. He was smug because he didn’t want her to get married, and now he could say ‘I told you so.’ Bastard.

That was not what he wanted to say.
He was a lying, smug bastard, and he could go fuck himself.
Stop it, he told her, and took a deep breath. What was wrong?
What was wrong? Was he really asking that?
Yes.
What was wrong? Her laugh had a hysterical tone. Everything. She hated her job. She told everyone it was great because they all said she was lucky to have it, but she hated it. Hated it! And the wedding, Christ, she hadn’t even picked out a dress yet, and the venue was all wrong, and why the hell was she marrying anyway?

Calm down, surely it wasn’t all that bad?
Calm down? Her life was shit, and he wanted her to calm down? She could die tomorrow and no one would give a damn because she was replaceable. She gave a ferocious tug on the loose thread, and out it came.

No, that wasn’t true —
She was nobody. Fucking nobody. Like that stupid Emily Dickinson poem. A frog? So what if she wanted to be a frog in a bog? She wanted to be somebody. She wanted to go to France and have a romance. She laughed loudly, and suddenly there were tears. God, what was she doing with her life?

He moved to sit next to her and patted her awkwardly on the back. She shrank away from his touch, curled up and covered her face, and sobbed.

So he sat with his hands on his knees and tried to say something comforting. She wasn’t nobody; she was a very important person to him, and he cared about her.

He was a nobody too! Her shoulders shook, and she took gasping breaths. Her hands were wet with tears.

He got up and took half the napkins from the dispenser so she could dry them.
She took them and dabbed at her face and blew her nose. He sat, and when she seemed somewhat calmer, tried to speak.

Hey —
She couldn’t deal with people right now.
They could go somewhere private —
No! She pushed back her chair roughly and sniffed. She needed to be alone.

He stood to help her, and she turned on him.
She swore to god, if he followed her, their friendship was over.
She stumbled out the door. He grabbed her bag and phone and jacket and
followed her. What kind of friend would he be if he let her go like that? And if she chose to end their relationship, well... perhaps it would be for the better.

When he came back to get his jacket, her cup of coffee still sat on the table. He stared at it, then slowly raised it to his lips.

Pumpkin spice.

* * *

When he walked through the doors of the coffee shop, she had already bought her drink and sat with it at the corner table. Busy talking on her phone, she didn't see him until he placed his jacket over the chair opposite hers.

He gave an apology, and she nodded at him and held up a finger. He would have offered an excuse, only he wasn't sure if she even noticed he was late, and her phone conversation seemed rather important.

He decided to get a drink.

He ordered a chai tea. Never did like coffee. As he waited for the barista to make it, his eyes fell on a single man at a table for two, a pink rose in his death-grip. The man looked incredibly tense, and he wondered if the guy was on a first date or at an execution.

“Tall chai tea?”

He grabbed the cup and walked back to his seat; the liquid spilled when he turned, splashing on his hand. He sucked on his burn.

She hung up right as he sat down.

How had his week been? Her smile was disarming.

It had been just like any other. Hers?

Good, all in all. She was warming up to her work, and her manager had assigned her to be on the team that would be working on the exciting new project. Her wedding planning was going pretty smoothly, and she had just booked a venue...

There was a loose thread hanging from the sleeve of her red blouse, and she fingered it as she talked. It was a mesmerizing motion, and he couldn't help but watch.

Was he listening?

He looked up. Oh, yes, what about the wedding dress?

Well, she hadn't picked one out yet. She had an appointment on Thursday at the bridal shop, and she was thinking she might want an off-white color rather than bright white, but he wouldn't be interested in hearing about all the details. She laughed and took a sip of her coffee. He tried to drink his tea, but it was too hot and scalded his tongue.

The murmur of the coffee shop was comfortable.

After a moment, she leaned forward and said that she had a favor she wanted to ask of him.

