

14th Annual

Café Shapiro

February 22, 2011 – North Quad

March 10, 2011 – Shapiro Library

Anthology of Selected Poems

and Short Stories

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Café Shapiro

Welcome to Café Shapiro! Café Shapiro began in February 1998 as part of the University's "Year of the Humanities and Arts" (YoHA). Originally conceived as a student coffee break, Café Shapiro takes place in the Shapiro Undergraduate Library during winter evenings in February. It features undergraduate student writers nominated by their professors, many of whom have also been nominated for various writing prizes within the University and beyond.

Students are invited to perform a live reading for a peer audience. For many student writers, Café Shapiro is a first opportunity to read publicly from their work. For others, it provides a fresh audience, and the ability to experience the work of students they may not encounter in writing classes. Through its fourteen years of existence, Café Shapiro has evolved to become a night (or several) of sharing among some of our best undergraduate writers, their friends, families, and the wider community.

Café Shapiro has been popular, and in many years we've created an anthology to provide access to these students' works after the live performance. We are delighted that this year's anthology could be printed, once again, on the Espresso Book Machine (EBM). The University of Michigan acquired the EBM in order to help our users connect with content in the ways most useful to them, thereby supporting the research and learning needs of students, scholars and faculty. For more information about the EBM, visit <http://www.lib.umich.edu/espresso-book-machine>. It's exciting to see our mission being realized in this year's printing of the Café Shapiro Anthology.

We hope you enjoy reading the work of these talented writers.

Shapiro Undergraduate Library Reference Department
Ann Arbor, Michigan
April 2011

Table of Contents

Nicole Aber

Mine Are the Sweetest	3
-----------------------------	---

Chana Ambuter

You!	21
Rose-Colored Glasses	23
Kynori: Live Chess Match (<i>Excerpt</i>).....	24

Josh Bayer

Modern Karma	31
Dead or Alive	33
Little Sip Drinker	36

Alex Dimeff

Pack of Two	39
-------------------	----

Savannah Hagen

Miss Piggy Realizes She is Better Off Without Him	47
A Heavy Monday Morning Pick-Up	47
The Busy Mother	48

Elizabeth Hand

Wife	53
Lana	54
Kolkata	55
Re: Middlesex	56

Keesha Hargrow

Daddy's Girl	59
New Activities	63

Maura Harris

Snow Place like Home 69

Chrisi Hornback

Chapter 1: Of Yellow Bicycles and Basketball 93

Caitlin Michelle Kiesel

Hemingway’s Androgyne 103

Sideshow Brothers..... 104

Seven Bonsai 106

In July..... 107

On Receiving Your Letter from a Monsoon Venice..... 108

Soul Search 109

Nadia Langworthy

Loving Rain 113

Anna Paone

The End of Last Year..... 125

Revenge..... 126

The Word of the Spirit, The Spirit of the Word..... 128

There is a Man in Prison 129

Sublimier Things..... 131

Jacqui Sahagian

The Merits of Giving Up (*Excerpt*) 135

Nathaniel “Zeke” Tell

The View From Above 145

Sophia Usow

8th Night (a work in progress)..... 155

Cassie Vernier

The Day I Grew a Pair 177

Nicole Aber

Nicole Aber



I'm a junior from Westchester, New York and am majoring in English with a minor in Chinese language. My current favorite book is *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. After graduation, I'd like to go to China to continue my Chinese language studies and possibly teach English.

Mine Are the Sweetest

I bumped into Andy, who was sitting next to me on the bus and holding a lit cigarette out of the window. It was the final leg of our journey to Hainan's *Dongjiao Yelin* or Coconut Grove. Sheila sat a row ahead of us, next to a middle-aged Chinese man with his white sleeveless shirt pulled up over his beer belly. Not surprisingly, we were the only foreigners on the bus, which felt alien itself, cruising in between rice fields and thick canopies of plush green trees.

Within seconds of stepping off the bus and inhaling a hot breeze smelling of salt and fish, we encountered three old Chinese women, who came up to us holding coconuts and machetes.

"What do they want?" I asked Sheila, the best Mandarin speaker of the three of us.

"They're selling coconuts," Andy said, answering for her. "You can't understand?"

"Ooh, I love coconut milk," I said, ignoring his comment. "But I'd love some food even more."

"Agreed," Sheila said. "They do have a pretty thick accent. Don't worry about it, Julia."

"I know, I wasn't," I said. For the past month, we had been studying Mandarin in the provincial capital of Haikou for our intensive summer language program. Unfortunately, my language skills were still subpar.

The women pleaded that we buy their coconuts, each woman claiming theirs were better than the others. Never mind that they all most likely came from the same three-mile radius.

"*Wo tian tian de*," one woman said, stressing the coconuts' sweetness.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“*Lai le, lai le,*” said another woman, telling us to come to her.

The third woman squatted in the middle of the road and began hacking away at a young green coconut. She carved an incision at the top and stuck a straw in the hole. She held the coconut up to us after the drink was complete, her wrinkled, tan face beaming with a metallic, toothy smile. Sheila paid the three *kuai* for her coconut, Andy and I following suit, not wanting to buy from one woman and not the other two. After answering the usual questions of where we were from and what we were doing in China, we asked the women if they knew a place where we could get lunch. They sputtered back at us in bubbling Mandarin, almost completely indecipherable to me.

We began walking down the road, past souvenir shops filled with straw hats, bright-colored plastic sandals and pearly-pink shells.

Sheila, who towered over the women, talked to them in her advanced Mandarin, while Andy and I walked behind. I gave Andy a joking smile as he sucked on a cigarette. He looked at me with his hazel green eyes that looked almost mean. He never understood when I got giddy like this. But back then I melted at even the slightest look from him indicating his attention was on me. His backpack was hanging on his petite frame, and he was wearing the blue shorts and racer-back black tank he'd gotten when we went to the outdoor markets in Haikou last week. I pulled out my camera. It was the new Canon PowerShot SX10 my parents had gotten me for my twentieth birthday back in May, before I left. I captured it all: the towering coconut trees, the little Chinese women with their coconuts and machetes, stray dogs sleeping outside street-side tourist shops, groups of men gathered on street corners sitting in bright pink plastic lawn chairs playing chess. And Andy. Even though I would never smoke and didn't support his

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

smoking, he looked pretty sexy with a lit cigarette and made a great subject.

We arrived at a restaurant that was deserted except for two teenage girls watching China's version of American Idol on an old TV in the atrium leading into the dining room. After being assured by the old Chinese women that the restaurant was in fact open for lunch, we were handed off to a twenty-something guy who beckoned us to follow him.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked Sheila.

"Not exactly sure," she said. "He said something about getting our fish. Don't know where that is, though." We walked down a path carved out among the coconut trees, which turned into sand as a white beach emerged.

"So are we going fishing or what?" said Andy, clearly irritated. He always got like this when he was really hungry.

"I think we're just picking them out from ones they've already caught," I said, pointing to an area divided by wooden planks and netting. "Relax, we're gonna eat soon," I said, squeezing his shoulder. It was warm and slightly moist with sweat, and felt wonderful. But when I looked at Andy, his eyes were set on the Chinese guy's V-shaped torso and biceps. I tried to pretend he was just looking really hard at the fish.

After picking out a medium-sized fish that none of us could identify we headed back to the restaurant.

"Well, that was an adventure," I said, as we settled at a table decked with two large bottles of Tsing Tao and a pot of tea.

"That's awesome they keep the fish so fresh like that," said Sheila.

"Yeah, that was pretty cool we got to pick it out," I said.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Not when you haven’t eaten in seven hours,” said Andy, burying his eyes into his palms and rubbing his hands back through his sandy-brown hair.

“Oh come on, stop being such a baby,” I said. “We’re gonna eat in just a few minutes.”

“I can’t wait to get into the water,” said Sheila, ignoring Andy’s whining. She always chose to disregard his negativity, while I tended to console him. Maybe he would recognize my coddling as adoration.

“The only fun part of that trip was watching the cute guy scoop out the fish,” Andy said.

“He was all right, I guess,” I said.

“That’s what you always say,” Andy said. “Cause you don’t like Chinese guys.”

“Whatever,” I said, rolling my eyes. He was always saying this. Pointing out guys he thought were cute. I never knew what to say back.

“Look, she’s cooking the fish right there,” said Sheila, pointing to a small, exposed kitchen off the dining area.

“Oh, awesome,” I said, standing up and grabbing my camera. The woman basted the fish in what looked like a garlic-ginger sauce, while tossing some baby bok choy in a wok over an open flame. Every part of her body was moving, grabbing spices, utensils and bottles of various liquids. It looked like she was competing in a sport. The woman glanced over her shoulder to see all three of us watching her.

“*Keyi ma?*” I said, asking her if I could take photos. She bowed her head in acquiescence.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

After snapping away until she finished preparing our meal, I joined Andy and Sheila who were already killing the first bottle of Tsing Tao. The waitress placed the fish, bok choy and three bowls of rice on the table, and we immediately plunged our chopsticks into the steaming food.

“It’s delicious,” said Sheila, scooping some rice into her mouth.

“Mmm, so good,” said Andy, finally starting to perk up.

“You guys want to go to the beach after this?” I said.

“Yeah, but we should get a room first,” Sheila said. “There should be a relatively cheap one right near the resort we passed on the way in. It was in Lonely Planet.”

We continued eating as we talked about how hard our classes were and gossiped about the other people in our study abroad group. Andy and I started hanging out almost instantly at the start of the program. Even before I introduced myself, I thought he might be gay, though I still pictured him shirtless, hovering over me. We’d do homework together in my dorm room every night — him on my bed, me at my desk. Each night after we got back from dinner, I’d eagerly await his knock. And when it came, I’d jump up, goose bumps creeping up my arms, my stomach fluttering. Besides Sheila, I didn’t bother making other friends on the trip; I thought Andy was all I needed. I looked over at him inhaling his rice. He was an expert at using chopsticks and had taught me how during one of our first meals together. I didn’t care that he was being bossy and arrogant because he was paying attention to me. I removed my gaze from Andy’s face and looked out the wide window in front of me. It was around four and the heat and humidity still hung in the air. A man was napping outside the restaurant on a homemade hammock hanging in between two trees, while a dog slept underneath.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Ugh, so full,” Andy said after we paid.

“Ooh, I’m feeling the Tsing Tao,” said Sheila.

“Yeah, I’m a little woo-oo,” Andy said as we walked out of the restaurant.

We walked back to the center of town, where we saw the women with the coconuts fanning themselves underneath the shade of a tree.

“*Hao chi ma?*” they said, asking us how our meal was.

“*Hen hao chi,*” we responded, saying it was delicious.

We asked them where the hotel was and they told us to keep walking about five minutes and then turn right near a little shack. It was past the shack, toward the beach; come back if we couldn’t find it, they said.

We found the little white-washed hotel tucked away in the fauna and put our stuff in the two rooms they gave us. I wanted to share a room with Andy but that would have been odd considering Sheila was also with us. I slid on my green and white striped bikini in the small but typically rural Chinese room, with sheer-white curtains caressing the windows.

We walked down the road and through the entrance of the fancier resort, with its golden-wood bungalows and paths dotted with red lanterns. If it weren’t for the lanterns I would have thought we were somewhere in the Caribbean instead of on China’s island province. We arrived at the beach and stood facing murky green water sparkling under the summer sun nonetheless.

“Don’t know if I’d swim in there,” Andy said, his eyes squinting and his hands linked behind his head.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Eh, it can’t be that bad,” said Sheila, her white sundress with tiny blue and yellow flowers flapping against her thighs. “It’s way cleaner out here than back in Haikou, and people even swim in the water there.”

“Only Chinese though,” Andy said. “You’d never see a foreigner swimming two beaches over from Haikou’s shipping lanes.”

“True,” I said, digging my pink-polished toes into the warm sand.

It must have been the off-season, as the beach wasn’t too crowded, and we were the only foreigners. We set our things on some dark wooden lounge chairs that probably belonged to the resort. I half-ran to the water like I used to do when my family went to Jones Beach when I was a kid. The water was warm and felt delicious on my golden tan skin. I was pale nine months of the year, but when summer came, all my freckles came out and I browned like a marshmallow over a fire. This genetic trait helped me blend in more in China, not like Sheila, with her Irish skin. She was constantly getting stopped by people requesting to take photos with her, for her to hold their babies while they snapped away. Her skin was even paler against her bright blue bikini, as she followed me into the water. Andy, with his opposition to swimming in semi-polluted water, remained on his chair, leaning back and listening to music. Probably to some sort of techno I’d never heard of. He was a music snob and was always criticizing me for liking Taylor Swift and Dave Matthews Band. Top 40 shit is ridiculous, he’d say.

“Uhh, it feels so nice,” Sheila said, skimming her hands back and forth across the surface of the water.

“Yeah, I haven’t been to the beach in forever,” I said.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“I don’t get why Andy’s so paranoid about coming in,” she said. “I mean, sure, it’s probably more polluted than back home, but you’re not gonna die from swimming in it once.”

“Yeah, he has these weird convictions about things,” I said, then quickly dunked under.

“Are you still thinking of traveling after we finish?” Sheila asked.

“Yeah, I really want to, I’m just not sure where I would go, and I’m not sure I’d want to go alone,” I said. “Plus my parents aren’t crazy about the idea.”

“Well, I’m trying to figure stuff out with Jordan. He might come for a week or so. Might go to Guelin and Xi’an. You’re more than welcome to come with us.”

“That sounds awesome. Yeah, I’m not sure, though. I need to talk to my parents some more. That’s cool Jordan’s coming.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see him,” Sheila said.

“You’re so lucky,” I said. “I feel like I’m never gonna have a boyfriend.”

“That’s how I always felt. But it just kind of happens when you’re not looking for it.”

“Yeah, that’s what everyone says.” I puffed my chest and floated on my back, squinting at the sun. I loved floating like this; the water going in and out of my ears, the calming deafness. After a while of staring at the sky, I stood up to find Sheila out of the water and lying on a chair next to Andy.

I got out and went to where they were sitting, arriving in the middle of a debate on whether Chinese were content or not living under communism.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“The majority of Chinese people are perfectly happy with their day-to-day lives,” Andy said. “It’s the way the media portrays it that really gets to me; that all Chinese people are repressed by the terrible Communist government.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying. It’s true the media definitely skews what goes on here. But even so, you can’t deny that people don’t have some basic individual freedoms. I mean, just take a look at the Internet censorship. Come on, no porn! Tell me you wouldn’t be upset living without online porn,” Sheila said.

“Touché,” he said.

I sat down on the chair on the other side of Andy, grabbed my camera out of my backpack and started taking pictures of him. He really wasn’t all that attractive. One of his front teeth was chipped, he was scrawny to the point of looking unhealthily skinny, and his face was covered in acne. But to me he was beautiful. I loved his chipped tooth. It gave him character; his teeth were different from my perfectly aligned ivories that were the result of two sets of braces. I loved the way he sat, slightly hunched over. And I loved the way he looked at me when the two of us found something funny that no one else did, like I was the only person that mattered to him right at that moment.

“Fucking paparazzi,” said Andy, holding up a palm in my direction and exposing his armpit hair. I loved seeing parts of him that were typically hidden from me.

“You’ll be happy in five years looking back at the time capsule of our lives that is Facebook and thank me,” I said.

“That reminds me, when I was on Facebook the other day, this fucking douche from middle school friended me. He was the biggest asshole and would always call me a fag and shit, and now he wants to be my friend. Bullshit.”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Did you accept?” I asked.

“Of course I did,” he said. “So he can see how great I am now and feel like shit for being awful to me.”

“Good plan,” I said.

“And, I mean, when I was in middle school, I didn’t even know I was gay. And people like this fucking Mike Barrell would call me a fag, and I would be like what the fuck are you talking about. I mean, I just didn’t know.” He got quiet all of a sudden and started scrolling through his iPod.

I looked over at Sheila, who gave me a nod indicating she thought I should give him a hug. Andy and I didn’t usually hug. Neither of us were the touchy type. I looked back at Andy, who continued scanning his iTunes library. I scooted onto his chair and wrapped my arms around his bony shoulders. I wanted to tell him that I cared about him. I wanted to tell him that whenever I thought about my future, he was in it. I wanted to tell him that this was the first time I’d ever thought that maybe it could be love. Instead, I just rubbed his back for a second. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Fuck them.”

After cold showers and a dinner of Wenchang chicken, eggplant, spicy tofu and rice, the three of us went back to the beach, Tsing Tao in hand. The sun was setting as the lanterns along the beach started to light up.

“I wish we could stay another night,” I said. “What if we just skipped class on Monday? I mean, what are they gonna do?”

“Yeah, they couldn’t do much about it,” Andy said.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“That would be awesome if we could stay one more night,” Sheila said. “We’d definitely get in trouble though.”

“Yeah, I know we should go back,” I said. “The thought of sitting in class on Monday, though, is like, ugh.”

“We only have three more weeks, though,” Sheila said.

“Is that it? Wow, I can’t believe that’s all we have left,” I said. “I’m gonna be so sad; you guys live so far away.”

“You can always come visit,” Sheila said. “Spring break to Hawaii!”

“That would be amazing,” I said. “I definitely couldn’t afford the plane ticket, though. You guys just need to come to New York.”

“We’ll make it happen,” said Sheila, taking a sip of beer and passing me the bottle. “I’m not gonna miss our classes, but I’m gonna miss China.”

“I know what you mean,” Andy said.

“But you’ll be back next spring semester, right?” I said.

“Hopefully, yeah,” he said.

“I think I’m gonna head back,” Sheila said when we arrived at the part of the beach that led to our hotel. “What do you guys wanna do?”

I looked at Andy, who now had the bottle of Tsing Tao. “Wanna kill it before we go in?” he asked.

“Obviously,” I said.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“All right, see you tomorrow,” said Sheila, turning toward the hotel.

“Night,” I said.

“See ya,” said Andy.

Andy and I walked further down the beach. The sand was warm and soft in between my toes, and I thought, I never want to walk on concrete again. We were buzzed and in a remote town on an island in the middle of the South China Sea. I hadn't known I could be this happy. We arrived at a red-roofed kiosk at the end of a dock, and sat on two stone cylinders. I wanted so badly to just sit on his lap. We alternated sips of beer and he lit a cigarette under his purple T-shirt so it would light despite the wind. No one in my family smokes and I'd never taken a puff in my life, but over the past six weeks, the smell of cigarette smoke had become a comforting reminder that he was near me.

“Have you ever seen *When Harry Met Sally?*” I asked.

“No, why?” he said.

“It's really good. You should see it when you get home. Eh, you might not like it, though, might be too mainstream for you.”

“What's it about?”

“It's about these two people who've been friends for a really long time but never dated, but then after a while they realize they want to be together.”

“Yeaah, sounds like something I wouldn't like.”

“It's a classic. And they're totally dead-on with the whole 'guys and girls can't be friends' thing.”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Well, guess that rule doesn’t really apply to me,” Andy said. I felt stupid now. Of course he’d say something like that.

We sat for a few minutes breathing in the salty air, and listening to the waves gently pull in and out of the beach. I was feeling the alcohol now, and the sound of the waves seemed to echo in my ears. Just say it, I thought. It’s just the two of us now, just tell him.

“Promise we’ll keep in touch after we go home?” I said.

“Of course we will. Why wouldn’t we? And you have to come visit, you really do.”

“I just feel like things like that never pan out; somehow things tend to fall apart. Distance really is a bitch,” I said.

“Hello? Internet.”

“I know, I know. This summer has just been so much fun. I can’t imagine it being half as fun without you here.”

“Aww, don’t get all sentimental on me now,” he said.

“It’s true,” I said, looking at his profile as he stared out into the darkness. “I feel really lucky to have met you.” I could feel my pulse speed up, my chest become warm.

“You’re a great friend, too,” he said, looking at me and then turning his attention back to the ocean. “It has been really fun.”

I looked over at his profile, and put my palm on his hand where it rested on top of his thigh. “I don’t want to be friends.” It hung in the air like a heavy morning fog. He just continued to stare straight ahead at the ocean’s abyss. “Don’t you know?” I asked.

“Know what?” he said.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“How I feel,” I said, looking at my hands gripping each other tightly.

“Julia, don’t.”

“I need to. I need you to know.”

“How could I not already know? It’s so fucking obvious,” he said. “How could I not know that you look at me like I’m the only person in the room? That you try to sit next to me wherever we go and *accidentally* brush your hand against mine when we’re walking? I like you Julia, I really do. But I can’t like you like that. You know that.” He turned to look at me but now I was the one who wouldn’t look back. “Julia, I just want to be your friend. Why can’t you understand that?”

I became dizzy and I could feel the tears coming on. But I wouldn’t let him see me cry. I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction he always got of being somehow better than me. I got up and hurried off the dock and onto the beach, my feet sinking into the sand as I ran. I reached the top of the beach and disappeared into the darkness.

The next morning, we walked back to the main part of town to catch the bus back to Haikou. I walked next to Sheila, ahead of Andy. I hadn’t spoken to him yet this morning, and I could feel Sheila’s inquisitive stares.

“Hey, I’m gonna go get some water,” Sheila said, heading in the direction of a convenience shop. “You want anything?”

“I’ll go with you,” I said. We left Andy with the women selling coconuts, who were starting to form a circle around him, cajoling him to buy some to take back to Haikou.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Is everything okay with you and Andy?” Sheila asked as we went into the store.

“Yeah, why?” I said, not making eye contact.

“I don’t know. Something just seems weird between you two,” she said.

“No, everything’s fine,” I said, trying to make my voice a bit higher pitched.

“Are you sure? You guys haven’t said a word all morning,” Sheila said as she paid for three bottles of water.

“Yeah, I’m just exhausted. I didn’t sleep well last night; it was super hot in that room.”

“All right, just wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“I’m fine, really,” I said, feigning a smile. I could tell she didn’t believe me, though. I’d never been a good liar.

We got back to where Andy was waiting, and said goodbye to the women selling coconuts. They told us to come back soon and to bring our friends.

“*Dangran, hui lai*,” we said, promising we’d return, though we all knew we probably wouldn’t. The past 36 hours had existed in a different world. We all knew that if we came back to China, we wouldn’t be back here. This wasn’t the real China. It was a tropical, cartoon version of it, a tourist destination.

But for that summer, it’d served us well. We’d all come to this island to get away from something. We’d all needed the escape. The funny thing is, wherever you go, you eventually create something you need to escape from again. I wonder how many times I’d do this before I’d be forced to stop going from place to place.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

We boarded the bus and sat in the same seats as we had on our way in. I didn't want Sheila to keep thinking something was up, so I settled in next to Andy. Breathing in his cigarette smoke, I looked down at his free hand resting on his thigh. I'd always had a thing for guys' hands; they could really make or break a guy for me. His fingers were thin and about as long as mine, the meat of his hands thin and sinewy. That summer I'd wanted to hold those hands every chance I had, to have his yellow-peachy skin wrapped tightly around mine. But those hands could never hold me. They didn't want to, and he had no intention of trying. Andy exhaled deeply; smoke drifted out of the window and disappeared in the wind, leaving no trace it had ever been there.

Chanah Ambuter

Chanah Ambuter



Chanah Ambuter is from Vernon, NJ, home of the Appalachian trail, black bears, deer ticks. (Yes, the autumns are quite beautiful, and no, that rude person you heard in traffic was probably a stressed NYC tourist). She's majoring in Harp Performance and considering a Creative Writing minor. Her current book? Currently anything by author Ted Dekker, although his "*Circle*" series is presently locked in fierce competition with his "*Immanuel's Veins*" for supremacy. Her favorite poems are found in the Bible's books of Psalms, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. She'd like to be a novel-writing professional harpist, but she is passionately dedicated to God, so wherever He leads her, that's where you can find her!

You!

It shouldn't be this way!
I *know* how to read people
– *especially* men (of any humor)!
I delight in summarizing them and...
You're meeting my eyes squarely
Panic!? What are you thinking?

You choose a clipped, precise voice, always
Controlled, never saying more than intended.
To know you more is to know less.

You, with your dark, decisive eyes–
Unfair! not soul-windows, but mirrors
That reflect my frustration mockingly back

That crooked pull at the corner
Of a wide smile that's almost a smirk,
Your eyes gleam with laughter as I fume

A jaw too square to be mellow,
A chin too pointed to be quiet,
...and a wit too poignant for me
To judge you and move to the next

I want to pin you down,
To analyze and explicate you
To gesture and say, "I have the measure of you."
Alas- you've kept yourself too safe:
You don't even know yourself

Still, I've known a thousand others *like* you

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

A tall, lean body: a quiet inclination, a partiality
For knowledge and wires above rough tumbling

A single, raised dark eyebrow above a glinting lens
Reminds me that I'm not infallible, myself
It'd take a warrior to wrestle admission from me-
But you do it with a blunt, quick question.

Don't tell me you don't think you're fascinating
It irks me more than if you hated me with foul mouth:
At least, then, I'd be able to know and dismiss you!

Rose-Colored Glasses

I do not see through
Rose-colored glasses
Or, if I do thus observe,
All the universe blushes such a hue

Existence is a gentled mirror, you say –
The illusion shines prettily, forgotten,
For the edge's delicate gilding.

But you have overlooked,
In your un-childish evaluation
A flaw in your precise correction

See there! – in your shimmering masterpiece,
A bubble, glittering in tiny golden mirth,
In the goblet of our entwined hands

Such imperfection!
It's the handhold for light and laughter,
Chiming among rose-colored glasses

Kynori: Live Chess Match (*Excerpt*)

Prince John's face was red. "Tumbler, to C3!"

Friar Tuck's face adopted a decidedly sinister expression. "Robin?" he asked, quietly.

"Will Scarlet to F6!" the leader said, either not hearing or choosing to ignore the friar.

"Guard at C2, to C4!"

"Robin!"

"Goodwife Little up to E5."

"Hood, what are you doing with my wife?"

"Come, now, Little John, don't make it sound like that."

"So help me God, Robin of the Hood, if you do not allow me to combat that tumbler, I vow I will never wed you and Marian!"

Robin blinked. "What?"

"Tumbler to F8!" Prince John commanded.

"Oh no you don't, you vile little filth!" Friar Tuck shouted as the tumbler began to do handsprings across the board in his direction. "You're not coming to my court— you're getting *out* of *my church!*" He lifted his battle staff and hollered, "In fulfillment of my sacred office! To Lord and land!" and charged forward across the board, bellowing at the top of his lungs as players dove right and left to scramble out of the way.

His chins wobbled and his head glistened as he swung and jabbed the staff wildly, missing the flighty jester as she flipped and danced around him. "Stay— still— thou— heathen!" he panted.

"Thou traitor to the throne, thou perverter of the Sacred

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Order!” he huffed, his face crimson and beefy hands gripping the staff tightly.

He finally paused for breath, hands on his knees as he sucked in deep swigs of air. “Lord have mercy on my lungs,” he wheezed. He tried to straighten, and winced. “And on my joints.” The tumbler crept forwards, the bells on her bizarre hat jingling. Friar Tuck paused, and wiped the perspiration from his face.

And suddenly heaved himself sideways, knocking the tumbler to the floor like a heavyweight wrestler. The jester shrieked, pounding the holy man’s jiggling stomach in vain. “Get off me, you decrepit old whale!”

“The victory is the Lord’s!” he sang, his chubby calves crossing comfortably. “I will wait upon His shofar to sound the victory at His second coming!”

This declaration, evidentially, panicked the tumbler. “I yield!”

The friar smirked. “Repeat yourself, little demon. This decrepit old whale has a hard time hearing.”

“I yield!”

“Do you vow never to impersonate a holy priest of the Lord again?”

“I vow it!”

“Do you vow never to mock a member of the Holy Order again?”

“Yes!”

“Do you vow to renounce your sinful ways of rebellion and treachery, and live a meek and humble life, giving part of your

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earnings as a tithe to the Lord and charity to the widows, poor, and children?”

“I vow it, I vow it, I vow anything you want!”

“I do believe I hear the trumpets of triumph.” He got up, the jester groaning nearly as loudly as *he* did when he rocked himself backwards over her, first, in order to catapult himself up to a sitting position. He struggled to his feet, grabbed her by the back of her jumpsuit, and dragged her across the floor. “Now you, my mischievous little sprite, will get out of my sight before I call mountains on your head!”

“I think one just dropped on my stomach,” the woman groaned, clutching her ribs and weaving sideways until she dropped off the stage.

Tuck scooped up his staff and marched proudly to C3.

“Hold on, there,” Prince John protested. “Is that allowed? I sent *her* to *him*!”

The archbishop was nearly glowing with pride over the spiritual fortitude and bravery of his student. He cleared his throat. “Technically, he came to her. It’s legal. Continue, Prince John.”

The prince cracked his knuckles. “Sheriff to C1.”

Friar Tuck raised his eyes to heaven in ecstasy. “Surely, the Lord’s blessings are gracious and bountiful. I shall endeavor to be a worthy instrument of His instruction.” He raised his staff. “Lower taxes, louder praises!” he shouted, beginning his charge at the Sheriff of Nottingham. “And funding for the arts!”

“Friar, no!” Robin shouted, but the friar wouldn’t be stopped. The rotund man got in two good whaps before the sheriff stuck out an armored leg and landed the friar flat on the ground.

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The Sheriff of Nottingham looked down his nose at the churchman, unsheathed his sword, and poked it lightly at the friar's throat. "Do you yield?"

"I do not yield to the Sheriff of Nothing-ham!" the friar declared, trying to roll to the side. King Richard court's cheered. The sheriff put a restraining foot on his enormous paunch, though, and the friar gave up. "But I might yield to the Lord, seeing as though He has decided to teach me humility."

"Thus did Friar Tuck die a glorious death," Robin murmured beneath his breath as the friar tottered off the stage.

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Josh Bayer

Josh Bayer



Josh Bayer is a Screen Arts & Cultures major, but prefers to classify himself as a “film” major due to the unseemliness of the SAC acronym. He hails from West Bloomfield, MI, currently lives in Ann Arbor, and intends to live in at least 5 other cities before he calls it quits. His favorite book is *Breakfast of Champions*, with *Catch-22* nipping at its heels and the entire *Goosebumps* series holding some serious leverage. After graduation, he plans to write and produce stereoscopic films for Giant Eel Productions, an independent 3D filmmaking company started by University of Michigan students.

Modern Karma

The best part about being laid off from the florist, he thought, was the privilege to sleep in. Now he is awake. 11:55 a.m. A wad of relief churns in his stomach: not quite noon.

He checks his sites: WhatIfSports, eBay, Plenty of Fish (for dating)

He checks his inbox: zero.

He pictures all of those web-connected women, squinting at his life, clicking *next* the instant they realize he listens to Styx.

Breakfast: quadruple espresso, THANK-YOU bag stuffed with empty vitamin boxes and used tissues — HAVE A NICE DAY. Leaving your trash can open is like leaving your toilet seat up, he thinks, exiting his efficiency and flipping the lid.

He starts his jog, jobless, absorbing the sights and sounds like a car sponge: gaptooth bag lady dropping her extra tiara, SAVE THE CROPS pinned to her purse; elderly couple seesawing, smiling like it's their honeymoon, flanked by buckets flush with multi-colored dollar signs; curved white pipe, sticking out of the ground like industrial macaroni. He spots a woman down the sidewalk bundled in red-and-yellow shawls and immediately feels a bulge in his sweats, blushing when she becomes real, cooing to a baby strapped chest-to-breast against her scarves.

He spots a flyer: LOWER LEG AMPUTEE. BLOOD NEEDED. \$25—pinned to the nose of a giant smiling middle-aged man on a billboard. He makes immediately for the hospital.

Inside, there's a lineup but no line — just a waiting room stuffed with fidgeting donors. Next to the magazine stand is a room for breastfeeding: PERSONAL ROOM, flagged off by a stick figure of

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a mother nursing a black cavity. He thinks he feels his cell phone vibrate, but it's just nerves — a thigh spasm from too many stimulants. He thinks that the lady in the red felt cap and nylon stockings might be flirting with him, based on the fact that she switched seats with her son to sit next to him — but then thinks it's probably just nerves.

He feels his cell phone vibrate again: REDBULL 6PK GIVEAWAY ONLY 2 HRS LEFT reply STOP to cancel and HELP for HELP

He texts HELP.

Dead or Alive

Exiting the fax machine was just
a matter of epidermis against plastic;
just another permutation just
another button-push for my father.

My father, who pretends like
he invented the stethoscope,
and he may as well have invented it,
it's been around for centuries really,
ever since Eve pressed her palm
against Adam's left pec
and asked "are you real?"

The bar was all 6's and 7's all
zeroes and ones,
and me,
freshly minted facsimile,
full-grown and incarnate,
right hand in the
unzipped pocket of my
bourbon-breath father,
receiving transmissions of
sweat-streaked exchanges
hot-wired from fragments

of blogged-about weddings
and films about movies,
watch my father munch
on the caked foundation
of a Ke\$ha-dressed waitress.

"Get her number,"
he whispers,
tongue in her ear,

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“I’ve got her nice and warm for you,”
as if he’s some sort of incubator,
and she, leftover pudding,
and me, an annex
of his glory days.

Cocktail sauce smearing
down the walls,
I scan the room for
something unprocessed,
something unfried,

and match eyes with
a lipstickless girl
across the bar,
white dress especially
sensitive to air
conditioning,
observing the crowd,
preserving their tics
in a black pocket pad.

One hiccup later
and my hand is in hers
(the girl’s, not the broad’s)
and we’re out the door,
my InstaGod father spurting
miniature copies of himself
all over the countertop.

“I don’t know your name,”
I say, and she says,
“Kate, but who gives
a shit anyway,
I didn’t choose it,”

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squeezing my hand,
crisp winter air alive
in our nostrils, all eyes fixed
on a stuffed reindeer
in the window of an antique store
across the street.

Little Sip Drinker

Little sip drinker on Mommy's terrain
Sipping that gold juice to coddle his brain
While Mommy and Poppy in turret above
Sip champagne and tango and romance the glove
And little sip drinker leaves home just to sip
And streamline his life, and suck on the nip
While Mommy and Poppy with dollars to spare
Blind-finance his playtime and idolize Cher
So little sip drinker can work on TV
Where he's paid to tell swingers that love isn't free
And he meets a fine wife and they sip and they sip
And they harvest delight and vacation and trip
And a slip and a slide and a baby is born!
As cute as a button and supple as corn.
Little prize little prize bundle of zinc.
Little thighs alibis sippy-cup drink.

Alex Dimeff

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Alex Dimeff



I am from Shaker Heights, Ohio (it's right outside Cleveland) and am majoring in English. My favorite books are *No One Belongs Here More Than You* by Miranda July, *Music for Chameleons* by Truman Capote, and *Krazy & Ignatz* in "*A Mice, A Brick, A Lovely Night*" by George Herrimen.

Pack of Two

From the beginning, I knew animals were much more endearing than humans, so aping wolves, I ate pig and beef and called it deer. I baked bacon in my sister's plastic oven and devoured it without silverware or hands. Wherever I walked, I walked like a wolf, dropping my left foot into the print of the right. Wolves do this to produce tracks that make a pack seem half its actual size, I had read, but I walked like this even in places where my shoes left no prints, for example, on sidewalks and in cafeterias—and I tended to travel without much of a pack anyway.

That was where my lupine act was weakest. My older sister outgrew imitating wolves the summer before she went into sixth grade, and the only kids who seemed interested in forming a pack were first-graders and kindergarteners. I try not to discriminate by age, but they lacked dedication. Wolf was only a game to them. I tried to explain, if you'll eat steak at the dinner table, what can you have against taking a rock to a rabbit's soft, velvety skull? Death is natural, I said. They remained afraid and unconvinced.

One Friday afternoon in the peak of acorn-kicking season, I sauntered home down South Woodland, sending several oak seeds spinning off the curb with my Mary Janes. I could hear the high school drum line practicing on their football field. The weather softened their snares to island steel drums. Ohio felt warm and easy and Caribbean. It was early September—still hot.

I turned onto Attleboro, watching the oaks drop their first leaves. They swirled down like feathers, which made me think of birds—and therefore made me feel hungry and lusty. Through the tree leaves above me, I could see clouds drifting through the blue sky like lambs drowning in a river.

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When I looked down again, I saw a girl hunched on a tree lawn, a pudgy fifth-grader named Eloise. She wore a red hoodie over our school uniform, even though it was essentially still summertime. Eloise was prodding something at the base of a tree with a twig. When I came closer, I discovered what interested her: a fresh squirrel carcass. Eloise stayed so focused on the body that I wasn't sure she'd noticed me standing behind her. I knew immediately that her determination could make her a good pack-mate.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Performing a dissection," she said without turning from her specimen. I squatted down beside her.

"You're just poking it." Now she looked me, making a mean face.

She didn't intimidate me. I pulled a pocketknife out of my backpack and began to make a neat incision from the chin to the groin, pinning the soft body to the grass with my bare hand.

"Don't touch it!"

I shook my head and continued with the job. The body smelled like saliva dried to a pillow, but the fur was silkier than you might expect. Once I opened its tawny chest, our nostrils tasted blood, salty and metallic. I figured we should take it home before the flies came.

"Take it home with us? Are you crazy?"

"Weren't you going to eat it?" I said.

"It's not safe."

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I unbuttoned my school shirt and stripped to my tank top. As I scooped the squirrel into my blouse, I asked if she'd seen it die. She said she watched it fall from the tree.

"Seems fresh, and besides, we'll cook it," I insisted. "Can't hurt us, if it's good enough for crows."

"What if it had rabies?"

"Rodents almost never have rabies. Besides, you get rabies from saliva. We'll just take off the fur and not eat the mouth, and then we'll be fine. Animals eat squirrels all the time."