What was it?
It would mean so much to her, especially because he was her best friend—
Just say it.
She took a deep breath. Had she ever told him… that Matt was infertile?
No, she had not. What of it? Was that why —
Well… Matt had known all along, and she had found out about it awhile ago, but she guessed it never came up in conversation.
Was she leaving Matt then?
Oh, no, nothing like that.
Okay, then. So, about the favor…
Yes, the favor. She and Matt both wanted children, but they would need a sperm donor.
He felt a chill settle in his stomach.
She took another deep breath. Did he think he could be their sperm don-
or?
She wanted him to father her children?
Well, not really. He would be their biological father, yes, but Matt would be their father. He could still be involved in raising them as a godfather, though.
Them? She wanted multiple children from him? He tried not to think of how she’d look with her belly swelling with a child. His child.
What about adoption?
It wouldn’t be the same. She wanted to experience all of motherhood.
And he wanted to be a father, but not like this. No, he would not do it.
Her eyelashes fluttered, and she pulled so hard on the loose thread that it snapped. She thought, as her best friend, he would understand. It meant so much to her, and she would much rather bear his child than the child of a stranger.
That was the problem, wasn’t it? It would be his child. His child would be raised by a stranger.
Matt was not a stranger.
No, Matt was a douchebag, an asshole with an inferiority complex, a jack-
ass on a power trip, a little fucker who would treat women like —
She slapped him. She would not hear another word.
Well, he wouldn’t sit by and watch her throw her life away. What was she doing with a man like that?
She gathered her belongings in silence and left. The gust of wind as she opened the door flapped her skirt, and then she was gone.
Her coffee still sat on the table. With a sigh, he reached for it and tasted the cold dregs.
Almond.
Back then, in the green-carpeted basement
Sophie and I sat for hours after dark fell the
rest of the house and watched what
we could. Long before I left his room
sobbing on Thursday morning clutching
last night’s shot glasses, I saw
Rory’s boyfriend say adios on a
dance floor, wrench his hands from
hers. We envied her shiny hair and
the boys that lined up at her door
mouths that kept saying love.
Before I got that
and other things.
Before in
Bolivia on the streets I shuddered
at the men who called me chiquita.
At my host mom’s
friend in the club, twice my age, who shed
his gentleman mask to
ask me once, twice, three times
for my phone number.
Inside the convent,
weeks later, heart bell-clanging,
I followed my male
guide, alone on the tour. He showed
me extra rooms: a staircase
where centuries of feet, heavy with sin and
repentance, dented a crescent
into the steps. The roof, where
I could see the eight flower petals
encasing the building. Suddenly
as we crept along the passageways I
kept waiting for something
uncomfortable
even unspeakable to
happen and when it didn’t
and I bid the simply friendly
guide goodbye I walked
20 minutes through the city streets
un-breathing
longing for the home
we don’t have.
“Christine” my stepfather might say in in a prickly voice during some irrational argument. “Chris” is what her mom and dad called her. “Mom” for me. On sunset nights, over the Pacific Ocean, on the Venice Boardwalk, my mom would take me along for the ride and the read. Clouds of blue navy turning dusk-grey, suspended high up covering the glistening violet dark of stars waltzing up from the east and the desert. I could look towards the sun, over grass and palm trees, to where it had set and left orange wisps and brush-strokes floating around the horizon, hovering above the sleepy head of Point Dume, infinitely far across the bay.

On the fading esplanade Mom sat down at a dingy table where “Psychic Readings” was painted on a plywood sign. She would not let me watch. I didn’t care. Scattered cards, palms, and the shadowed face of an unfamiliar witch doctor, maybe another mother, all in the light of a lousy bare bulb. I didn’t see a future in that. I was only a kid, maybe that’s what it was, but the loose pebbles on the asphalt and the ragged beach bums who staggered from the surf with kelp in their beards kept me occupied with wide eyes and a shut mouth. When it was over we would recede inland, pulling away from the waves and the ocean, and the red sunset silhouette of a sleeping beast, our backs to the beach, we retreated to the bungalow where my mom was Christine and I was the kid.
It’s 2014. The line for Reagan Youth sticks out the door. When it snakes back inside, we’re hit with a blast of warm air, darkness, and graffiti. There’s a yellow banner hanging from the ceiling, which reads “NO MOSHING!” T insists that we check out the bathroom, so I follow her into another dim space, more graffiti and playbills. We snap selfies in the mirror. It’s a nice bathroom. Faint smells of piss and soap, but not reeking.