We brought it to my kitchen, and I showed Eloise the phone so she could call her mom and say she'd be a little late.

I'd never watched anyone skin anything before, but I didn't want Eloise to doubt me, so I didn't hesitate. I found a peeling knife and carved off the hide piece by piece with messy results. Still, without its fluff, the rodent looked more like meat, which calmed Eloise down. She didn't wince when I dug my hands inside and pulled out the guts, and she even helped me slide out the bones, bones as delicate as stalks of rye. Of course, we didn't do any of this correctly, so we lost most of the meat, and there's not much meat to a squirrel anyway.

I was ready to plop our few meager chunks into a hot pot of dissolved bouillon cubes (the cubes were her idea—she said soup was no good without stock)—but Eloise objected.

"I've watched my mom make homemade chicken noodle soup before. You don't put raw meat into a stew. You have to cook it first."

So she fried up the squirrel in a buttered pan while I chopped up carrots and celery. These were also her recommendation. I don't really like vegetables, but Eloise seemed to know more than me about cooking. Still, I was good at cutting things; she envied me that. When I started dicing onions, she asked how I did it without tearing up.

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“I never cry,” I said cockily.

When we added the vegetables to the frying pan, the onions hissed their spicy sweetness into the air and up our noses. Finally, we scraped everything into the boiling pot, and I started scrubbing the big cutting board. Like raspberry juice staining fingerprints, red clung tight in the scratches. Once I finished the dishes, I gathered the unused squirrel parts in a garbage bag and hid it in our neighbor’s outside trashcan. Meanwhile, Eloise tended to the soup dutifully as a watchdog.

We ate in the backyard, down in the grass. August had been gone for weeks, but it was still warm enough to hear air conditioners hum. The humidity embraced us, and Eloise tugged off her hoodie. I watched her turn sweaty red. She spooned our mixture to her lips. She seemed to avoid the tough purple-brown meat, but I didn’t really mind her hesitation anymore. We’d make a good pack. Her caution would temper my recklessness, I decided, as I poured the soup down my throat straight from the porcelain bowl.

“You’re a little a wild,” she said.

I grinned. “Do you know anything about wolves?”

“Not much.”

I showed her my teeth and howled.

She looked too shocked to react, and then, I knew I’d overdone it. On Monday, she’d tell people that I made animal sounds and ate roadkill. I wanted to go full-wolf on her, force her down and snap my teeth around her pale flabby neck, but Eloise was bigger than me. And besides, it wouldn’t stop her from talking—it would only make her gossip that much richer, onions to her soup.

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So I just blushed and looked down. I let the topic of wolves go for that afternoon and just hoped that if I acted human enough for the day's remainder, Eloise might forget all about my howl.

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Savannah Hagen

Savannah Hagen



Hey-llo. My name is Savannah Hagen. I am a Sociology major and creative writing enthusiast here at The University of Michigan. Not only do I have passions for both playwriting and screenwriting, I also love to write poetry and flash! fiction pieces. Books are good and when I'm not studying Weber or Marx, I love to read anything by Lydia Davis, Richard Foreman and Chuck Palahniuk. As a second semester senior, I am currently trying to figure out my post-graduation plans. So far I have narrowed my interests down to a career in: screenwriting, playwriting, marketing, advertisement, finance, sheep herding, juggling, early retirement, or a unique mixture of all of the above. I am honored to have a taste of my works published.

Miss Piggy Realizes She is Better Off Without Him Anyways

My heart beats
independence.
It's home, unknown
to know men.
Stop the batting
now, listen.
Soft croaks that come from
the distance.

A Heavy Monday Morning Pick-up

Grown boy.
Teased words till they moaned, boy.
Couldn't even remember home, boy.
Thought you sat on a throne, boy.
Did you know you alone, boy?
Talked trash.
Ended up sittin' by trash.
'Till you became trash.
Mornin' pick-up changed your tone, boy.

The Busy Mother

The mother was a busy mother. She did not like that her wealthy neighbor's wife, who wore two strands of pearls around her perfectly tan neck, who wore perfectly ironed and starched clothes, who wore beautiful leather heels with beautiful red-sole bottoms, had come to see her house carpeted with her boy's tiny toy lobsters, pillows from last evening's playful fight and slippers from her now bare feet. The mother was a busy mother, too busy to give an impromptu tour of her messy house to her wealthy neighbor's bored wife.

But, no, she could never not let her in. She was the president of the PTA, Brownie troop leader, and one who aspired to be viewed as a good person by good people. So instead, all she could say was, "why, won't you come in?"

And the woman with the beautifully full blond hair with the gentle curl at the bottom, with the whitest teeth and the friendliest smile, with the most petite long legs, came in.

The busy mother searched the wealthy neighbor's wife's expression for disgust at the color of her burnt orange, plaid armchair that did not match her red, five-year-old couch. She searched her expression for pity at the scuffmarks on her tope walls from her son's rollerblading fiasco. She searched her expression for bewilderment at the busy mother's own appearance – how someone two years younger than her could look so bloated, so tired, and so old.

The wealthy neighbor's wife had none of these expressions. She just smiled her perfectly white, straight-teeth smile. And, she sat on the five-year-old couch that did not match the plaid armchair, to catch up.

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The busy mother talked about the weather, the good neighborhood schools and how Rick, her husband, was in Detroit for a seminar that week and that was why the house looked like such a mess. The wealthy neighbor's wife talked about how she was acclimating to the neighborhood and the cold, Michigan winters, she talked about the cute café just down the street and she talked about how she thought the busy mother's wealthy neighbor, her husband, was cheating on her with a younger, blonder, more-perfect woman, and she began to politely cry.

The busy mother listened to her soft and sad words and gently rubbed her back and told her everything would be all right. She did this even though she was too busy. She had errands to run, kids to pick-up, and arms to tone. But she could never do this, so she sat, and listened and watched streaks of \$30.00 designer mascara run down the wealthy neighbor's wife's perfectly powdered cheeks, staining her five-year-old couch that did not match the burnt orange, plaid armchair.

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Elizabeth Hand

Elizabeth Hand



Elizabeth Hand is a senior from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, studying English and Women's Studies here at the University of Michigan. Her academic focus on LGBT studies and issues of sexual politics provides inspiration for much of her poetry and fiction writing. After graduation, Elizabeth is attending law school.

Wife

Previously titled "Prostitute"

For a while after you finish
I don't move under your unthinking caress.
I just lie there
and look at a black and white family portrait
hanging on the wall

until finally, bored with the dead weight
of an arm on my breast, I grab
a tissue for between my legs and
pull on cherry red pajama bottoms
and your shirt from the '95 company picnic.

I put the ring that you gave me
on our wedding day back on my left hand.
Your sleep groans tell me
you're gone so I will go
tuck in your kids.

Husband, I need to leave you.

Lana

She stands in the dirt
road beyond the cusp of the starved grass
outside his teal and white
12-wide.

The sun sets inside the unsettled dust
from the tires of his yellow Chevy Nova.
Her dark brows squint out the Santa Anas'
grime that settles in yet undiscovered
crows feet, battle scars
of life in the desert.

The Brigitte Bardot of Vista Del Rey
swings open the screen door of the trailer
where two blonde children on the floor
watch *Underdog*
with a toy gun
between them.

She takes her bottle of Jim
in the bathroom. Touches up
the peroxide in her dirty roots while she drowns
her mind
and puts on her leopard bra over scarred breasts
to work a show.

She'll cash her welfare check downtown tomorrow
and look up to see the crooked Hollywood sign
blocked by smog.

Kolkata

Where did you unload White Man's burden? Trekking over Pakistani, Nepalese mountains, the responsibility was as immense as K2: unable to carry it anymore, unable to care. An unhappy and disparate marriage of city and country, civilized and native savage where young water buffalos wander and weave between rusted German hatchbacks, their slick noses steaming in Indian heat and their feathered tails slapping flies shiny as black dew along their bony ribs. A seventh generation wild housecat, with a tender swollen underbelly swaying between her legs, runs through the city, under the millions of feet that walk the crowded roads, dusty sidewalks, Hindu temples, swiftly and recklessly globalized offices under buzzing fluorescent lights. Icons of Western commerce, winding pinnacles of blinding windows and American steel shine as modern Towers of Babel. These engineering feats flank a brown river where brown women spin and beat flaxen linen on the crumbling colonial shores of the country. The child prostitutes sulk in the narrow alleys of the red-light district, dabbing at scabs on their knees, battle wounds from falling out of a tree. A child's mother and madam yells to her daughter from a window four floors up, reminding the girl to grab at couples: twice the price to let one watch. The smell of open markets, selling delicate strands of flaming saffron, burnt star anise, and sweet curried beans tangles with the unwashed homes and floors in an olfactory symphony coming to an unresolved climax at a narrow door jamb where a naked choleric child cries alone in its own brown puddle.

Re: Middlesex

The myth remains that the Gods scorned
by my Father's Sunday morning abandonment,
like Achilles selfish desertion
inciting Agamemnon's unbridled wrath,
made me. When in fact

the tapestry of my existence
weaves, guided by invisible hands of my ancestors,
between thin walls of Middlesex Boulevard,
running through time along the pavement of Detroit,
imprinting the genetic code of Motown
on my fifth chromosome, before
Zeus even breathed life
into my parents lungs.

The fates held my thread tight
between their fingers
long before Detroit's silk
strings smoldered and curled
in the summer fury of 1967.

My double helix spans the ocean,
the fibers spawning from Aristophanes's
mouth birthed from his tale
of eros, my inherent self-love.

"We don't need anyone else, Cal,
don't you see?" The secrets
between her legs revealed too
that we, already, had found our other half.

Sing, O Goddess, the beginning of
Calliope!
The sacred hermaphrodite of Detroit

Keesha Hargrow

Keesha Hargrow



My name is Keesha Hargrow. I'm from Ypsilanti, Michigan. I'm a senior majoring in English Literature with a sub-concentration in Creative Writing. I've been writing creative fiction since seventh grade, and I'm really interested in fantasy. At the moment, I'm not too sure what I'd like to do after graduation—probably take some time off to work on my writing. I'd like to write a novel and also look into writing children's fiction.

Daddy's Girl

I was shaken out of my sleep by the piercing ring of my cell phone. Normally I'd turn it on silent before bed, but that night, it just slipped my mind. The cool November air blew into the apartment window and made me shiver, and while my boyfriend Jay was sleeping peacefully next to me, I trembled as if I'd just had a nightmare. He'd always liked to leave the window cracked just a little so he wouldn't sweat in his sleep. I pulled up the covers and looked at the clock. 3:14. Maybe it'll stop and I can go back to my dreams, I told myself. By the fifth ring, however, it was clear that it wasn't going to stop ringing unless I answered it.

Jay groaned, turned over, and sighed deeply. "Ali, you just gonna let it ring?" he mumbled, half-asleep and completely irritated. He had to go to work at the garage in a little while, and the ringing was disturbing his beauty sleep. I knew that if I didn't answer soon he would wake up with an attitude and be in a bad mood all day about not getting enough sleep.

I slowly reached for my purple Razor and looked at the caller ID. It was my mother.

"Hello," I whispered.

At first, there was nothing but silence.

"Ali, your dad had a heart attack; he didn't make it."
Mom's voice was flat and mechanical, almost calm.

My throat was dry, but somehow I managed to croak,
"What? When?"

"About an hour ago, at the hospital," she told me. Mom was saying something else, but I couldn't really make out her words—maybe she was recalling what'd happened, I don't know. I was trying to process what she'd said. Dad died from a heart

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attack. *He's gone?* I wondered to myself. *How? I just talked to Dad not too long ago, and he sounded fine.* I half-listened to whatever Mom was saying in that emotionless tone of hers, thinking that this had to be some horrible dream, and soon I'd wake up and Dad would be fine and I'd go on about my day.

“Are you there, Alicia?” Mom asked, breaking my train of thought.

I sat up slowly. “Y-yeah, I'm here, Mom. Okay.”

The phone clicked. Mom's voice was gone. I blinked, but I was still in my room, sitting on my bed with the phone in one hand and a good chunk of my cover clutched in the other. This was actually happening, I thought. My dad died. I sat there on the bed stiffly and stared at the wall for a good two minutes, trying to recall the dream I'd had before that call but it was out of my reach. What had I been dreaming? I was so focused on the thought that I barely noticed when the phone slipped from my hand and crashed into pieces on the floor.

The noise finally woke Jay. As I got down on the floor to retrieve the pieces to my phone, He stirred in the bed. “Ali, you know I gotta be at work in a couple of hours,” he yawned.

I ignored him and looked under the bed for my battery in the dark.

“Babe, what are you doing down there?” When I didn't respond, Jay turned on the lamp and the room lit up. The sudden brightness caught me off guard as I sat cross-legged on the rug.

“That was my mom on the phone. She said...my dad had a heart attack...” I looked down at my phone and tried to put the pieces back together. “He, uh... he didn't make it.” I could feel my mouth opening and closing, but I didn't recognize the voice saying the words.

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“Aw, man...are you serious?” he asked incredulously.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the shaggy brown rug. It felt like I was going to break apart at any second.

“You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I said quickly, jumping to my feet. *God, there’s so much to do...* I thought as I started pacing back and forth in front of the bed. Jay started to sit up, slinging his long legs over the edge of the bed. So many things were racing through my mind that I wasn’t sure where to start first. I stopped in front of the oak dresser, staring at my reflection in the large mirror. My stringy, shoulder length hair was matted from rough sleeping; my eyes were wild and bloodshot from the news. Funeral arrangements had to be made; friends and relatives had to be informed.

I had to get home, I told myself and opened the dresser drawer that Jay had cleared out for me when I’d started spending the night more often.

I could see him in the mirror behind me, rubbing his eyes and shaking his head. “Hold on,” he perked up once I began pulling out clothes. “You’re gonna drive home tonight?” I nodded. “It’s at least a four hour drive to Akron, Ali,” Jay continued.

“I know, I know. I just...I need to go. Mom sounded way too calm on the phone, and there’s no telling how Jessica’s taking the news,” I explained as I went to the closet and pulled out my black duffle bag. Mom’s lack of emotion was odd enough. I just knew that my little sister Jessica wouldn’t be able to hold herself together, much less take care of Mom.

Jay stood up and stretched, his arms nearly touching the ceiling. “Your mom’s probably in shock, like you are. She and Jess

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are probably asleep. We could head down there first thing in the morning, Babe.”

I spun on him. “Well, if you don’t wanna come, you can stay here,” I snapped, raking my fingers through my hair.

He stood there and stared at me with his wide, concerned ebony eyes and didn’t respond at first. “Ali, I didn’t mean—”

“—I’m going with or without you,” I told him matter-of-factly and finished getting ready. I looked down at my grey sweatpants and thin t-shirt. One of my socks was missing. Once I’d recovered it from the other side of the bed, I grabbed my Wayne County Community College sweatshirt from the back of the door. Once dressed, I decided to make some coffee for the drive. It still felt like I was dreaming and needed to be brought back to reality.

New Activities

Completely wasted, I crept into the house around two thirty in the morning. I had the routine down pat—slip in the basement window I'd left cracked before I went out, crawl into bed, go to sleep. I knew my aunt and uncle were in the bed already. Uncle Lawrence had to get up at seven in the morning to work security at the Detroit Metro Airport, and Auntie Brenda never missed a day of church. Their schedule was so ingrained in my memory that I could sneak in and out as I had pleased. I got so good at it that I never got caught. But this time it seemed the plan had failed before I even made it through the window.

I started out feet first in the window with my heels and clutch purse in hand, but somehow I slipped and missed the reliable washing machine underneath the laundry room window that I'd used for my safe landing. I ended up tumbling to the floor head first with a loud squeal. "Damn it," I exclaimed between breaths after smacking the concrete. I tried to stand up, but I knew that if I did, I was gonna pee on myself. Usually I can hold it together when I'm drunk, but that 1800 Silver Tequila was something else. And it was 100 Proof. I'd lost count after three shots because it was so smooth. 1800 definitely sneaks up on you and gets you messed up.

Once I calmed down and remembered I was trying to be sneaky, I strained to hear any movement from upstairs. It was all quiet, so I figured I was good. Gathering my purse and heels, I crawled from the laundry room towards my bedroom. *Once I hit that pillow, everything'll be all right*, I thought. My plush chocolate comforter was gonna feel like a dream. But a wave of fatigue hit me all of a sudden and I couldn't even pull myself up to stand. I sat on the floor against the edge of my bed and didn't even have the energy to take off my dress. It was a struggle to keep my eyes open. I was ready to pass out and fall asleep right there on the floor. Just as my head was lolling to the side, the light flicked on, nearly

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blinding me. I shielded my eyes and squinted at the figure standing in my doorway. Even though I couldn't make out who it was, I recognized that voice all too well.

“Jaida Marie Sims, where the hell you been?” My Aunt Brenda demanded sternly.

Damn, busted, I cursed under my breath. *There goes my perfect record.*

“Girl, I asked you a question,” she pressed when I didn't answer. I rubbed my eyes and looked up at her tiny frame standing in the doorway in a faded pink robe and a raggedy-looking head scarf. From my angle she looked a lot taller than 5'3” and much more intimidating.

Slowly, I stood up, but I immediately plopped down on my bed and made the springs squeak. I hesitated again. The lie I'd concocted had to sound spontaneous and not like I'd rehearsed it.

“I was at my friend Monica's house...” I told her slowly, trying hard not to slur my words. Monica, my chubby party companion, was one of the few females from school I chose to associate with, mainly because she had a car, and her mom knew my auntie through church bingo. Monica was more of a good girl who I'd taken under my wing. It was a perfect alibi.

“We went out to the movies, and then the bowling alley,” I added as innocently as I could and kept my eyes on Aunt Brenda's fluffy pink slippers. I was ready to rattle off the name of the movie and the winner of the game if she needed to know it.

Aunt Brenda scrutinized me with her beady, penetrating gaze for so long that it made me a little nervous. Waiting for her to take the bait, I wasn't sure she was buying it, at least until she crossed the room in one swift movement and roughly grabbed my chin so she could look into my eyes.

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“You lyin’ to me, girl?”

“Uh-uhh, Aunt Brenda, I swear,” I lied through my clenched teeth.

She let go of my jaw and took a step back. It looked like she believed me. Before I had time to react to her grabbing my face, she hit me with a hard, stinging slap that almost knocked me off the bed.

“You lyin’ little whore,” she spat, pointing her bony finger in my face. Her lips were twisted in disgust. “You can’t fool me; I know what you were out doing. You were drinking and carrying on with boys, weren’t you?”

I shook my head, holding my face and holding back my tears.

“Yes, you were,” she said accusingly. “Just like that mother of yours. Just sixteen-years-old, and you’re out partying and doing God knows what with God knows who. Well, I’m not about to have this running in and out of my house at all hours of the night. You’re gonna respect me and my house, you hear me?”

It wasn’t the first time that I’d wanted to hit my aunt back, but I resisted temptation and nodded.

All the tension released from her body. “Good. Now take your ass to sleep.” With that, she left me to gather myself.

I waited until she disappeared up the stairs before I actually moved. I went over to the mirror to make sure that my face wasn’t swelling up. Aunt Brenda’d done that before. Sometimes I don’t even know why my mom decided to leave me with her.

It’s been six months since my mom realized that she wanted to be with her man more than she wanted to be with me. Everyday since her little sister had ran off, my Aunt Brenda seemed

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

like she was getting more resentful and taking it out on me— dropping little hints that she didn't want to be bothered with me. I could care less, because I never wanted to come here anyway.

I tossed my clutch onto the nightstand, peeled off my dress, and gazed at myself in the vanity mirror across from my bed. The mocha skinned reflection that looked back at me was frowning. I'm nothing like my mother, I told myself as I wiped off my make-up. Yeah, I have her green eyes, her dimples, her wavy ebony hair, and her curves, but I'm nothing like Janay Sims. I don't chase after men; men chase after me.

Maura Harris

Maura Harris



What's your hometown/Where are you from?

Romulus, MI

What is your major?

English, African-American Studies & Creative Writing

What is your current favorite book?

The Broker, John Grisham

What is your current favorite poet/poem?

Mont Blanc

Any thoughts on where you'd like to be and what you'd like to be after you graduate?

I'd like to get accepted into the MFA program here at the University of Michigan and go on to publish novels written in English and Spanish as a Professor of Creative Writing. Also, I want to direct and produce a few of my screen-writes, novels and plays.

Snow Place Like Home

As the first raindrops hit the glass I'm thinking about the millions to follow and how all my past tears could match them. My eyes keep drifting from the box, to the window, and back again. I remember sitting on my bed when I was five and watching the cars drive by my house, hoping that one of them would be my father's. I couldn't wait to rush into his arms like the many times before, but I'd never known even when those times would come. Our house was cold. The temperature was fine, but something between my parents made the three of our bodies shiver. I didn't know that then, but now it's as clear as the ice between us that froze time when my father wasn't around, to make it seem like I had been awaiting his return for years. My mother told me my father loved hanging out with his friends more than he loved spending time with our family, but I didn't believe her. I didn't believe anyone could love an outsider more than their own blood.

It was the first big snow in the winter of 1996, I couldn't wait to learn how to build a snowman; My father was going to teach me. At six years old, knowing how to build a snowman would make me the coolest kid in school. We lived in Garfield Ridge, Illinois, and our little town on the southwest side of The Windy City always seemed to get hit with the most snow. We lived in a small, brick house. The roof was black like the night, and I often pretended it was one with the stars. Our front yard didn't stretch much wider than the house, but it was all I needed to have a good time in the snow. I was wearing my favorite pink-and-purple snow suit with the zipper that never pinched my chin when my father zipped me up. My hair was a curly, sandy-brown mess under my hat and scarf; my mom hadn't fixed yesterdays pigtails for school, since today was a snow day. My father was wearing a heavy, brown Carhartt coat; Paired with his brown complexion, the coat always made him look like a bear. For that day, however, he was my bear.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Dad! Dad! Come on before all the snow melts in the whole world!” I yelled up the stairs to my parents’ room. “Dad! Can you even hear me? Dad! Dad!”

“Whoa! Calm down, Melon,” my father said coolly as he jogged down the stairs, knocking one of the four silver picture frames hanging on the wall loose. “If all the snow melts, I’ll call and tell Santa to bring more.” His voice was calm and deep like the ocean.

We were standing by the bottom of the staircase near the front door. My father tucked the bottoms of his blue Ford Motor Company coveralls into his black work boots and tightly tied them. Static from his large black work radio was coming from where the radio was lying on the brown sofa beneath the window; My father walked over and turned it off.

“You know Santa?” I looked over to my father in awe. “You know Santa, himself? Like...not the mall guy, because my friend Benny said that guy isn’t real, yah know.”

“Yes, Melon, I know the big man himself...and you can tell Benny.” He smiled at me and gave me a little nudge on the shoulder.

“Nuh-uh. Shut up.” I folded my arms, shook my head, and stuck my bottom lip out.

“Melonie, don’t tell your father to ‘shut up.’ I don’t tell you to ‘shut up,’ do I?” Although his voice was still calm, his eyes spoke to me with more authority.

As a tear touched the top of my cheek, I slowly responded. “Sorry, Dad. Don’t tell Santa, ok?” I’d never do anything to hurt my father in any way. His feelings mattered more to me than my own.

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My father chuckled and nudged me again. “Hey, hey now, Melon, . . . wipe your eyes. No room for tears. It’s a snow day! Let’s get out of here and make that snowman.” He always knew what to say to cheer me back up.

I sniffled a little and wiped my eyes. “Well, what are you waiting for, old man? Let’s go!”

“Who’re you callin’ an old man? You know, I could beat you in a race outside, even if I ran backwards.” He raised his eyebrows, and I knew he was daring me.

“Nuh-uh, you can’t beat me.” I laughed. “I’ll race you then, Dad. On your mark, . . . get set . . . go!” We took off into a white paradise and I won the race. My father claimed he let me win, but I knew I’d won fair and square. I watched my father roll around in the snow like a big kid, while the sunlight coruscated off the snow, making it look like a sea of diamonds. I had to join in on the fun. Snow was everywhere. I tossed it in the air and kicked it around, while my father chased me all over the front yard. The snow was cold, but I held onto it until I felt its warmth. When the wind blew heaps of it into our faces, my father and I just laughed and started rolling up the balls for our snowman. I couldn’t quite get a ball to form, but it was good enough for my father, so it was good enough for me. My mother always watched us from the kitchen window, because she hated playing in the snow. In my heart, I felt as if the snow was a special home for me that no one else could offer—especially when I shared that home with my father. Another gust of wind sent the snow diamonds my way, and I opened my mouth to taste its pure goodness. I was obsessed with the snow, and so was my father.

Those were the good ol’ days. Back when my father and I used to play in the snow together, but after a while, it seemed as if he preferred to play in it with his friends, instead of with me. As I grew older, my father spent so much time in the snow that he

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

started missing work and eventually lost my mother. She told me that his winters were too long, and that's why their marriage had gone cold. I was 17 then, and understood her pain to be the same as the pain I used to have sitting on my bed waiting on him to come back inside to play with me. On those cold nights, sometimes three in a row, she used to cry my tears and watch the same cars passing by the window...our tears became one splash of pain against an empty heart.

My mother was sitting on her and my father's bed with her arms folded, staring at our family photograph on the wall next to the television. In the photo, my mother was sitting beside my father with her arms wrapped lovingly around his neck— her wedding ring aimed at the camera— and my father was holding me on his lap; He was gazing down on me, an infant, smiling up at him. My mother and I were both wearing lavender dresses, and my father had on a black suit with a tie and hat that matched our dresses. Although his shoes couldn't be seen in the picture, my father told me they were lavender too; My father was very dapper indeed. However, it wasn't love in my mother's eyes as she beamed into the photograph. It was worry drowned in sadness. I knew the look in her eyes because I had it too.

“Mom! Mom! Where's Dad?” I'd ask on those cold nights.

“Melonie, go to bed!” Her voice was high-pitched and sharp. “He's out shoving all his money up his nose with his friends like he's been doing since before you were born. That's where he is!” She slightly rocked back and forth as if she were holding a child, while her eyes scanned the ceiling.

I cried, “But I can't sleep unless he tucks me in, Mom. I don't want to go to bed. Can I wait in here with you?”

“No! Go to bed, now!” My mother looked away from me and murmured, “I'm done waiting on him.” Her eyes were dark, and her face, emotionless. Her hair was even curlier than mine but

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

at night she kept it wrapped in a blue silk scarf covered with little cloud patterns. The scarf always made me think of heaven, and I wondered if she saw heaven in her dreams. Maybe her dreams were set in lands far above the earth, where maybe she lived in peace with my father. My parents didn't really talk much on earth (outside of the many arguments), so maybe being elevated would clear their minds and give them a different perspective on their difficult situations. I wondered a lot of things, because reality always left me cold and uneasy. Reality was a bitch. I took one last look at my mother's scarf— I couldn't bear to see her stern face that fought hard to conceal pain— and went back to my room. Those were the nights when I used to cry myself to sleep. I used to wonder how my father could be out having so much fun without me. My tears covered the pillow and were cold against my cheek. Not cold like the snow that over time brought me warmth, but cold like an abyss with random, piercing gusts of wind. Although my father and I shared a home in the snow, the snow lay in my mother's heart, and it was so cold in there. I remember the feeling well. Cold were the days, and frigid were the nights.

* * *

My mother worked as a personal trainer at Fitness America; Though her outer shell seemed rigid, her heart was ready to be loved. On most days she got home from the fitness center in the afternoon, around the same time that my school bus was pulling up in front of the house. We would cook meals together before my father got home: Mondays were for pasta; Tuesdays chicken dinners; Wednesdays sea-food night; Thursdays steak, broccoli and wild rice; Fridays were our Mexican Fiesta nights; Saturday was usually the only day for fast-food or going to a restaurant; and Sundays we'd cook whatever we were in the mood to eat. I was in the kitchen setting the table for Friday's Fiesta Night, when I saw a red Cadillac pull into the driveway. I recognized the driver as my father's loud friend, Sly Sam. He worked at Ford Motor Company with my father for about twenty

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

years, and the machines had caused him to lose some of his hearing; Sly Sam had to talk louder in order to hear himself, but it was too loud for me. I watched him from the kitchen window as he walked up to the front door. He was much shorter than my father, and chubby with orange freckles. His eyes were a piercing green, and he had curly red hair with a matching goatee. Although Sly Sam was fat, his face was defined and his cheeks looked sucked in. The only physical aspect he shared with my father was his red, Rudolph-nose. He knocked hard, and my mother swung the door open:

“What!” She snapped.

“Is Jacob here?” He took a step forward.

“No, he’s not.” She lied.

“Well um...he just um...told me to come over and pick him up.” Sly Sam tried peeping in through the door behind my mother.

“Is there something in my house that you need?”

“Um...no, Heather.”

“You keep looking behind me like you see something.”

“I don’t...I don’t see nothin’.”

“Then look at me!” She spat, pointing to herself. “I want you to get the hell away from my house with your foolishness. I have an eight year old daughter, and she doesn’t need to be exposed to more of her father’s bullshit. *It* and *you* can stay on the streets.”

“Look, ma’am...I’m just here to—”

“Look, ma’am my ass.” She pointed to his car and yelled, “get the fuck off of my porch and hit the road!”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“I’m not trying to disrespect your home, Heather.” He was louder than usual; Probably in an attempt to get my father to hear him.

“Then leave when I tell you to.” My mother flung out her arms. “Hello?” She waved her hand in his face. “Bye-bye, Sly. Get the hell outta here. I’m not gonna tell you again— next time I’m gonna show you.”

“Stop being stuck-up and tell Jacob to come down-stairs. I’m tired of this sh—”

POW! My mother jabbed him in the nose. Sly’s head flew backwards as if his neck was broken, and when he lifted it back up, blood gushed out of his nose and down his mouth and chin. “You want some more?” She had her fists up. My mother was about 5’9”, weighed 170 pounds and of course had a solid frame. “Leave, damn it!”

My father walked up from behind her. “Sly, man...who whooped your ass? You got in a fight on your way over here?” My father said, shaking his head, “What was all of that yelling?”

Sly pinched his nose and in a squeaky voice said, “You need to get your wife under control, Jay.”

“Heather, you hit him? What the hell?” My father was confused. He looked from Sly’s twisted up face, to my mother and back.

“I don’t want him hanging around here, Jacob.” My mother folded her arms. “He only comes around on pay days. What type of friend only hangs around when you have money?” She interrogated. “No good friend of mine, I’ll tell you that!”

“Heather, I’ve known Sly for years and—”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“You call him *Sly*! Hello! He’s a snake!” She shook her head.

“We’ll talk about it later, Heather.” My father tried to walk passed my mother.

“You ain’t goin’ nowhere with him.” She blocked the exit. “I just cooked dinner, and Melonie set the table. You *will* sit down and eat.”

“You ain’t Jay’s mother!” Sly yelled, then spat out blood. My mother rushed toward him, and my father pulled her back.

“I want him away from here!” My mother screamed. “And if you follow him, Jacob, you stay away too.”

“Look, Sly...man I’ll catch up with you another day.” My father shook his head.

“You let her run that household, Jay? Just like that? I can’t be—” My mother’s knuckles barely brushed his face as my father snatched her back, and closed the door. Sly Sam went back to his car, and never pulled into our driveway again.

* * *

Although I know it’s normal for couples to quarrel, when it happens every encounter, the quarreling becomes a problem. A particular argument between my parents still sends a chill up my spine whenever I reflect on my childhood. Ten at the time, I’d been sitting on the porch all day waiting for my father to pull up in his burgundy Chevrolet Caprice and take me to the park to play catch. I remember looking down in to my black leather glove and watching the tears run down the seams into the pocket, until my mother yelled for me to come inside. My father tried sneaking into the house that night through the back door at three o’clock in the

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

morning, unaware that my mother had been sitting in the living room nearby, gripping a wooden baseball bat, and awaiting his late night return. Although, my father and I shared a love for baseball, my mother wanted to show him that every once in a while, she liked to take a swing too. As soon as he entered the house, she hit him in the stomach with the bat. His scream awoke me. I ran towards the top of the stairwell, where I had a clear view of my parents, and hid near a wall. My father was clutching his stomach, and slowly rising from his knees.

“Heather, what the fuck!”

“I told you to stop coming in here late and disrespecting my household.” My mother kicked him back onto floor and spat on him.

My father wiped the spit from his neck and chin and yelled, “You are a crazy bitch!”

“I’m crazy? Look at me, Jacob!” She grabbed his chin and lifted his head. “Do you know what your daughter did today? Do you?” There was a tangible moment of silence. “Of course you don’t, because you were too busy with your head buried on somebody’s fuckin’ table.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He looked away from her, but she gripped his chin again and pulled his head back towards her.

“I’m not stupid, damn it! I know what the fuck you do. I only wish I would’ve known it before I married you.” Still holding his chin, she looked a way for a second, then returned to his face. “Melonie sat on the porch for hours waiting on you to pick her up. You told her you were goin’ to pick her up. You *promised* her...but here you are at three A.M. walking in like you never even made the damn promise. Did you know...” My mother fought back her tears, and I could hear her voice trembling. “Did you know

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

she...she cries herself to sleep sometimes because her father isn't there to tuck her in— like he *promised*? See Jacob, you make all of these *promises* but I don't really think you know what '*promise*' means."

"I know what promise mea—

"Why the fuck are you even talking? I'm talking right now! Your time to speak was about twelve hours ago when our daughter was sitting out on the porch with her face in a baseball glove." My mother crossed her arms and stared down at my father who was still sitting on the floor. "Lemme ask you something: where was your face?"

"Look, Heather, I—

"Shut the fuck up! You are a terrible excuse for a man and an even worse excuse for a father. All I wanna' know is, when you *kill* yourself out *there*, what do you want me to tell our daughter? Huh? What do you want me to tell her?"

"What is it that you want from me?"

"Oh, how nice of you to finally think of *me*." Her eyes followed my father as he stood up. "I don't want a damn thing from you, anymore but your daughter does. You are her *world*, Jacob, her *world*. When her *world* is *gone*...what do you want me to say? 'Oh, Melonie, sweetheart, Daddy's in heaven now, but he spent his whole life high so don't worry— he's used to it.' Look at you, Jacob— you're a mess. Your hair needs to be cut, you've been losing *a lot* of weight, and you're eyes are all glassy from—"

"Lack of sleep—"

"And being high, damn it! Who do you think you're fooling? I'm not Melonie! Unfortunately, I'm your wife...and quite frankly, being your wife is just as unfortunate as being your child."

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

As soon as my mother's eyes locked onto my father's, he looked away.

"I'm not high. You know I work late at the plant and I—"

"What? How were you planning on picking up your daughter and working late at the same time? You're so loaded you can't get your lies straight." As my father tried to walk away from her, she grabbed his face and slammed his head through the wall behind him. I screamed and fell to the floor.

"Dad!" I cried. My parents looked up towards the stairwell.

"What are you doing eavesdropping, Melonie?" My mother's voice was cold and harsh. "Go to bed!" She looked at my father who was moaning with pain and gripping the arm of a chair with one hand and the back of his head with the other. There were pieces from the wall scattered on my father's green shirt. "Jacob, get out! Go back to where ever the hell you came from because *we* don't need you *here*. I want a divorce."

"Dad, no! Please, no! Stay!" I was yelling to my father between coughs, gagging and tears. "Oh, my God...oh my God...don't go!" I could barely breathe.

"Melon, it's gonna' be ok. I'll tuck you in."

"Get out! You should've been here earlier."

"Heather, let me just tuck her in!"

"Get out!"

"Dad! Mom don't make him go, please." I was sitting on my heels, my hands in a puddle of tears. "I don't mind waiting. It's not that late."

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Tuck her in, Jacob. Then I want you outta here. You hear me, bastard? Out!”

I felt as if my life would be frozen in that moment forever, the pain in my heart was so intense. My father slowly walked up the stairs and held his head down like a child who’d done wrong and finally felt guilty enough to deserve punishment. When my father reached the top of the staircase, he put his hand on my shoulder and walked me into my room. As he flicked on the lights, I climbed up on my bed and lay down. My father sat down next to me— pulling my pink comforter up to my chin— and kissed my forehead. His face had lost some of its color, but his nose was as red as I’d always remembered; I used to think he looked a little like Santa’s favorite reindeer, Rudolph.

“You know I love you, Melon.” My father said.

“I love you too, Dad.” I smiled.

“And you know I’ll always love you, right?” He smiled back at me.

“I know, Dad. I’ll always love you too.” I could see that he was more serious than ever before.

“Melon...Melon sometimes adults do things that they don’t wanna have to do.” He sniffled a little bit and wiped his nose. “It’s like...have you ever wanted to do something that you knew you shouldn’t do, but you really just didn’t know how to fight the urge?”

“No, Dad, why?” I pulled my hand from underneath the comforter to move a piece of hair out of my face. I could hear my mother moving chairs around in the kitchen, probably sweeping.

“I guess you’re right,” he cleared his throat, “promise me that you won’t let anything between your mother and me keep you from doing all of the things you want to do in life.”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“I promise.”

“And promise me that you’ll never find out what it is to want to do something bad, just because you feel like it, or give into any of those urges.”

“I promise.” As I said this, he kissed my forehead again.

“You’re my only child, and I love you, so don’t you ever *forget* it.” My father held onto my hands with one of his.

“I won’t ever forget, Dad.” I smiled again.

“Close your eyes, and I’ll tell you a story, ok, Melon?” He chuckled a little and wiggled my ear. I closed my eyes. “When I was your age, me and my brothers and sisters used to walk to school barefooted in ten feet of snow.”

“Nuh-uh, Dad.” I shook my head and frowned.