The venue is relatively quiet before the set. People mill around, clustered in small groups chatting or curled up on the concrete benches. I heard the food here was unusually good, so I saunter over to the bar and ask where to order food, and get laughed at by the bartender. (“Here.”) We get mozzarella sticks. Shit, they are good.

Ultrahazard takes the stage first, two women in bright blue and pink hair, and two men without distinguishing features. They scream into the mics, the rip of their guitars destroying any chance of their words being heard. Crowd gets a little antsy. Heads start bobbing. Two people charge into the center of the pit. They dash around in a crazed messy pattern, trying to bring as many people into the pit as possible. The cycle repeats with a few more bands. Each time, a few more people enter the pit. By the time the Bollweevils take the stage, we’re jumping and screaming for blood. Darryl Wilson edges near the crowd now, giving us the mic, and we shout the words straight back at him. He is not far above us, he’s one of us. T and I, the seasoned concertgoer and the newcomer, stand at the edge of the pit (stage right near the trash can) thrashing to the barely-distinguishable beat in our own ways. In the semi-darkness, I feel like no one can judge me.

Once in middle school, I ended up at the mall with a school group. As we walked past Hot Topic, the whispers grew a little nervous. Soon, they were covered up by laughter. I didn’t laugh. The store’s patrons may have looked scary and weird, with their dye and body modifications, but their outfits also conveyed a sense of control. I did this. Your dress code didn’t do this. Social norms didn’t do this. Maybe the people were self-assured in real life. Maybe the extreme care they put into appearances belied how little control they had over the rest of their lives. Either way, they seemed braver than I was.

Two weeks ago, T stood in line for Patti Smith concert tickets. The older people behind her were skeptical of her love for Patti Smith, because she was so young. There was an air of “oh, you didn’t truly experience punk like we did.” Perhaps they didn’t take young fans seriously, because we had such easy access to everything. The first wavers were pasting hand-made playbills on walls, no internet to help them promote. They learned of events through word-of-
mouth. The scene was more underground. Concerts were more violent. People lived faster and/or died younger. Iggy cut himself with glass and razor wire. Nancy was stabbed to death in a bathtub, three years older than me. Dave dying slowly of heroin addiction, barely past thirty. Henry’s body bruised by the crowd, at Henry’s bequest. GG Allin shat and bled on stage. Now, we find songs on Youtube and buy clip-on rings at Urban Outfitters, and a guy can walk into a frat party bearing a foot-high turquoise mohawk, no one bats an eye.

“It was a miracle I got to see Patti Smith at all,” T enthused. “The show was sold-out, but I arrived 2 hours early and they put me on a standby list, and that’s how I got the ticket!”

Trey Oswald looks so young at first, I think, this can’t be Reagan Youth. Reagan Youth’s original lineup, with Dave and Paul, formed before Trey Oswald was born. Regardless of his age or his absence from the original lineup, Trey is talented. As he sings, the moshpit truly coalesces. No more of the lonely two-man moshpits, struggling to reel a third man in. We’re all in the pit now. Even T and I, who’ve been on the edge this entire night, we enter the pit. I punch and kick and receive both and shove fellow concert-goers, laughing in each other’s faces. Somewhere along the way, I lose my glasses. Yumii, a guy I met during intermission, helps us sweep the floor. Finally, T retrieves the halves from a security guard.

I can’t see for shit without my glasses. The street’s a blur of lights. Thankfully, T is there, and she leads me to the right bus stop.
EYES OPEN
LUCIA LU

each morning my waking instinct
is to scrabble our bedstand
for my love-for-you.

i look. you're beautiful.
the way the bed C's
against your body-curl
is beautiful.

i live with my love-for-you perched
behind ear-shells.
my face is my face this way.
my eyes pick through classes, books,
the grain of your forearm —

my vision blurs,
slips down
a bridgeless Han nose.
i push my love-for-you
back into place,
or you do.

some days i wake up
and i don’t remember
where i put it.
i’m annoyed,

and then you laugh, find them
in a corner under our desk,
beneath a pillow I had half-unpeeled
the night before
BERNARD ISN’T A NAME
ALLISON TOREM

Hannah Greene is nothing more and nothing less than the woman who made me into a lesbian. I remember it like a metaphor. A good-bad movie. Is that okay?

“What’s his name again? ‘Bernard’ isn’t a name in the 2000’s,” she said, winking at me at the wrong time, acknowledging that she didn’t give me time to answer, and that she liked it that way a lot. She blew her bangs out of her face and they fell right back, but continued: “He’s gotta be a baby, his nerds for parents bringin’ ‘Bernard’ back, or he’s gotta be upwards of… I donno, sixty years old? He’s got a crib, or a house, and definitely a woman in his life doing the dishes that ain’t you. It’s the 2000’s, Vick, wake up and find yourself a dude in real life you can see.” She tossed my phone onto the other twin bed. She smiled. Damn was Hannah proud. Born with a name like Hannah, she’s been insecure since the 90’s that she was bound to be fat and vacant of opinion. Hannah and I went to grade school together. She’s my main bitch.

That week in Texas Hannah and I remembered how to play this one game with alcohol we discovered in the sixth grade. It’s not so much the game itself, but the game of pretending it’s a game. Every night that week we made a mockery of spending 20 extra bucks getting two beds in the shittiest hotel we could find without there being rats. The both of our fat asses couldn’t fit in one bed. Hands sticking everywhere, waking up with god knows what on them. Tossing and turning. Her pointy-fuckin’ elbows. Sharpest motherfuckin’ things in the world. We could sleep better under a bridge back in Chicago. But it’d been a while since we’d had a sleepover and neither of us, confused, officially adulting, and somewhere in a part of Texas Hannah’s parents didn’t even know, expected to know exactly what to do. And we made it through the nights. Half-awake. Wondering about fishbowls and the meaning of life. It got cramped. More than it had to. But she was my friend and her kisses tasted like dinner so fuckin’ sue me. It’d been a long time.

“Seriously: Vick! You’re better than this virtual bullshit. And fuck Peter. And Max is dead.” He’s not dead. But I’ve learned to keep quiet about real life ex-boyfriends. Hannah starts, she keeps going. “Leo is a sex offender. D is… also dead.” And then stops. Hannah frowned, trying to think of another thought, maybe a true one, and accidentally looked at me. We burst out laughing. It was funny to see each other as full-grown adults. Her in a giggle, me in a manly sound. She’s still so bad at being bad. I held my hungry belly as I laughed at her longer. I find my favorite people funny even after years apart, even when all they’re doing is sit-
ting crossed-legged saying something dumb to me. I stood up and took two steps to wash my face without looking in the bathroom mirror except to see Hannah on a bed, her thighs stuck together from the open window heat, her dress barely doin’ a thing, letting Texas do it for her. TV static in the foreground, this shitty vacation.

“I love you Hannah.” I said, “Thank you for coming with me.” Hannah returned my gaze in the mirror. Enough was enough. Kissing like 6th graders was fun. Tomorrow I’d touch her and make her come.

Two fat girls cumming in a twin bed. Otherwise alone in the world. Same age as twin sisters. Hannah would hate that I’ve turned her into a bad poem but would be grateful that I have no audience. I spent high school without Hannah, deciding if I was a bitch, a slut, or a nag. And I spent college inside. An extrovert who hated people. Fucking boys on the down low with my eyes closed. A clown without any makeup. A bad poet. And then some. I hadn’t seen Hannah in person since her dad got the job in Texas when we were thirteen. Both of our mothers are nice but don’t like to tell the truth but do it anyways. And Hannah takes heat well. Her dress covers very little, but the creases of it, weighed down and shaded by sweat, remind us both of ice cream sandwiches that melt too fast into your hand and feel like mud. It made us remember being little. We’d get chocolate on our teeth and call each other “Shit Tooth” in Southern twangs. That week we walked around Texas doing the same and fitting right in, sort of.