“Just listen, Melon. Don’t interrupt.” He pinched my cheek and continued, “Mama used to get all 13 of us up at five A.M. and—”

“I thought there were only *nine* of you guys: Aunt Sarah, Uncle Mark, Uncle—”

“We had cousins living there too. Next time you interrupt I’m gonna stop and you can ask your mom to tuck you in.” He laughed.

“No, ok ok. Finish!” I giggled and rolled on my side.

“Where was I?” He scratched his head.

“13 of y’all at five A.M.” I murmured.

“Melon!” He gently squeezed my shoulder.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Okaaaaaaay. You asked me a question, dang.”

“Melon...don’t say ‘dang’.” My father folded his arms.

“I can’t, Dad, because I’m not supposed to speak, remember?” I rolled onto my back and tapped him on his forehead.

“Do you want to hear the story or not?” He returned my forehead tap.

“Yeaaaaaa, I said finiiiiiiiiish.” I flashed all of my teeth.

“Soooo, at five A.M., Mama, woke all of us up and handed the oldest a wash cloth. We all had to shower and brush our teeth with that one cloth. Then everybody swapped the clothes they wore to school yesterday with a different person, so we wouldn’t have to wear the same clothes every day. The kids out at the schoolhouse tried to tease us, but we just told them that we each had a separate set of the same clothes. We could always hear, Mama, yelling, ‘make sure y’all put some Long Johns on under ya’ britches. Those beds better be fixed, and y’all betta’ pray to the good Lord before ya’ head outta my house’.” He laughed. “Then...then we all went in the living room and rubbed our feet on the carpet until they got really warm— so we could make it six miles in the snow— and opened the front door.”

I loved my father’s stories, although I knew how tall those tales were.

“Melon, I tell ya’, we had to work together to dig a tunnel from the front door to the street, because the snow was so high; you know if we didn’t have socks, we didn’t have gloves either. Ooo wee! Our hands were frost bitten to the bone but we never stopped digging. You better believe we got to school on time or early every day or we were gonna have a problem when Daddy got home form workin’ on the railroads. Girl, your grandpa used to walk in the house, toss his coat in his big chair, rip his shirt off with

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

one hand and wipe the sweat off his forehead. Hahahaaa. Mama and Daddy kept us in line, boy ol' boy, I tell ya'."

He left some time after that; I was fast asleep.

Times didn't get much better after that. Our family just grew further apart after the divorce. Once in eleventh grade, I even tried playing in the snow with some friends of my own. How they got their hands on some snow, I don't know, but the temptation was all too much for me. I wanted to see what could keep a man away from his family. As I stood there in the snow, leaning into the wind, I awaited that magical gust of snow diamonds that used to make my skin tingle with warmth. I could feel it approaching, so I took a deep breath, hoping its pure goodness would be the same as I remembered during those good times with my father. I could feel it! At first my mind was cold, but then my body started warming up. I was in the clouds, twirling around my mother's old silk scarf and in the distance I saw my father. I smiled at him, and for an instant we were reunited in our snowy home. I jumped up and down and waved at him, but he didn't share my enthusiasm. He just pointed at the ground and told me to go back down. The sky was no place for me. Slowly, I drifted back down, leaving my friends behind, and knew I didn't want to go back up there ever again.

I used to wonder when the winter wonderland in the sky would call my father home. He often talked of plans for my upcoming high school graduation, but I knew he wouldn't make it to the spring. I knew my father lived for the winter—the last season of the year and the final snow had already fallen upon the earth.

The last time I saw my father, he was walking to my car from his apartment wearing a lime green suit with a matching hat and shoes. His build had gone from stocky to slender and he looked like a green snake. My father's once strong, athletic legs were like two green sticks when the wind blew against his pants. He

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looked as if he hadn't slept or eaten in weeks. My father's face was long with red, bulging eyes. I rolled down my window, and my father bent his lanky body down to my car:

"Hey, Melon. How you, um...um how you doin' in school?" He stuttered, and shot paranoid looks over his shoulder.

"School is fine. I have a four-point-four GPA because of my advanced placement courses." I forced a smile through the pain of seeing him in such a terrible state.

"Four-point-four? All right! You still wanna' um...you still wanna' go to UCLA, right?" My father coughed and I could hear a build-up of phlegm in his chest.

"Yea, Dad. I've already been accepted, remember? I have a full-ride merit scholarship." It hurt me that he couldn't remember something so important in my life, but I knew he wanted to.

"Yea...yea, that's right. I do remember you tellin' me 'bout that, Melon." He sniffled and continued, "look here, Melon...I um...I just got paid and I have a little for you." My father stuck his thin fingers deep into the pockets of the baggy green suit that once fit him well, and pulled out his wallet. He flipped through the money a few times, debating how much he would give me. Finally, my father handed me thirty dollars.

"Is this um... is this enough for you, Melon?" My father scratched his chest and arms as if he'd felt a million tiny critters crawling on him.

"Yea, Dad, it's fine." I had a job, and didn't need his money at all; I only accepted my father's money because I knew it would be that much less going into his system.

"You know I don't...um I don't get that much money since I had that medical retirement from Ford." *That was a lie; My father got paid more than enough to be sitting pretty.* He shot a few

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more paranoid looks over his shoulders. “I try to give you what I can.” *Whenever he wasn’t asking my mom for money.* “You take care of yourself out there in California. Maybe I’ll um...maybe I’ll move out that way so...so you’ll have someone nearby.” He sniffled some more. “You know I love you, Melon.”

“I love you too, Dad.” These words were becoming more instinctual than emotional.

“Melon...I haven’t been feelin’ too well lately.” He glanced over at my side-view mirror. “I might not be around too long, ya’ know.”

“Oh, Dad, don’t say that.” I looked into his sorrowful eyes.

“Well, you know...” he took a deep breath, “all those years at The Plant really hurt me.” He scratched at the invisible bugs on his suit. As a blue pick-up truck rolled by, my father waved at the young, male driver. “It’s all right, though— I lived my life and you have to live yours.”

“It can always get better, Dad.” I patted his shoulder like he used to do mine. “You’ve just gotta pray before you leave the house like Grandma used to tell you.”

He laughed. “Ol’ Mama...” he looked at the ground, “Ya’ know, Melon...I um...I really miss my parents. It’s been um...it’s been about seven years since they passed, but it still feels like yesterday.”

“Yea, Dad, I miss them too and—”

“Fifty-seven years they were married.” He shook his head. “That’s a long time, Melon. Your mother and I...we coulda made it but she didn’t wanna make it work.” He looked over his shoulder at the blue pick-up truck that was now parked a few apartments down. “That’s what’s wrong with couples these days, Melon, they don’t...they don’t wanna try to make it work.” He shook his head

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again. “Make sure you find someone...someone who’s gonna be there for you— even in your hard times.

“I will, Dad, but I’m not really worried about that stuff right now.”

“Well, Melon, you gotta um...you gotta think about things when you’re young so you don’t...so you don’t mess things up before the time comes.” My father looked back over at the truck. “If you take life as it comes...it’ll um...do what it wants with you. The day you finally um...finally decide to plan, you might wake up too far down the road to take the path you wanted to take.” He looked down at his shoes. “Believe me I know that road too well.”

“Well, you could always make your own path, Dad.” I smiled.

“You’re right, Melon.” He laughed. “You were always smart.”

“I try to be.” I giggled.

“Hey, Melon, remember when we um...when we used to go out and build those snowmen in the front yard?” My father flashed me the wide smile I remembered from my childhood.

“Yea, Dad, I remember.” I returned the smile.

“Boy ol’ boy, those were good times, weren’t they?” He laughed some more.

“Yea, they were.” It was nice to reflect.

“You were just a little thing then. Swore you could beat me in a foot race. Hahaha!” He looked over at the blue pick-up truck. “It would be nice if we could go back and um...go back and do it

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all again. Me, you and your mom could be a...we could be a family again.”

I wanted to burst into tears.

“Wouldn’t that be nice, Melon.” He smiled.

“Yea, it would.” I turned towards my windshield, took a deep breath, and exhaled for as long as possible—hoping that I’d completely deflate and vanish into the past.

“We had some great times, Melon. We really did.” Sly Sam was riding up in his red Cadillac, and my father looked over at the blue pick-up truck. The driver was still inside, and Sly Sam pulled up beside the truck. “Well, Melon...I’ll um...I’ll talk to you later.”

“I can stay longer if you want, Dad.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “Maybe I can come in and we’ll play some cards or something.”

“No, no, that’s fine.” My father looked over his shoulder, and scratched at his critter collar. “Go out and do what you need to do for school. I want you to um...make me proud out at UCLA, ok?”

“Ok, Dad.” I was disappointed that he wouldn’t ditch his friends to spend time with me.

“You promise, Melon?”

“I promise.” I looked at my steering wheel.

“I’ll always love you, Melonie.” I looked into his eyes, not knowing that it would be my last time.

“I’ll always love you too, Dad.”

“All right, now. You head on outta here and um...remember what I said.” My father kissed my forehead, stood

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up, and stretched his bony arms toward the heavens. He walked back to his apartment, and Sly Sam followed with the guy from the blue pick-up truck.

I rolled up my window and sped off. *I'll always love you too, Dad.*

* * *

Looking out across the stage yesterday at graduation was hard, knowing I wouldn't see his face smiling back at me like he used to do on those old snow days.

"Melonie, I know your father would've been proud of you." My mother hugged me tight.

"I know, Mom," I cried a little and she did too.

"He'll always be with you, baby. I want you to go to UCLA and make us proud." She fought back more tears, "you'll see him again tomorrow...and I want you to tell him you love him one last time face-to-face." She gasped for air. "You're a strong woman, and we've always known that. Don't ever stop being that way over this— that's not what your father would have wanted...and it's not what I want. You and I still have each other."

"Mom, don't make me cry anymore." I sniffled. "I knew it was coming; like you said, I'm not a little girl. I can handle Dad's death."

"But you don't have to handle it alone."

"I know. I know." I pulled my mother close to me, and hugged her again. That time I didn't want to let go. The only thing harder than letting go is looking at the box. Everyone's just staring at the box and listening to the preacher drone on and on about a man he didn't know well and an afterworld he's never visited. I'm staring at the box and out the window at the raindrops because it's

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too hard for me to look at my father, a man once full of life and laughter, lying there stiff, and lifeless. In my mind, I'm still racing with my father out the front door and into the snow. He's still rolling around in the snow like a big kid in his brown Carrhartt coat. We're still building crooked snowmen, because I can't quite get a ball to form. I'm still dancing around him in my pink-and-purple snowsuit, tasting wind gusts full of beautiful snow diamonds, while he's making snow angels.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

Chrisi Hornback

Chrisi Hornback



Hometown: Whitmore Lake, which is just north of Ann Arbor.

Major: My major is currently undecided. I really enjoy English, particularly Creative Writing. I hope to be able to incorporate both into a concentration/sub concentration.

Favorite Book: My very favorite book is Jane Eyre. To date, however, I have not finished it as I am too concerned I won't like the ending. It's a love/hate relationship for sure!

Favorite Poem: I'm still looking for an absolute favorite.

Where I see myself after graduation: At this point I'm not sure where I'll be after I graduate. My eventual goal is to have a place here in Ann Arbor, write books and stories, get married, start a family (dog and cat included), and take frequent vacations to cool places like New Zealand.

Chapter 1: Of Yellow Bicycles and Basketball

“Vood you like uhh bag?”

“No thanks, Joe, I’m all good.”

“You are shuuure?”

“Yah, no worries, I’ve got it. Have a good one.” Riley grabbed the milk and ramen noodles off the store counter, which was covered with local advertisements and pictures of missing dogs, and headed towards the door. She heard the familiar “ding dang ding” of the bells as she backed into the door, pushing it open with her shoulder.

Outside the little corner store, a bicycle leaned against the brick wall. The yellow paint was chipped and peeling off in spots and the brown leather of the seat was worn. A rusty wire basket hung from the handlebars over the front tire. It was one of those inanimate objects that had that curious way of looking wise, like it had been around the world.

Before hopping onto her trusty bicycle, Riley stopped to admire the toy train set in the store window. She could see the little lights in the houses around the train, as it went around and around and around. That train had been set up in that window since before she was born which meant it was at least 16 years old; it was always there and it was always turned on. She smiled to herself, glad that someone like Joe owned the little corner store. He and his wife had come to the U.S. years ago from somewhere in the Middle East, she couldn’t remember where. She also didn’t know how his name came to be Joe. Nevertheless, he was always at the counter with his wispy gray hair, kind brown eyes, and gap-toothed smile, just like that train was always in the window. Riley tossed the groceries into the rusty little basket, swung one leg over the bike, and pushed off.

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It was a very typical sort of day: hot yet comfortable, late August, nothing special. The neighborhood, made up of small brick houses surrounded by the most unusually large trees, was fairly quiet as it was late in the afternoon and most adults were still at work. There were, of course, the scattered groups of kids chasing the ice cream truck and teenagers walking the sidewalks, splashing in backyard pools, and laying out in bathing suits trying to get that perfect tan. But mostly, there was peace and Riley Adams rode down the middle of it. Worn sneakers pedaled rhythmically and her long dark hair flowed out behind her from under the baseball cap that shielded her bright green eyes. She knew these streets, like she knew her bicycle, and as she sped down them, a flash of yellow, she appeared to flicker as she pedaled in and out of the patches of sunlight cast by the tall trees. This was the suburbs, a place that, on the surface, was blissfully unaware of any harsh outside world, but housed its own private tragedies.

* * *

When she finally reached her house-- average-sized, red brick with a black roof surrounded by pine trees--Riley put the yellow bicycle in the garage and pulled the groceries out of the wire basket. As she opened the door, she was greeted by the sounds of laughter and commotion coming from the living room. Riley's older brother, Max and his best friend Nick had been shooting some sort of Batman spoof video in the living room all afternoon. This was not an unusual past time for them, regardless of their being 21 years old. They also had a habit of turning everything into a philosophical debate. Riley tip toed behind the couch trying to sneak through to the kitchen, milk dribbling over the carpet. Max was standing behind a tripod with his palm to his forehead while Nick stood in front of him wearing what appeared to be a cardboard box as a shirt and a fake pair of cat ears on his head.
Geez.

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Having reached the kitchen successfully unnoticed, Riley set the groceries on the counter with a slight “splosh!” from the milk. A gravelly voice spoke from behind her.

“I won’t be here for dinner.” Riley turned to see her father sitting at the kitchen table, a can of Budweiser characteristically in hand. He was younger than he looked, in his mid forties, partly because of his greasy hair, which was thinning and gray, and partly because of his sullen face. His dark eyes were boring into hers, distant and glossy, the remnants of a man.

“Oh?” she asked.

“I’m going out with Brandy.” He answered.

“Fine.” She replied coldly. She turned back to the groceries, hesitated, and then added, “Larry got in a fight today.” The words came out in a rush. She turned her head to see his reply, wishing her father would finally step up and do something about her little brother’s problem with bullies.

“...well...it ain’t like it’s my fault.” His eyes were hazily focused on his shoes. “I suppose I best go get ready to go out.” He stood up and left the kitchen without another word. And that was that. Riley stared after him angrily for a few moments before turning to the fridge and beginning to fix dinner.

An hour or so later, Riley called the boys in for dinner, insisting they wash up first, use utensils, act civilized, etc. But Larry didn’t come down from his room. *Great.* She fixed him a plate and was heading past the door for the stairs when the doorbell rang. She reached for the handle and swung the door open, suspending the plate of food in her other hand like a professional waitress. Standing on the step was a curvy little blonde wearing entirely too much make up and a sequined red dress that was maybe long enough to cover her belly button. *Yeesh.*

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“Well, hey there sweet cheeks!” Brandy reached out with both arms, abruptly yanking Riley into a suffocating embrace and accidentally scratching her arm with a fake red nail. Riley struggled to balance Larry’s dinner. “Ooo, sorry hun, did I get ya?” she chomped loudly on bubble gum, occasionally blowing a large pink bubble and then obnoxiously popping it.

“Naw, it’s fine.” Riley replied curtly.

“Well, how ya been sugar?”...”chomp, chomp.” Brandy stepped in and closed the door behind herself.

“I’m fine.”

Silence.

“Now ain’t ya gonna ask how I been?”...”chomp, chomp, POP!”

“I bet you’ve been just fine, Brandy.....DAD!!!! SHE’S HERE!!!!!!” Riley looked around frantically for an escape before realizing she already had one in her hand. “Listen, why don’t you just sit down on the couch there in the living room? I’ve got to take this upstairs.” She hurried around the corner and up the stairs, passing her father in the hallway. He smelled of alcohol and too much cologne. At the end of the hall, she reached Larry’s door and gave three quick knocks.

“Who’s there?” came his voice.

“It’s Riles, I’ve brought you nourishment, young Einstein.”

“Oh, shut up...and come in.” Riley entered the dimly lit room cautiously. One never knew what to expect when entering Larry’s room, which was more of a makeshift science lab than a bedroom. Larry sat at a wooden desk in the corner, hunched over a microscope.

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“Where do you want it?” she asked, looking around the cluttered room; every surface was covered with some sort of half finished project, wires sticking out of pears, light bulbs of various sizes, plants, diagrams, and models.

“Where do I want what?”

“The food, I made dinner.”

“Oh, right...ummm, well, hold on...I...I wanted to ask you something.” He was clearly distracted with whatever was under that microscope. Riley took a seat on his black Star Wars bed spread and looked around some more. Most of the things in Larry’s room were foreign to her. Of all the posters on the wall, she only recognized the periodic table and Gandalf. She turned to the table beside his bed. Ah, there they were. Two brown chinchillas sat cuddling in a glass cage.

“Luke and Han seem to be doing well. Didn’t Han turn out to be a girl though?”

“Mmmm...hold on.” Larry said.

Growing impatient, Riley leaned back with her elbow onto his pillow. “CRINKLE!” She looked down to see what she had unknowingly destroyed. The corner of a photograph stuck out from under Larry’s pillow. Her eyes shot up to Larry, still focused on that microscope. She pulled out the photograph. A beautiful young woman sat in a pile of autumn leaves, smiling like the world was hers and a yellow bicycle leaned against a wooden fence in the background. Riley studied the woman’s face, her long blond hair was the same as Larry’s and her bright green eyes also belonged to Larry, Riley and Max.

“CLANK! “Riley looked up to see Larry setting aside whatever had been under the microscope. She quickly stuffed the

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photograph back under the pillow and looked up just as he turned his eyes to meet hers.

“Sorry, I just figured I might as well use the blood I was dripping for science. Yes, Han was a girl so I switched it up. They are now Han and Leia. What did you want again?”

“To feed you. And you told me you wanted to ask me something.”

“Ah, right...ummm, well, I was just wondering if you told dad about what happened today...?”

“Oh. No, no I didn’t.” she lied, “Did you want me to?”

“No, don’t. I don’t want him to worry. It’s really no big deal.” He said. Riley nodded, feeling guilty.