Hannah was as bad at paying attention as she was good at wearing adult overalls unironically and she never did notice that I didn’t plan to see my dad until the last day of our trip. One of the saddest things that happened when I grew up was the realization that I didn’t have to share everything about myself with even the people who I loved the most. That there were things I could and should keep to myself. That I wasn’t planning to ever go back home was one of them. She didn’t even ask why my suitcase was so big.

Hannah will never know my come-face. I’ll only ever know hers. She scrunches everything up — cheeks, toes, and holds her breath like it’s on purpose. Maybe it is. Either way it’s cute. When she comes is when I feel the most powerful. I feel like a predator. Like I’ve captured a small bunny and am tickling it against its will. Velociraptor against bunny. Round 1. I’m glad she doesn’t see it that way. She places her hand on my bare thigh in the Renta-convertible. Squeezes. Bites her lip. Damn, I’m glad I skimped on food to save up for this stupid fucking car. Her hair looks excellent flapping in the hot air. Shit, I don’t know how to drive and she’s touching my leg. We’re lucky if we make it a mile. But we do. Suddenly we’re in front of a Denny’s. It’s been exactly one mile, the car says. “Is-this-your-destination?” Hannah talks like the technology-woman in the car. I look straight ahead. Shake my face a little. “Naw, I just want some waffle fries first.” Hannah gets up clumsily. Practically falls on me to kiss my face in the car. We’ve been hungover all
week but this is just Hannah. Seat belts on, but hers stretched. I laugh at her. She says, “Waffle fries first,” smiling at the corner of her mouth. I grab the back of her neck. She likes being on the bottom and fucked. She’d never admit it: she took a class in college on feminism. I didn’t. I think it’s sexy when she needs me.

Thirty minutes later both our hair looks like shit. It’s Denny’s in the middle of the day. We’re as close to a cliché as we can get without the car breaking down and a thunderstorm in Texas inspiring us to follow our dreams. Some Willy Wonka Shit. Somewhere over the hetero-normative rainbow. But no. It stays a normal blue on the outside. What’s weird is how it feels to eat pancakes across from my best friend for the first time in so long. I didn’t notice before, but she’s really pretty under bad lighting. Instead she’s listing everything wrong with her face: “My eyes are too small. I haven’t dated anyone and you can see it in my face. I embarrass myself. I do it all the time at the supermarket.” I smile at “supermarket.” Take a cocky Midwestern bite, like I earned it. Wink at her. Makes her laugh cuz she knows I’m listening in the way that I do.

“I love you.”
“I love you.”
“I missed you Vicky.”
“I missed you Hannah Greene.”

My dad’s house is like three houses. Shit is good in Texas. When he and my mom got a divorce when I was thirteen, I asked him through tears over waffle fries to take me with him so I could live with Hannah or hang out in her back yard with a dog or something. I never told her that, but it’s true. It was also the last time I cried in front of a person. He said the courts wouldn’t let him. That I couldn’t even visit, not even when I came to visit Hannah. And that it was my mom’s fault. So I never visited Hannah. I just grew up and then learned the truth at some point. Hannah offered to go to a cafe around the corner and wait. I told her she’d better not come in unless she wanted to see me get especially ugly. She left it up to me but told me I was beautiful and strong. I honked the horn. A warning. And shuffled up the gravel with Hannah two steps behind me, holding her sobering hand, taking her there.

“You sure you don’t want a cucumber sandwich?” is what the pretty woman in a dress said to me. I asked her where she got the idea of a cucumber sandwich, that it was an idea my mom would never have. Like putting on a dress. The pretty woman smiled blankly for just long enough for me to know it was fake. I could tell she knew what me and Hannah knew. That my dad was unforgivable. That he moved all the way to Texas so he could fuck a woman just like her. I felt sorry for her. She had nice pearl bracelets, though, and, real or fake, she didn’t deserve to be with him. “He’ll be done showering soon, okay? Until then… Hannah… Please, tell me about your life?”
Hannah didn’t need to check in with me. “I’m just here for Vicky.” The pretty woman smiled and nothing else. Hannah and I wished we had bracelets we could rearrange on our wrists. Awkward as fuck. “So, I mean, what do you wanna know?”

Pretty woman: “How was college? Vicky’s father told me all about the two of you.” She focused on Hannah. I focused on her. The shower stopped running. Quiet.

My dad can’t be described as any kind of person. Maybe I learned this from movies, but the crazies in your life are supposed to fuck up the same way every time. The worst thing about my dad is he’s unpredictably unpredictable. Just when I get used to nothing for my birthday, I get a big package in the mail, the return address of a pretty woman so my mom doesn’t know it’s from him. And so that if she does, she gets to feel extra bad because it means he’s still moved on. No card, just a big teddy bear. Because that’s what I need.

Mostly I feel sorry for my mom. When I get mail from him it brings her to marbly tears. Other than her relationship with her own mother, my dad is the worst thing in her life, except that it brought her me. Given that, just, mathematically speaking, I do try to be the best thing ever. It sometimes works: one time I won the Young Author’s Award and she was so proud of me she laugh-cried. I fucking love when she does that. She gets embarrassed that she’s being too loud — taking up too much space — even in her own living room, so she covers her mouth, but then tears well up, and she covers her eyes, wipes them, rubs them. She’s a vision and I hug her and I don’t cry. My dad found out from our neighbors about my award, who kept in touch with him through pay phones, and he sent me a clip of published writing he’d done before he had a family. Addressed from another pretty woman. I burned my award — and that was hard, because it was a trophy and at age thirteen trophies help us sleep at night and wake up in the morning knowing who we are. I burned it though. And I only wrote boring shit from then on, kept the rest to myself. The trophy melted too slowly in the back yard. I Skyped Hannah and stared into space for two hours. She didn’t say a word, just did her algebra quietly while I looked at her.

My dad’s black hair was dry and his clothes were nice. Was he even in the shower? Was he instead taking a shit while his daughter waited on the couch to see him the first time in ten years? He should know that I would have found that very funny. His clothes looked well-suited on him. As if he’d never been to jail, and if he had, that he’d only spent an afternoon there, visiting a decent person. It was hard to look at him in the face without wanting to jump up and hug him, which surprised the shit out of me, so I just bit my nails and told him to “have a seat” in his own house. An hour went by and I learned he’s been in anger management. I remembered what Hannah had stressed to me late the night before, the same
night she taught me the word “hetero-normative,” and I repeated it: It’s not about anger. It’s about thinking it’s okay under any circumstances to beat the woman you love and force her to have sex with you. “You need to be in therapy, Dad.” He told me he was. Is. “I still am.” The pretty woman smiled at me privately, scrunched her nose, and nodded. It helped. But then she squeezed his knee. Other than that I don’t remember what happened. Hannah tells me I was brave. I don’t remember having any other option but she drew pictures on my skin in bath bubbles that night in the tiny tub: the plane ticket I paid for, the phone call I’d made to her, the train she took to meet me. I shivered in the bath and she hugged me from behind. Said I could’ve just gotten a job somewhere after graduation and told myself I was too busy forever. Instead I’d decided to face my past. We splashed around.

On the drive back to the hotel I wondered about people like the pretty women who sleep with my dad, even without knowing what I know about who he really is. I can’t tell if he’s handsome. I can’t tell. There’s got to be something about him that makes women look up at him and see something good. Maybe I’d understand if he wasn’t my dad. He doesn’t talk a lot. Maybe he drives them places. Maybe he stares straight ahead like me and smiles at them or winks blankly and gets lucky because it just so happens to be that moment in a woman’s day when it’d just save her to believe she’s beautiful. Maybe he doesn’t say much but he says “I love you” and maybe it’s everything. That night I didn’t fuck Hannah.