“Yah, I suppose. Okay.”

“Thanks...for that and the food.”

“No problem, see ya later.” She pushed herself up from the bed and walked out the door, closing it behind her. She stood there for a moment feeling guilty. Riley didn’t like lying to her brother. She should never have even threatened to tell dad in the first place. He never cared anyways. Nevertheless, it was sweet that Larry still thought he would care. Riley took a deep breath and went back to the kitchen to enjoy her dinner and a rather comical discussion between Nick, Max, and herself about their father’s “bimbo” of a girlfriend.

Later that night, after dinner and a ridiculous viewing of Bambi in slow motion with Max and Nick (also chosen by Max

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and Nick), Riley Adams found herself alone in her bedroom. It had gotten dark outside and dad wasn't home yet, though that was to be expected. She grabbed the black zip-up sweatshirt that hung over her bedpost and threw it on over her gray tank top. After a brief listen at her door to make sure no one was around, she slid open the bottom drawer of her desk, dug around under some papers, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She stared at them a moment, adjusting her baseball cap. *Finally, some stress relief.*

After another glance at her bedroom door, Riley crept to her window, slid it open, and climbed out onto the roof. The roughness of the shingles rubbed on the bottoms of her bare feet and pulled at the strings of her cutoff shorts. She sat there in the dark, knees to her chest, smoking and staring off into the distance.

It wasn't long, however, before she started to notice a sort of thudding noise coming from the house next door, Old Mrs. Tibbon's house. Someone was...someone was dribbling a basketball. Riley crept along the roof, closer to the corner edge. There, on the fringes of light cast by Old Mrs. Tibbon's back porch lamp was a shadowy figure dribbling a basketball. "THUD, THUD, THUD," silence, then "CRASH" as the basketball hit the rim. The hoop was shrouded in darkness, outside the circle of light. She couldn't tell if the ball had gone in or not. She waited to hear a reaction from the player. Some sort of "He shoots, he scores!" or "Aaaaair ball!" exclamation, but it did not come. The shadowy figure continued to play as Riley listened to the thudding dribbles and crashing shots from her roof, unnoticed. All she could see was the silhouette of a basketball player.

She didn't know how long she'd been sitting there, maybe ten minutes, maybe an hour, or how many cigarettes she'd burned through. She was like a mindless couch potato watching TV, except she was, for all intents and purposes, spying. But life came thudding and crashing back to reality, as it so often does, when she

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noticed her foot was asleep. Riley tried to quietly adjust herself, shifting her weight, when suddenly her foot slipped out from under her. Both arms flung out to her sides, attempting to brace herself. Her fingernails scraped the rough shingles as she started to slide down. Riley stuck her feet out, trying to catch herself when suddenly her feet caught the rain gutter, stabilizing her. She looked over towards the mysterious basketball player. He hadn't seemed to notice. She was safe....and then she saw the lighter that had been laying next to her slide down the shingles, bounce off the rain gutter, and land with a "TINK!" on the patio below. *Shit.*

Her eyes shot over towards Old Mrs. Tibbon's house. The thudding and crashing had stopped and a teenage guy stood directly under the porch light, basketball in hand, staring straight at her. Riley instantly had a vision of herself as some sort of over-sized pigeon flapping her arms to stay balanced on the edge of the roof. She stared at him, speechless. He was average height, probably 5'7", with shaggy light brown hair. From what she could see he was attractive. She gulped.

"Are you smoking?" he hollered across the yard at her.
Crap, did he have to say it so loud?

"Uhh, yah...yah, I was." She managed.

"Oh. Well, it's not good for you." He yelled. Riley Adams continued to stare. And that is where it all began, Riley Adams teetering barefoot on the edge of her roof and Ian Nicolson silhouetted under the porch light, basketball in hand, each of them startled by the other.

Caitlin Michelle Kiesel

Caitlin Michelle Kiesel



Caitlin Michelle Kiesel is from Royal Oak, Michigan. She is a sophomore majoring in English and planning to subconcentrate in Creative Writing. Her favorite poets are Billy Collins, Jane Kenyon, and Frank O'Hara, and some of her favorite authors are Ernest Hemingway, Haruki Murakami, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Laura Esquivel. She is the recipient of several Hopwood awards including the Hopwood Underclassmen Poetry Award, the Roy and Helen Meador Writing Award, and the Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship. She writes both poetry and fiction.

Hemingway's Androgyne

white hair like a horse's
tail spiked by its shortness
who did the woman think
she was going to the barber
shop asking for the Eton crop
coming back the next day
demanding it bleached until
all color was lost and she
was a towhead baby
with no more feminine
delicacy remaining

who did the woman think
she was smoking on the beach
wearing nothing but the sand
on the shore and tanning until she
was not herself anymore and then retiring
to the hotel in Le Grau-du-Roi
when she had worn out the sun
stolen all of its rays to morph
into an avant-garde star

who does the woman think
she is wearing shorts on Sunday
when she should be at church
in a skirt but instead she
is drinking absinthe before noon after
her new husband who she is not sure
she adores pours the green liquid

like a slow secret because it is still
illicit but she craves it every
morning after devouring her breakfast
of fried eggs which she speckles with
black pepper after releasing the
liquid yoke from its membrane

The Sideshow Brothers

Skin.
Smooth skin;
silken, supple,
polished patent leather.
Skin unlike the other beasts'.
Not monster skin,
but alien.

My skin,
and also yours; akin, thin.
Are we
in the same skin?

Kith and kin.
Suppose we are
twins
with matching,
natural suits.

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Let's give
each other some skin.
No, let's get under
each other's skin,
tucked inside
like beneath bedcovers.
On display inside
the striped tent,
atop the cirque
rostrum, our body
shines, gleams
in the funneling light.

Let's hold hands;
clutch, clasp, clench them.
Fingers crossed.
Fingers corset laced.

Siamese.
Bones and muscles
embrace beneath
the surface
of a single skin.

Seven Bonsai

Now that I have become a mother,
propagating these seven bonsai trees
from trifling plant cuttings,
repotted thrice to allow for growth,
styled the trees by leaf trimming
and pruning the roots, trunks, branches,
in the beginning, using wires to form
the bend of my Chinese Juniper
and the plumb trunk of the Elm Zelkova,
even taking time each morning
to notice their pastel changes,
daily adaptations so delicate
like the latticed, pearl veins of lacewings
or crispy petals of dried Blue Salvia spikes,
now that I have made my own
small wood from root and soil,
I find true forests too arcane,
majestic, yes, but incomprehensible.

In July

Summer in the backyard.
Bubbles float like glass eyeballs.

Rainbow colors
In the weightless baubles.

Blow too firmly,
They fracture and fragment.

Exhale luxuriously,
They balloon and burgeon.

While some hold hands,
the bulbous couples look all around.

Down below, beneath branches and telephone wires,
A barefoot murderer runs in the grass.

On Receiving Your Letter from a Monsoon Venice

For a week, you say, they've closed
the motorway that leads to Venice.
You told me, with borrowed language,
how it was simply not *common* rain.

Last night, in an insomniac state, I could only
imagine a hydrated dream of Venice.
Scores of young lovers holding hands,
their feet safe inside rubber rain boots.

A graying woman on a raspberry bridge, smiling
at her twelve drenched roses.
A gondolier's song muffled as he gargles
with the antiseptic rain.

His gondola sinking because there is a leak
in the sky's faucet,
and you can't get anyone to come
out until Wednesday.

Two boat travelers lying in the same sea
water bath, saying to each other
"How romantic this is," and the inevitable,
"I love you."

Soul Search

Excavate me
Dig
Past the surface flesh
Beyond the blood seas and veins
Chisel
Into the armor bones
Break them if need be
Brush
Away the shards with gentle strokes
Inside the marrow
Reach the center of the center of the center light

Take out the ball
Heavy and metallic
Luminous in your palm
Do not
Set it on the ground and let it roll away
It is precious
A portable glow moon

Place
It on display
In the main gallery that way
Everyone
Will see the discovery
Inside sealed glass or clear plastic
Exhibit A: Part of the *Human Series*
And they will
Wonder
If they too have a silver spirit

Nadia Langworthy

Nadia Langworthy



I'm a sophomore from Kalamazoo, MI. As of now, I'm pursuing a double major in psychology and english. After I graduate, I hope to go to medical school. Favorite book: *The Kite Runner*.

Loving Rain

It was raining. Bits of broken glass covered the wet, black asphalt, reflecting light, giving the road a watery glimmer. The strong metal of the car was mangled, bent, and contorted into an ugly shape. She stood outside the car by the ambulance, barefoot, in her one-piece swimsuit and shorts, surprised she was alive and unable to comprehend why her parents were not. The other driver was alive and well, save for his broken arm, which hung limp and unnaturally angled. She absently listened to him as he attempted to form words, slurring them together as tears welled in his eyes. He looked from the mutilated cars to her face.

“I’m shlo slorry. I’m shlo slorry. I’m...I...” he repeated in a drunken stupor, twisting his face into an expression just as ugly as the wreckage. His bottom jaw was quivering uncontrollably and he stumbled to the ground, cradling his head in his usable hand. She wanted to scream, but her voice could not escape her lungs. She wanted to collapse to the cold ground, but her muscles could not relax. The flashing red and blue lights were the only consistent thing about that night; that, and the relentless flow of her tears.

Two years later, she thought about the conversation she had had with her parents that night in the car on the way to the Swimming Nationals.

“So, you nervous?” her dad asked, switching lanes.

“Well if she wasn’t, she is now,” her mom said throwing her husband a disapproving look.

“It’s ok. I’m just a little nervous because it’s raining. I hate the rain. It reminds me of bad things,” Anya answered.

Her dad chimed in, “You shouldn’t hate the rain.”

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“Well, all right then. Give me some reasons to like it,” she responded tilting her head to the side and raising a taunting eyebrow.

Her dad smiled as he looked at her in the rear-view mirror. “Well, first of all, your mother and I met on a rainy day; the best day of my life,” he adoringly glanced at his wife. “When it rains, it’s like having something start over. Everything is washed away, good or bad, and a new beginning is possible – one can start fresh. Second, I love the rain so therefore, being my daughter, you are required to love it too. Whenever you see or feel the rain, think of your old folks and how much they love it. Rain is just a fantastic thing!”

“Well, I – ”

“You know what one of my favorite quotes is? It’s by an amazing poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He said that the best thing one can do when it’s raining is to let it rain. What do you think about that?”

Anya never had the chance to answer.

* * *

Bacon sizzled in the morning air, and drenched the house with its tantalizing aroma. The meaty scent was soaked into the floral wallpaper and into the crisp bed sheets by the time she woke up. Wearing only a t-shirt and shorts, she cringed at the thought of stumbling out of bed, and squeezed her eyes shut. Quickly tightening her body into a ball, she hugged her knees close to her chest, and curled her chilled toes. She inhaled the intoxicating breakfast fumes that were wafting from downstairs. Eyes still closed, she listened to the scraping of a spatula against a pan and glassware being set on the old wooden table. She could hear the faucet running and voices mumbling. Daylight finally made its way into her eyes and she kicked the covers off with her feet and let out

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a deep, satisfying yawn, stretching her thin arms and legs. Her feet rested on the icy hardwood floor as she sat on the edge of the bed, tangled brown hair in her face.

She liked the way the old house was always chilly in the mornings, but what she enjoyed even more were the mornings themselves. She liked what was left of the still darkness outside, the chill that clung to the air, and the fact that she knew she had hours upon hours still left in the day, awaiting her arrival. Her feet quickly and carefully carried her down the stairs, a unique creak and moan rising from each step. Her hand dragged on the worn banister, her fingertips feeling out every groove and crack. As she reached the bottom of the staircase, the breakfast fumes invaded her lungs and teased her taste buds.

From around the corner she heard a scratchy voice exclaim, “Well good morning, Sleeping Beauty!” her grandpa’s voice echoed through the house and shook away whatever sleepy fiber she had left in her body.

“I don’t think Sleeping Beauty was ever up this early,” she retorted, taking her hands away from her ears and entering the dining room.

“Hey. Winners. That’s who’s up this early,” he answered back with a wink.

“Oh don’t you go teasing her again, it’s too early in the morning for that,” her grandma chimed in while carrying plates of bacon, eggs, pancakes, and fruit into the modest dining room.

“Oh, hell. I’ll do whatever I want to...” his voice trailed off in a maze of grumbles as he slowly lowered himself into his seat. With glasses filled to the rim with fresh-squeezed orange juice, the trio began feasting.

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“So what’s on the schedule for today, coach?” Anya asked. Coach was what she liked to call her grandpa, because after all, he was essentially just that. He had taken it upon himself to train Anya for this year’s Swimming Nationals and together, their progress was unstoppable. He had been in the Air Force during his younger years and adopted a gruff and tough demeanor with a heavy dose of wit. A champion at heart, he would accept nothing less than superior achievement from his granddaughter, or anyone else for that matter.

“Well I was thinking, for starters, we’d change things up a bit. After breakfast, you go back to bed for a few hours, watch TV, paint your nails, or whatever you girls like to do and then - ”

“Seriously?” she interjected.

“No,” he replied, cocking his head with narrow eyes and a playful sneer. Her grandma theatrically threw her head back and cackled, making their ears ring.

“Nice try, Anya,” she said. Anya smirked at her grandparents. They were dinosaurs, but they were undoubtedly young in spirit. *They* were the ones that kept *her* alive.

Anya had been training for months now. Early morning runs, specific weight lifting routines, swimming for hours on end, and other assortments of strenuous workouts, had shaped her into the perfect swimmer. This would be the year she would wear the heavy gold medal around her neck. This would be the year she would lift the circle of gold to her face and press it to her lips, kissing it victoriously. This would be the year she would take first place in the Swimming Nationals. After all, this was the year she was finally beginning to see herself the way she once was: determined and motivated. She came so close to winning two years ago, only to quit in the finals due to the death of her parents, an event that destroyed her for a while and hindered her from swimming.

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The two years that followed the accident were extremely grim. Anya, being an only child, was left alone with her grandparents to cope with the passing of the two most important and loved people in her life. She left high school for the rest of her sophomore year. A constant ache overcame her body and she spent her days sleeping in bed and her nights lying awake in it. She didn't speak to anyone for months, but instead, offered the occasional head shake or nod. When it rained, Anya would find herself either uncontrollably sobbing or discovering comfort in it. Her father's last words to her were about the rain, and depending on her mood, she either loved it or hated it.

* * *

“Ready, kiddo?” Anya's grandpa asked.

“Born ready.”

“That's what I like to hear.”

The two headed outside into the morning, their gym bags slung over their shoulders. It was still slightly dark outside and the brisk air bit at the back of their throats. They climbed into the ancient, blue Ford pick-up truck and began their journey to the Air Force base near their house. Having served, her grandpa had access to the base facilities, including the pool. Her chin resting in the palm of her hand, Anya gazed out the window, admiring the changing leaves as they drove past countless trees. She loved all the different colors autumn brought to her quaint town in the Maryland countryside, and found herself hypnotized by the beautiful picture the warm tones created. The red, orange, and yellow leaves seemed to mesh together and playfully dance on the branches. She broke the trance and looked over at her grandpa's face. His brow was slightly furrowed and his lips were pursed. She could tell he wanted to say something.

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After a few moments of her staring expectantly in his direction, he blurted, “I’m very proud of you, Anya. And if your parents were here, I know they’d be proud too.”

This was gutsy of him to say, because Anya rarely talked about her parents and often exhibited a negative reaction towards the topic. When brought up, she would avoid eye contact and cease any verbal communication. However, even though the past two years had been difficult, Anya certainly experienced a great amount of improvement regarding her reactions to the accident. She was finishing her last year of high school and made an enormous amount of emotional progress thanks to her loving and eternally patient grandparents.

“Thanks, grandpa. I couldn’t have come this far without you.” She paused, and then said, “And I know they would be proud. They are.” Her smile held a sweet sadness as she thought of her parents.

“I’m just glad you’ve come around and are acting like yourself again. Your grandma and I missed you, you know.”

“I know. I’m here to stay, don’t worry.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Her grandpa pulled into the pool parking lot, parking his truck in two spaces. Even though his car was just about as old as he was, it was in pristine condition. Not a single blemish could be found on or in it. By his law, no one and nothing would ever scratch or dent his truck, or else he’d, “put his foot up their ass”. Anya smiled at the thought of this as she walked into the building to change and begin her warm up.

When she came out of the locker room, her grandpa was sitting where he always sat, wearing what he always wore. He stationed himself in a white plastic chair dead center at the end of

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the pool, wearing navy blue shorts, white tennis shoes with white high-top socks, a white polo, and his bright, red whistle. In his lap rested a binder which contained her previous times, records, and critiques.

“Ready, coach?” she asked, hands on her hips.

“Born ready,” he replied with a wink, his voice booming through the swimming arena.

“Well, that’s what I like to hear.”

* * *

Finally, a week later, the day came. She had made it this far. She effortlessly passed the qualification rounds with flying colors and destroyed the semi-finals. It was the day Anya vigorously trained for, and awaited, for months. It was finals day of the Swimming Nationals. When Anya woke up, she had never felt more invigorated, more excited, or more ready for anything in her entire life. She felt it – this was her day. After dressing, she hurried downstairs, inhaled her breakfast, and packed her bag. She was sitting at the dining table with her grandma waiting for her grandpa to come downstairs.

“So, you nervous?” her grandma asked.

The memory of her father asking her that same question two years ago flooded her mind. Mixed emotions flashed across her face: first, a slightly despondent scowl and then a relaxed smirk. Anya’s eyes brightened at the thought of her parents. Their memory gave her confidence and they wouldn’t want her to dwell on the accident, especially today.

“No,” she replied, shaking her head with a smile.

“Good. I know you’re going to be the one with that medal draped around your neck. I can feel it.”

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“Thanks, Grandma, let’s hope so.”

“Oh it’s time to win, time to win, time to win!” Her grandpa belted as he pounded down the staircase. “Are you ready, kiddo?”

“Born ready!” Anya said with a beaming smile.

“Well, that’s what I like to hear!” he exclaimed with widened eyes, raised eyebrows, and an ear-to-ear grin.

* * *

Her toes curled over the edge of the platform. She stared intently through her goggles at the still, blue water in anticipation of the blow horn, signaling the start of the race. Even though the crowd was boisterous, everything went silent. The people around her disappeared and the only things that existed were her and the water. She inhaled, the horn blew, and she took the plunge. The cool water surged over her svelte body, as she sliced through the lap lane. She counted: 50 meters...100 meters...200 meters...400 meters. She was halfway there and in the lead by a good two meters. 550 meters...700 meters...750 meters. There was one more lap to go. The lap she had been determined to finish first. A competitor had splashed past Anya at the 760-meter mark, slightly ahead of her by one meter.

“I can’t watch this,” Anya’s grandma said, squeezing her husband’s hand and tapping her foot against the floor of the metal bleachers.

“She’ll be fine. She’s got this, I know she does. C’mon Anya!” her grandpa cheered.