A creeping feeling sat in the bottom of my stomach like if I touched another person I’d hurt them and turn them into my property or worse turn them into me. Hannah listened to me be quiet. I made little noises like “mm” and “hm” lying on my back pantsless alone in the other twin but didn’t say anything. The less I said the more I reminded myself of my dad. The more I did that, the more I wanted to die. To get the fuck out of there. To send Hannah home. And so I did. She covered her face and burst into tears and told me I was acting childish. That I couldn’t hurt her and she wanted to stay. She screamed at me, which made us laugh: “You just hate yourself so you’re reverting to childhood defenses! And you’re being fuckin’ stubborn like always!” We laughed because we sounded like teenagers making loud generalized statements and getting noise complaints and we so totally weren’t anymore. She stood in front of me. A silent moment and I could see her sweating now. Normally I would throw down. She’d moan and squeal and I’d tickle her to sleep. This time she kissed my throat. She took the back of my neck and squeezed it. She pushed me into the bed I was already lying on top of. She pulled my hair a little. I looked up at her, surprised by this new Hannah, and told her to pull it again. To just tell me what to do with my life. To just tell me what to do to not be my dad. To just tell me what to do. She said, “Yeah.” She stayed there, shaking nervous for what felt like a full fuckin’ minute on top of my body, leaned her pointy-ass elbows into me to balance while she put her hair in a
bun, and then stared me straight in the face like serious business: “You want me to tell you you’re a lonely piece of shit because I know you better than anyone else and if I say it, it’s true. Well fuck you.” She pulled the blanket off me. I thanked her because it was too hot. She pulled my underpants off with her teeth. I asked her what she was doing and for once she didn’t answer because I had asked a stupid question. We both knew. I started laughing. She didn’t. She was serious: “You’re better than him.”

I wanted to be angry at her but I couldn’t. My eyes got wet. I felt like a baby in a dream. Being born or having a nightmare. Shitting its pants. Not knowing what the hell is going on cuz the adults are screaming. I let go. I don’t remember much else.

When Hannah got married, I moved back to Chicago and didn’t have any real friends. I wanted to explain my situation. To open up and be the complete human being I hadn’t been since I was born. Maybe I’d omit that I’d lived with my lover’s parents in a garage in Texas for two years, and gotten odd jobs at toy stores, but I’d come clean about everything else. I wanted to be in therapy. To hug my mom and make her laugh and cry at once. But time had gone by, I guess, and I felt alone. My mom and I saw a romantic comedy and she still drank out of a straw the same way and clapped like a seal at the previews. She squeezed my leg. The movie made her cry just like the Pokemon movie did when she was pregnant with me and at the movies alone. Both times she was emotional to be with me. So I wrote a lot of bad poetry and melodized it in the shower. I listened to the sounds of oceans recorded on tape. I didn’t go to any open mics but I did attend a knitting club and even started following Gloria Steinem on Twitter. I went back to school and re-trained to be somebody’s assistant. I know Hannah is real. I grew up with the girl. And I know as well as anyone that I am too. I know our lives are real. But.

The next morning at Denny’s I wondered if she’d ever seen my come-face. So I made it. I made it over eggs and she asked, “Ha. What’s that?” I smiled and after teasing her for saying “Ha” like as if it were a word, said, “Nothin.” Somehow I thought that’d make everything better, but a part of me wished she had seen it. Seen something of mine no man had ever seen and ever would again. She took my hand and I took it back and ate more eggs with it. She’d had enough of me last night. I winked at her. What didn’t help is my phone blowing up with texts from online-dating Bernard. My dad’s name is Phillip. Another old guy’s name. Another name that would be funny and ironic, but only at first, on a baby. Hannah took my phone and tossed it onto the floor. The battery fell out and I didn’t mind. But she didn’t look up at me and smile or make fun of it. She ate like a fuckin’ horse. I asked her if I could come home with her, as if I’d thought of it just right then. She stared straight down at her waffles, shook her head a little yes, and kept eating.
THE LAST ECLIPSE
JULIAN SPERGEL

When my eyes saw dancing lights
in the corona of the eclipsed sun,
I knew you’d be arriving soon
with your beautiful scythe and
elegant bone saws.

There’s not time enough to explain,
why you and your kind ride the wastelands
while I lean on a rain-water barrel,
too sick from radiation to
close my eyes against the dust.

But you’ll be here, in caravan
of rusty parade floats, so soon,
and I’ll gaze into your masked face
as your friends unfold the operating table.
I’ll whimper prayers of thanks,
and you’ll be opalescent.

The world is winding down, you’ll say,
the reasons lost amid a sea of sepia grass,
and I’ll know what has come for me.
The umbra is waning. “I’m here”
your voice a song over the whir of blades.
And in the end, I’ll understand.
PAPA KAUFMAN’S ROSEMARY PIZZA DOUGH

2 teaspoons active dry yeast
2 tablespoons of sugar
2 cups cold water
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
6 cups white unbleached flour (extra flour for kneading)
2 tablespoons of salt
Finely chopped rosemary

1. We begin by enlivening the yeast, shall we say. Two teaspoons of active dry yeast, two tablespoons of sugar, two cups cold water, one tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil, blend together and let sit in a bowl for ten minutes, or a machine with a dough hook (da fuck) mix with a whisk. Biggest mistake when mixing dough is to put the salt with the yeast at the beginning, this kills the yeast and the dough will never proof.

2. Add four cups of flour to a mixer, white unbleached all purpose (bread flour with lots of gluten), add two tablespoons of salt. Blend the salt and flour so the yeast mixture does not hit pure salt (yeast will die if it interacts with pure salt).

3. Add the yeast mixture from step one to the combined flour and salt, not all at once, mix. Once mixed in, add another two cups of flour and the rest of the yeast mixture, and mix till a dough like shape appears.

4. Knead the dough on a board covered with flour. Cut up a small amount of rosemary, say one or two tablespoons, and knead into the dough. Work the dough into a ball, place in a bowl, cover with a wet towel to keep the dough humid while it rises. Let rise for an hour or two in a warm place.

5. Once the dough has risen significantly, cut it into three/four equal pieces and form each of these pieces into a ball. Place the balls on a baking sheet and let rise for another two to three hours, covered again.

6. Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Cover with desired toppings. Bake for 15 minutes. Place dough on parchment paper for a crunchier crust and a cleaner pan.

NOTE: Papa Kaufman bakes at a high altitude (5,300 ft).
FRESH MANGO BREAD BY GRACE LYNN OF HOUSTON, TEXAS

2 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
2 teaspoons baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup granulated sugar
2 large eggs
¾ cup vegetable oil
2 ½ cups mangoes, peeled and chopped
1 teaspoon lemon juice
¼ cup raisins

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

2. Combine all of the dry ingredients.

3. Beat eggs with oil and add to flour mixture.

4. Add mangos, lemon juice and raisins.

5. Mix well.

6. Pour into 2 greased 8x4 loaf pans.

7. Bake for about 1 hour or until toothpick comes out clean.
HEALTHY-ISH ZUCCHINI BREAD

1½ cups flour, wheat or white
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ cup yogurt
½ very ripe banana, mashed
1½ teaspoons vanilla
1¾ cup granulated sugar
1 cup grated zucchini
2 teaspoons cinnamon
Ground nutmeg and cloves, to taste
Chocolate chips, lots and lots of ‘em

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Grease and flour a bread loaf pan.

2. Sift flour, salt, baking powder and soda, and spices into a bowl.

3. Beat yogurt, vanilla, mashed banana, and sugar in another bowl. Add sifted ingredients to wet mixture until well-combined. Stir in zucchini and chocolate chips, mixing well.

4. Bake for 40 to 50 minutes, or until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean.

5. Wait 10 minutes to cool. Eat and enjoy!
This magazine is entirely free, and always will be.