The crowd was roaring in anticipation of the close race. The suspense of the moment was truly electrifying. At 785 meters the competitor was still ahead. Anya thought of her parents as her arms ferociously slapped the water. She thought about them being

there, cheering her on. She thought about the rain. She gained speed, catching up to her challenging competitor at the 790-meter mark. They were side-by-side, kicking furiously with their feet and carving the water with their arms and cupped hands. The last 10 meters of the race were gripping. Everyone was out of their seats jumping up and down, arms outstretched toward the ceiling. The race was finished. The crowd's voices streamed into one, massive scream that echoed in the swimming arena and poured out the doors onto the street. Anya clung to the pool wall, gasping, and found her grandparents' faces amidst the rambunctious crowd. She ripped off her goggles and looked up at the time board. She had won the race.

“Oh my God, she did it! She did it!” her grandpa shouted as he bolted up and out of the bleachers to embrace her.

Nothing but laughs and tears were coming out of Anya; the moment was too exciting for words. Her grandparents hugged and kissed her repeatedly.

“Your parents would be so proud. So proud,” they said.

The medal was placed around Anya's neck as she stood at the top of the winner's podium and smiled at her grandpa. “Thank you,” she mouthed, to which he replied with a wink.

After being congratulated countless times and shaking many hands, Anya headed to the locker room to quickly change so she and her grandparents could go out and celebrate her victory.

“We'll be waiting in the truck,” her grandma said, her face still holding a big smile.

“All right, I'll be quick,” Anya replied. She dressed and left the locker room, walked the length of the pool reflecting on her triumph, and opened the door.

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It was raining. Anya walked outside and looked up into the drops of rain coming down from the heavens. “I’m thinking of you,” she said to her parents, and clutched the medal that hung around her neck. “I love you...and I will always love the rain.”

Anna Paone

Anna Paone



I am a Screen Arts and Cultures (film) major from New Jersey. I have always loved writing both poetry and fiction, and in my poems I draw a lot of inspiration from both my upbringing in central Jersey and my current college experience. Ultimately I would love to be a writer and film and theatre director. I enjoy the novels of Jaclyn Moriarty and other current YA authors and the poems of Mary Oliver, among others.

The End of Last Year

An Italian restaurant that looks like a theatre—
it *was* a theatre—five youths standing
outside of a bar (their friend inside
is newly 21) and the basement of
a parking garage, ivory and carpeting
like a modern church
or an office.

Pick the slug lines like flowers
and tie them together. It's night all the time
in this bright city. It's a city of women
and the politics thereof.
Inhale the sweet scent
of a birthday evening,
of movie projects unnecessary
in the crowded of days. Remember what will come
from here.

A girl falls in love
outside of a bar. (Her friend inside
senses something happening.) She wants to be
a nun. And then she doesn't. But she cannot be
a woman with a man—
that requires, practically,
the work of a degree

from this college town. Take a bow from the theatre,
go back home to the east
where you can imagine the 1920s
and the life you will lead
after your college flower. Run an organization
from a parking garage. Learn you have friends
who will back you up
when the politics snake around you

like slug lines and ropes.

You are an office
unto yourself. Write this poem in class.
Remember that you're not here
to get a degree.

Revenge

Someday Stephen Strasburg is going to retire
and every strikeout he ever got
will be immortalized in ink, the swing and the miss
or the call combined into the number
that will probably be impressive.
Someday I will stop
hearing about every win,
hanging on to every hanging slider
because it will become normal
or it will disappear.

II: The Winner

Your sweet voice will convince me
of what I need to know.
You can plunge a stick into my faith
and run headlong into mystery.
I am going to be true.

Sometimes the best happens
when you're not concerned
about you.
Sometimes the worst will go,
a runner on a full count,
when your hair is curled and tamed

or your workout working.
You can get injured on a warm-up pitch,
a strike in the dirt.

The spirit will take me
where I need to go.
Beaches-clearing brawls are nice, but summer
makes them as bitter as a steroid scandal,
the shouts of the players drowned out
by the Jumbo-Tron.
You can try to smooth it over,
but it's better to move on—

Because there's only so many ways
to increase one's speed.
There's only so many chances
to shock the radar gun,
to put down the gun
and offer a hand, as I do
to you now, not wanting it clasped
because then I'd remember, not wanting
too many balls to be thrown
even though I root for the opponent,
not wanting your records
thrown out of whack
for some of my crazy
sentimental sentiments,
for me.

Because the kid can throw, after all.
And to wish otherwise
would be to cripple him,
hit him in the knee,
bean him on the mound.

The Word of the Spirit, The Spirit of the Word

Not everything is important.
Some words come trickily, some idly
from the roots of the stories that are meant to be
told and retold,
as though they are the types of weeds
one tears one's hands pulling out,
the type of rain
that never falls in TV shows, the
high anxiety that comes
with being happy
at odd stages and with odd people.

Not everything is important.
Some sweets songs slip too deliciously
down your esophagus, some situations lie supine
in front of you asking for an illuminated capital,
some sharpshooters fail to see gaping holes
in the twisted pictures of their lives.
One of them could be you;
one will be me if I think the only filling is falling
in love, if I let innuendo pierce the spine
that holds this book together, if I cut my leg
on line breaks and have to convalesce
in the home of overly kindred spirits.

If no one types The End I will improvise.
No one can hold the pen as firmly
as he'd like, so toss the looks and glances
and shifting eyes that come your powerful way into the wastebasket
and leave it up to your grubby self,
recumbent on a desk chair.
Not everything is important, but some
things you can decide.

There is a man in prison

who
needs
you.
And there is a man with reason
who needs you.
And there is girl in front of a screen
who needs
you.
And there is a girl on screen
who
needs you.

And you need
to speak in their language
and
you
need
to speak in their language
and
 you
 need
to speak in their language.
Languages.

Let's not play the numbers game
let's not
play
the numbers game
let's play it not,
the numbers game
because
what we need
is help.
Take off your gloves.

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Take off
your gloves.
It will bother me more
to do nothing.
See how
dirty it is.
We
are
handling
history,

and it will bother me more
to nothing
do,
nothing and
a blank space
where the
womb of compassion
should be.

Let's talk until
there is
something
there. And
I
know
little,
but you
know
less.

Sublimier Things

How many miles
from Montreal to Michigan?
I'll see you out there with your waltzing Matilda
and wait for you, a Waterhouse heroine
with a pink MacBook and fingers pounding.

What does it mean
to be an ingénue?
I'm no Guinevere, but if we wander the streets all night we can talk
until I feel like a young woman and you are a knight
in the campus dark, putting your arm around the fair lady
you protect, and ready to get back to the maiden you will marry.
Our words will grow long like a ballad,
our steps leisurely in the starlight.

I don't care if it's
ten hours by car. Come see me sometime,
where people do stay out all night,
where chiffon curtains cover million-dollar lecture halls,
where I want to tell everyone I have a brother, a squire,
and watch as their painted eyes take you in.

Jacqui Sahagian

Jacqui Sahagian



Jacqui Sahagian is an English major from Concord, Michigan. Her favorite book is *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Her favorite poems are "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens. After graduation Jacqui hopes to avoid graduate school at all costs, move to the Appalachians and become a mountain woman.

Excerpt from **The Merits of Giving Up**

“Jolene, I seem to have lost the use of my right arm, but then you’ve been standing so close to my right side for so long that I can’t remember if I’ve ever had one.”

“Your right hand girl, that’s me.”

“Yes, but mightn’t you move to my left side for a moment, sweetheart, just to see if my arm still exists, has ever existed, or if I’ve just been imagining it this whole time.”

“I’m afraid that would be quite impossible, dear.”

“Only for a second?”

“Are you trying to demote me? No one likes their left side as much as their right and stepping away is out of the question.”

“No, Jolene, of course you’ll always be my right hand girl, it’s just that this question of my arm has been plaguing me for some time now. I can’t sleep nights.”

“We should take a stroll, Steven. It’ll help take your mind off things.”

“Jolene, I absolutely cannot go out in public without knowing whether my arm is missing or not. Suppose someone stopped to ask me, what an embarrassment.”

“There are some things in this world that we just don’t have the power to know.”

“Come to think of it dear, I haven’t seen the right side of your face in awhile either.”

“We’ve been over this. My left side is my good side Steven. You wouldn’t want to see me looking ugly would you?”

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“Yes, I think you were right to get rid of your right eye after all. The patch has only enhanced your cheekbones. What’s the point in holding on to body parts one doesn’t need?”

“You’re finally starting to speak reasonably.”

“Jolene?”

“Yes, Steven.”

“As a matter of fact, my left eye has been acting quite strangely itself. I catch it missing things it should have seen. The world has lost its depth.”

“If it’s useless, why keep it? Isn’t that what you just said?”

“I don’t know Jolene, I may need it if my right arm really is gone.”

“We look out for each other, Steven. We only need two eyes.”

“But suppose something happens and I lose you. A person can’t rightly function missing an arm and an eye.”

“You’ll never lose me, Steven. I’m right here. Your right hand girl.”

“I just haven’t felt like myself lately.”

“No one feels like themselves when they’re in love.”

I looked over at the profile view I always had of her. She tucked her hair behind her lobe-less left ear and her dark brown eye smiled, attempting to reassure me. I wasn’t sure if it worked.

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So we took our evening stroll amongst the other couples in the park. They were playfully separating and coming back together like shape shifting amoebas but Jolene and I stayed close and retained our form, which made me feel better anyway because shadows make me dizzy. We walked leisurely in a circle around the dark shiny pond, periodically pausing to sit on a bench and feed bread scraps to the ducks. The pond looked strangely beautiful that night, the little remaining sunlight revealed rainbow swirls that danced with the ripples caused by the water fowl.

A couple giggling from the thorny dried-up bushes, the only foliage in the place, startled me. How long had it been since I'd heard someone laugh? Jolene thought that laughter was a sign of instability, its only advantage is a strengthening of the abdominal wall. But the whispered "I love you's" nestling between pre-orgasmic, breathless laughs reminded me of when Jolene and I had first met and we could still separate, even though during our time apart all we wanted was to be together. Back when Jolene's eye was still there, before the brown patch over her right socket that had now become a permanent facial feature. I still don't know why she wanted to get rid of that eye so badly. I couldn't understand something that she seemed to know in the marrow of her thin bones. She described it as being superfluous, as if no one else she knew possessed a pair. I came home one evening to find a brown patch of leather covering the right side of her face. Her right eye feebly wriggled in the kitchen sink while her left glared at me defiantly. When the living eye saw my horrified expression it softened and cried for three days. Jolene was very upset about the whole thing and self-conscious about the patch. Sometimes I think she must have realized that she really did need that eye. But that was long ago, I can't be sure if it even happened or if it was just a dream.

After the fourth or fifth lap around that black pond we made an unspoken decision to wander back to our apartment. The florescent street lights buzzing made my hairs stand, I always

thought it would be worth an increase in crime to get rid of those lights, to not have to see the dilapidated concrete ugliness of the city. As we got closer the familiar sensation of foreboding that always began in my right arm (or what was left of it) spread through my body.

Our apartment is really much too small, we should move to a bigger place outside of town where we could see the countryside. One of the two of us said that sentence every other month for the past many years. Both our idle procrastination and my claustrophobia caused my hatred of our living quarters to increase exponentially. I knew my blood pressure was exceptionally high, but never mentioned it to Jolene. I didn't want her to worry, though I'm fairly certain that she could perceive it anyway. Every year at our annual doctor appointment as soon as Jolene would turn her back the doctor would slip me a note: "Your blood pressure is astronomical. You need to take action or early death will befall you. One's heart and mind can only take so much pressure directed outward." But still we stayed anchored in that tar pit year after year.

Our shared stench of inaction swept over us as we entered. It smelled like something would smell if you could smell without breathing. I spent the rest of the evening obsessing over how difficult it is to really do anything while Jolene and I mechanically brushed our teeth, washed our faces, and went to bed side by side. She fell quickly into a light yet peaceful sleep while I pretended. "This insomnia must be why my blood pressure is so high," I told myself as I did every night after Jolene fell asleep. "I can't help but feel jealous of Jolene for sleeping so well, anyone in my position would feel the same."

"Why can't you just tell the doctor that this is the problem? He'd simply give you some big lovely pills that would knock you unconscious ten hours a night and then you'd be much healthier and feel much better."

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“Maybe I could sleep if Jolene and I just left this miserable apartment and moved to a house outside of town.”

“Why can’t you do either of those things? You think about them every night. Moving and talking to the doctor, both relatively simple tasks. Thousands of people do these things every day, so why can’t you? What’s stopping you?”

“Getting out of bed is hard enough, how could I ever move out of this building?”

I had these obsessive conversations with myself every night for seven or eight hours until Jolene awoke, refreshed, radiant, and full of energy while I followed her around the apartment in a lethargic haze. In the mornings my inner monologue changed from self hatred for my inability to function to jealousy of Jolene for making everything seem so easy. She made breakfast, ate it, straightened the kitchen and bedroom, drank tea, and read the newspaper before I could even unwrap myself from my coffee mug. The scent of that brown sludge disgusted me so much that every sip was a fight against instinct. And still I took sip after sip. “Steven, you really shouldn’t drink so much coffee, you’ll give yourself a heart attack.”

“This is only my second cup.”

“Second cup of the second pot.”

“Why is it so hard to keep track of time?”

“No one truly understands time, you just think about it too much. If you think about any one thing for too long it becomes impossible to understand, but especially things like time, or why humans pretend that they’re not fundamentally cruel.”

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“I can’t help it, my train of thought is a runaway.”

“Then you and I must do everything we can to stop it before it falls off a cliff into a heap of steaming, twisted metal. Then you wouldn’t have a train of thought at all.”

“Sometimes I think it would be nice to be rid of it.”

“If the other people on this planet can control their trains of thought and live perfectly happy lives, so can you. Just stop thinking about time. It’s hard enough under normal circumstances, but downright dangerous to attempt while every cell in your body is vibrating with caffeine.”

“I feel lost.”

“Don’t cry dear, you can’t be lost as long as I’m here.”

“I’m not crying, the coffee’s just making me shake.”

As I watched mornings like this pass through the foggy glass of my sleepless nights, a strange thought started to grip my mind. It began forming when I began having the trouble with my arm. As I lost track of its existence the thought became more prominent, to the point that it almost never left my consciousness. When it wasn’t front and center it was hiding behind my other thoughts, I would catch it peeking out from around corners or behind bushes, but was so ashamed of it that as soon as I caught its eye I would look away, pretending I hadn’t seen it and it hadn’t seen me, though I knew we were both completely aware of each other’s presence.

“Jolene is doing this to you. She’s the cause of your misery and she’s sucking your energy out through the place where your arm used to be.”

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“How could you even think such a horrible thought? Jolene has done so much for me. She’s the love of my life. She’s the only person I have.”

“So why are you crippled by paranoia and depression? Why is the very blood in your veins committing mutiny and attempting to escape through your pores? Why is your arm acting so strangely? You never had any trouble until she came along.”

“Everyone goes through hard times. I can’t just blame my personal problems on Jolene.”

These hellishly introspective conversations with myself began against my will whenever I wasn’t occupied with something more simple and they caused me to lose touch with reality for hours. I self-medicated with television. TV really is a beautiful thing, before I had scorned it as a useless distraction, but that is precisely what makes it so beautiful. It became my electronic womb. The longer I was lost in its lights, colors, and sounds the longer I forgot about my arm and my insomnia. I had never owned a TV until I moved in with Jolene, but after I thanked her daily for its existence. The only problem was the wave of self-hatred that washed over me as soon as I shut it off and the screen turned to black. “Another day with nothing accomplished,” I would moan to Jolene. “I can’t even remember what I watched.”

“You’re too hard on yourself Steven. You did the dishes this afternoon, didn’t you? That’s something.”

“Yes, I suppose,” my mouth responded while my brain screamed, “I used to write pages, read, cook, exercise, and have conversations with people every day.” The “before you came along” pounded its fists on my teeth, straining to escape, but I clapped my hand over my mouth before it got loose.

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“Steven, all writers get writer’s block at some point in their lives. I’m sure as soon as you get over it you’ll produce the book of your career, the book of the century!”

“Hopefully you’re right.” Lie Lie Lie Lie Lie, the word pulsed in my blood.

“Of course I’m right, I’m always right.”

Nathaniel “Zeke” Tell

Nathaniel “Zeke” Tell



I was born in New York City, and I am a senior graduating in Italian. Even though I will be working next year back in NYC, I am hoping to spend some time climbing more mountains, maybe a "14er" or two. I really enjoyed reading Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* recently, though I don't see myself attempting Everest (yet).

The View From Above

‘When you’re freezing your ass off – let me tell you. You’re going to be glad you listened to your pal Ed!’

Right, “pal.”

‘This one is built with Ground Level Side-Seams, Heat Bump Draft Tube, 600+ Fill Power Goose Down, *and* a Down-Filled Collar with Reversible Slider Tabs.’

Oh, this... uh, sleeping bag?

‘You could go with synthetic, but when you’re looking at ten degrees, five, zero degrees, you’re not going to be upset you shelled out for this one!’

Ed snaked his neck upwards, bringing his face almost even to mine. His desiccant pupils gave off a startlingly silver glint of light. I looked over at the three armloads of goods already laying behind the store counter, breaking our visual contact.

The trip to Mount Kilimanjaro was in six weeks, and my friend and climbing partner Dave had sent me the list of all the gear I needed. It was three pages long, and specified everything from headlamps to synthetic underwear to waterproof boots, graphite-tipped hiking poles, fur-lined down mittens and special UV-lens glasses. I tended to view each entry as tantamount to the consequence of life and death. All the same, I couldn’t help but think of Dave, his well broken-in boots and acclimatized lungs, those the benefits of living in Denver, a mile above sea level.

Rising majestically to 19,341 feet above the East African plains in Tanzania, “Kili” is the tallest freestanding mountain in the world. It is also designated as one of the Seven Summits, the seven peaks representing the highest point on each of the continents.

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However, it's generally thought that any person at a moderate fitness level could attempt, and would be likely be successful, in summiting Kilimanjaro. Dave certainly fit into that category. He regularly ascended the 14,000-foot peaks of the Rocky Mountains, which casually, he referred to as "the 14ers."

Yet even for someone such as myself, with an alpine pedigree of less than stellar repute (I had once been left behind in our rented lodge during a family ski trip to Breckenridge, incapacitated, thanks to a bout of acute altitude sickness), given the proper guides and equipment, a successful climb to the top of Kilimanjaro would simply be a matter of my *physical will* to continue up.

Dave's plan called for an eight-day trek to the top, which would leave us a night to camp at the foot of the 80-foot high glacier within in mountain's volcanic crater, one of Kili's most stunning geographical features. After summiting, we would spend the night there in sub-zero temperatures before our descent.

That night, as the contents of four enormous shopping bags from the *Bivouac* outdoor store sat spread on my bed at home in Ann Arbor, I picked up the phone to tell Dave about the new sleeping bag I had bought.

The two months of preparation time had vanished almost in an instant, like Kilimanjaro's blunt peak into the heavy early-morning cloud cover. After the fifteen-hour flight to Arusha, Tanzania, Dave and I checked into our hotel at the base of the mountain. Dazed, I came in dragging my luggage behind me.

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It was my last night in the comfort of a bed before being on the mountain, but I was barely able to keep my head down on the pillow. After shuffling back and forth in my room for hours, taking stock of my gear, checking laces and drawstrings, making sure my waterproof pants would zip-up right when we were met by a torrential downpour, I eventually arranged the items into two large duffels, leaving aside the few essential items that I would need access to that morning while hiking. At some point, the sun came up, followed by my alarm going off.

At seven AM, Dave and I were met by our driver. An occasional guide on Kilimanjaro, today he would bring us only as far as the gate marking the entrance to the mountain. Although, proudly, he reported that he had visited the summit “256 times. Or 257 – I can never remember!” I still wasn’t quite certain what I had gotten myself into as we made our way outside of the clean, modestly proportioned city of Arusha. But as we pushed up along the winding unpaved roads through the low jungle ravines and sudden tree-dotted hills of the Tanzanian countryside, gradually making our way up to our starting point, elevation around 6500 feet, I knew that, pending some unforeseen disaster, I would be coming back down this road with at least one summit trip to my name.

Our guide would be meeting us at the base of Kili. Tanzania law requires that each of the tens of thousands of visitors to the mountain each year must be registered through a licensed operator, a policy with its grounds in protecting both man and nature. Kilimanjaro lies within a national park, following government aims to protect the delicate ecology of the mountain and of Tanzania’s vast game preserves, sites crucial to the country’s tourism industry.

And despite the technically undemanding nature of the climb, between eight and nine deaths still occur every year on Kili. These are caused mostly by climbers failing to recognize the

symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (given their oxygen-deprived minds made weak from the progressively thinner air being sucked down at higher altitudes) and eventually succumbing to complications caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain. Given my tentativeness over my own abilities, I was glad to have someone around whose job it was to look out for me.

At last, the rattling diesel engine eased to a halt, and Dave and I exchanged a stolid glance as we emerged from the vehicle. A large group of young men, dressed in warm-up sweats and tennis shoes, perhaps twenty altogether, began to unload our duffels from the car. To my horror, their next move was to begin to remove every last item I had carefully packed within, as they started poring over them, stacking our gear into different piles.

A lean but powerful looking man in his 30's strode over and introduced himself to Dave and I. It was Msafiri, our head guide.

'Welcome to Tanzania!' he bellowed, little puffs of steam easing from his mouth in the cold morning air. He had a short frame but a solid build, and narrow black eyes cast deep beneath an oval-shaped forehead.

Addressing our confusion over the sudden industry taking place around us, he explained that these were the men who would serve as the team of porters accompanying us up the mountain. The porters would be responsible for carrying all of the tents, food, cooking and medical supplies up Kilimanjaro that we would need for the entire eight days. They would not, however be provided with any of the same special climbing equipment that Dave and I had lugged across from America. Their wage for this work was somewhere around eight dollars a day, plus tips.

I looked across at them along sloping landscape, still hurriedly jamming our possessions into their own packs when

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Dave, eager to waste no more time on the bottom, hoisted his bag onto his shoulders and announced that he was ready to leave.

Our group was right off the bat prescribed to the pace of “*polepole*.” Eagerly, I learned from Msafiri that this was Swahili for “slow.”

The base of the mountain is draped in jungle flora, and despite the altitude and the parachuting drops of rain that transformed into tiny beads on my GoreTex shell, it was a hot morning. We were setting a good pace, I felt.

No more than an a half hour’s walk up the trail, a stream of the porters with items strapped to their shoulders, arms, and the tops of their heads began to pass us by. One at a time, they strode past us. Five hours later, after we had crossed through the jungle and had begun pushing our way up through the mountain heather, we arrived at camp. The team of porters were already there. They had been relaxing, in fact, awaiting our arrival.

When the booming sound of Msafiri’s voice finally reached camp from beyond the last twist of the trail, it was replied with an outburst of loud and joyous greetings in Swahili. As their faces came into view, I heaved my bag from my shoulders, scanning for a clearing on which to throw myself, drowning in my own sweat. All of a sudden, the triangular orange outline of a tent appeared in my view near the top of a ridge. It was *my* tent – the porters had entirely set up our camp for us as we hiked. I dragged myself inside my tent until quickly, the sound of the screams of laughter between Msafiri and the others faded into the lumbering silence of sleep.

It was a number of hours later when I emerged from the tent.

‘Hey, Zeke-ee! Where were you?’ Msafiri asked, as I made my way to the middle of the site.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

‘Sleeping, tough day’

‘No way.’ he smiled at me. ‘We’re having fun.’

I looked at Dave, who apparently had himself been playing out the dynamics of “fun” versus “exhausted” while I slept. Msafiri took a few moments to describe what the trek tomorrow would be like. Another quick five hours, we were informed. More time to acclimatize before really getting up in altitude.

Dave had asked Msafiri a question, expecting him to launch into a lecture on safety and proper mountaineering. Dave had tediously undergone this routine on numerous other guided climbs he had been on. Msafiri instead took the opportunity of this down time to teach us some favorite Swahili phrases.

As we hiked on, the current day’s trek would seem a little easier than the one we had completed the day prior. I hoped it was because I had been building up my stamina. The summit day, we were warned ahead of time, would be an exhausting nine-hour trek up the deathly steep and dishearteningly endless face of Kibo Peak towards Gillman’s Point. According to Msafiri however, it was nothing at all to worry about.

From the second day of the trek, the summit began to make itself visible through the radiant sky. We were flying up the mountain, navigating ridges outlined by the tops of clouds. The daily ritual of the porters passing us by, slapping us five as they blazed the trail to the next campsite, gave us plenty of chances to work on mastering our new language.

“Dav-eed! Zeke-ee! How’s it going!”

“*Poa Kachisi Kamandizi!*” we yelled back. “It’s cool and crazy, like a banana!”

The afternoon nap which followed the morning trek (5 AM wake-up calls being the norm), was soon replaced by a new

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pastime – Dave had brought along a deck of playing cards, and after observing us playing a game one day, Msafiri was not shy in coming over and asking if we'd like to learn a new one. *Arabastini*, it was called. Later that night, Msafiri showed up again outside our tent. The light of his headlamp silhouetted the figures of the eight or so porters who had accompanied him over to play along with us.

All taking seats on the ground, Dave began to deal. The hours passed as they told us, Msafiri translating, about their families and the different places from around the country they came from. We learned that their work with the mountain guiding company took them away from home for two months at a time, in which time they would make four complete treks up and down Kilimanjaro before seeing their families again.

The card game dragged on and on, nobody willing to admit that they had had enough for the night. Dave and I eventually shared a look, indicating that it would no longer be impolite to excuse ourselves from the game. As we lay silent in the darkness our tents, the shouts of the others continued to waft through the campsite. Msafiri's unmistakably razor-edged voice bit through the thin frosty air beneath the wide open star-drenched sky.

After that calm and peaceful evening spent on the mountain, the morning came as a shock, like a powerful storm blowing down from the high-up peaks. The porters began their remobilization. On the trail, our tired trudging paces were doubled by their determined strides. We had our pride to watch out for, but they had their jobs to do.

When the gang reassembled that night in the mess tent, we continued to joke and tell stories like old friends. Engaged in uplifting conversation (a begrudging substitute for the cocktails that would be forgone while on the mountain) and thrilling

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competition (I had started to get a feel for the finer points of *Arabastini*), sitting on top of Africa, I felt strangely at home.

As I spent those final days of the trek hiking breathlessly along the upper reaches of the atmosphere, the realization of accomplishment began to slowly creep its way into my beleaguered mind. Ensuring the integrity of my every step across the ice above the Western Breach, I couldn't help but let my mind slip back down the rocky slope, down, back across the fertile land. I followed my mind back as it dragged me back home.

I imagined taking all of my equipment from my duffel bags, walking over and dumping it onto the floor in the middle of Bivouac, right at Ed's feet.

The temperature is dropping. The air is thinning.

"Am I *ever* going to use this stuff again?" I think.

But the summit is getting nearer.

I'd like to give *all* that stuff right back to him.

It's the summit, I see the sign. Dave's already there.

Or maybe, I'll give this mountain climbing thing another try.

Sophia Usow

Sophia Usow



What's your hometown/Where are you from?

Chicago, IL

What is your major?

Undeclared

What is your current favorite book?

Daddy's by Lindsay Hunter

What is your current favorite poet/poem?

Wilco

Any thoughts on where you'd like to be and what you'd like to be after you graduate?

No idea, my dream job is writing for either *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* or *30 Rock*

8th Night (a work in progress)

There is a rabbi in the back of my head at all times. He doesn't do much: mostly just sits and from time to time strokes his beard with his eyebrows raised or makes funny faces. When I am at temple with my Dad for the High Holidays, the rabbi stands up and prances around my cerebral cortex until eventually he tires out, collapses into a heap on top of my mind-Torah, and emits an exhausted, "oye." We don't talk much, mostly just smile at one another like two people who are related but don't speak the same language.

When I was little, I remember watching *Fiddler on the Roof* one summer at a friend Laura's hotel room in Michigan. She and her older sister Ruth were practically crawling all over the couch in excitement...singing through the opening credits and reciting the dialogue word for word. It was an old VHS, and sometimes lines of electricity fizzled across the screen. Like most young kids, I immediately experienced a self-consuming desire to be part of the fun. Why couldn't I sing and recite too? I joined the chorus with a jumble of incomprehensible gibberish. "If I were a fish pan! Babababababab dubba dubba doooooooo!" I intoned Scooby as I crooned over Tevye. By the end of the 181 minutes, my friend and her sister were furious.

"Shut up! You don't even know the words!" Laura yelled, fire burning like the depths of Sheol in her eyes.

"I HATE YOU!!!" Ruth yowled, losing all sense of 6 year old-older sister composure.

"Guys I know the words... listen to me, okay?" I lied frantically, wondering how they had caught on to my charade. To be honest, I thought the movie had gone downhill after the funny Russian dancing in the bar. I didn't get what the big deal was. "I've seen this movie like one thousand million billion times. I know every single word to every single song I sing them all the

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

time.” I persuaded as I warbled some strained notes so they would get the idea.

“Ruth and I watched it last year in Hebrew school and now we OWN IT,” one-upped Laura.

“Yeah I bet you didn’t watch it in Hebrew school ‘cuz you don’t even go to Hebrew school,” Ruth exclaimed as she crossed her small arms, squared her shoulders, stuck out her chin, and raised her eyebrows contemptuously. “My mommy says that your mommy’s not even Jewish. So you shouldn’t even watch Fiddler on the Roof. Fiddler on the Roof is for Jews only.”

“My mommy IS TOO Jewish! She’s more Jewish than your mommy!”

“Your mommy is BLONDE!!” Ruth cried, her “inside voice” thrown out the window.

The scuffle that ensued culminated in me rolling around with Ruth on the floor while Laura tried to pull me off by the seat of my corduroy overalls. Laura’s mother heard the screams and came running to break things up. My mom apprehended me not 15 minutes later. In the car I refused to say a word to her. She was so maddening, so blonde. The charge of Sister Assault earned me a seemingly endless time out.

I am not blonde like my mother. I look more like my dad: rebellious black hair, a nose with character... like a swarthier, miniature version of Barbara Streisand. I had a Bubbe who lived in Milwaukee and gave me a box of animal crackers and my Dad a migraine every time we visited. She was a collector of owls and a formidable gossip especially when it came to my autistic cousin Donald. Donald was a couple years younger than my Dad but was considered vastly inferior because he wore a crocodile skin suit to bed and brought a gold pimp cane with ruby stars of David welded onto it to Thanksgiving dinner, an event held at the local German

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Brauhaus due to the fact my Bubbe and her sisters, as a rule, overcooked anything and everything in order to insure every miniscule germ had been annihilated. My Dad's stories about his high school days centered around black rimmed glasses cracked by swarthy Lutheran bullies, girlfriends with botched nose jobs, and scholastic eminence to the tune of lonesome sounds of silence drowned out by a vinyl spinning Simon and Garfunkel. To this day I believe he views himself as Philip Roth—if Philip Roth had chosen to give in to his own mother's naggings and become a real estate lawyer instead of a man of pen, paper, and chutzpah.

How he came to marry my mother is a classic story of Jewish New World success...after years of litigation, in isolation, in metro Chicago, he managed to enroll in a French class with my aunt (a Catholic crêpe lover). Through her he discovered that her beautiful shishka modern dancer sister (by her family farm's standards, very much a black sheep) had become entangled in a noxious lease renewal dispute with her roommates and was desperate for pro bono. History unfurled, and my mother became the first in her family to marry... a Jew!! "Could have been worse," my grandma had said as she eyed the black tuba player at the wedding reception, who winked at her and wiggled his onyx eyebrows. "Much, much worse."

I met Fiddler on the Roof again in seventh grade, when I went to see a production of it at Sacred Heart Elementary School. The Sacred Heart School players were a versatile bunch that transitioned easily to this work after their recent Nativity performance. Some of the costumes had even been recycled, so instead of assimilating to the dress of early 20th century Russians, Tevye and his family appeared to be characters in some sort of Hassidic Back to the Future remake. I went because I was a friend of a few of the actresses through my club soccer team, the Windy City Kickers. The Kickers consisted of two Tsarist pogrom leaders,

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

a red headed Lazar Wolfe as Goalie, and me, a Sweeper and an honest to Jesus half-Jew. For about a month every time she saved a shot, Titian Lazar (whose real name was Maggie McKenna) would shout “La’chiem!!!!!!” with all the spirit of a rich, ugly butcher celebrating the successful bagging of a hot, age-inappropriate wife. Her tactic effectively unnerved many opposing Forwards from various northwestern suburbs, who probably assumed she was speaking in tongues (or worse...ebonics! Those northern teams always feared us because we were listed on the official WSL roster as being “from the city” and supposedly affixed metal shanks to the tips of our cleats and snorted coke before games).

Anyways, the fact that a Catholic grade school chose a (or rather, *the one and only*) Jewish musical as their big show was, remarkably, not that out of the ordinary. It has been my experience that parochial institutions are more likely to spend energy on Jewish education and celebration than the average public school. In an effort to avoid the obvious assumption that they do not give two consecrated hosts about the Jews past the Old Testament, most Catholics dogmatically educate their young about the lives of those poor old Hebrews. Years later when I, by some inexplicable turn of events, found myself getting more than one type of education at Saint Francis Borgia, I would often find myself being berated with knowledge by my classmates about alien Judaic practices around major holidays, most of which caused long sighs of exasperation from my little holy man upstairs. For example:

Hanukah! “Don’t you, like, play dreidel and eat pancakes for 8 nights? And get, like, a shitload of presents? I remember in 5th grade we had a fake Hanukah celebration and we sang that song about the ‘claydreidel.’ Do you know that song? Ohhh dreidel dreidel dreidel I made you out of clay,” an expectant look in my direction, “I forget the rest of it, but I know I won mad gelt... good ass chocolate money.”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

Passover! “Okay so you like dip the egg in the salt water and leave out a cup of wine that, like, nobody drinks because it’s supposed to be for, like, some... prophet? Am I right? Am I right?”

Rosh Hashanah...? “Um...is that the New Year one? Or is the New Year Yom Kippur? I never got that.”

What fascination! And, what confusion!

Regardless, the show must go on. I imagine that Laura and her sister would have been impelled to commit arson against *The Goy Fiddler* on principle alone, but the production wasn’t so bad. I enjoyed myself thoroughly, except for when I greeted one of my soccer friend’s moms who acted polite, but obviously had no idea who I was.

“Hi! Have we met before?”

“I play on *The Wind with Grace*! My name is Nina...you drove me to Wheaton once...usually I’m really sweaty...”

“Oh... Nina! Honey, I’m sorry, of course! How are you? How’s your father...Joe?”

“...Moishe! He’s doing well, he told me to tell you hi!”

“How nice of him. Well, you tell him I said hi, too, okay? I’ll tell Grace you came, that was *very* nice of you.”

Probably a little bit creepy too, considering she still had no idea who I was. Years later, when I was over at Grace’s house before a dance in high school I asked her mom if she remembered me coming to the play. “You must have come the year they did *Fiddler on the Roof*!” she exclaimed as if it was the only one that made any sense. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t remember, but that was *very* nice of you.”

How I came to be the only half-Jew at my Catholic high school was completely serendipitous. Bad planning, some might call it. I guess I feel best describing it as an accidental experiment. My grammar school, which was named The Hubert M. Henry School, was small, private, liberal, and predominantly Jewish, and this was not a large factor in my childhood save for Hebrew school inside jokes that I was not privy to (Fiddler on the Roof being the first of many), and, eventually, infamous wedding-size bar and bat mitzvahs. Bar and bat mitzvah's, meant to be coming of age celebrations for pubescent (yet pious!) young Jews, morphed into something much larger and extravagant. Gone were the hours-long temple tortures followed by lox and bagel luncheons of my father's day, and in came the *optional* service and the *mandatory* after-party at the Union League Club. I vividly remember one such celebration where my gleeful joy over being picked first to slow dance with Adam Goldstein was completely blown out of the water by the fact that the "Winter Wonderland" themed soiree (in early June), actually included an honest-to-god snow machine.

I had a bat mitzvah, too, but it was a bat mitzvah on a budget for a girl with a mom who pronounced "baruch" like she was George W. Bush: "bay-ruk." I was allowed to invite 10 lucky friends, who were just as confused as the rest of my family as to why a priest was in attendance (explained, in my mother's words, "to round out my spiritual experience"). Afterwards, frazzled and unsure where to put all the Jewish letters and a new religious membership card that kept falling out of my mind and into my upturned hands, I watched as my mom's family and my dad's family awkwardly small talked their way around the greater issue at hand: what the *fuck* had just happened? Had their relative just joined a new theological team? If so, did they still need to buy me presents on Christmas? As for coming of age... I had just been granted two rows of unholy green-banded braces and an ill-fitting A-cup, so all signs pointed to the unfortunate reality that the New

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Age I was coming into wasn't anything to celebrate. My grandma still managed to look on the bright side: "At least she's not pregnant. All the young girls on the TV these days are getting pregnant. Things could be worse."

"I don't think we have to worry about her getting pregnant," my aunt Linda pronounced as she watched me polish off my third plate of knishes and pick the remnants out of my braces.

Pregnant with faith? Pregnant with love for Judaism? Pregnant with the Son of God? The only thing I became pregnant with that day was a savage knish-baby...and the desire to break free of my small, over-privileged school. I *hated* not having street cred. When I said I went to my grammar school, people immediately decided two things about me: one, I was spoiled and two, I was a freak. While the second allegation was debatable, the first frustrated me to no end. My mom and I didn't worry about money, but only because we knew with 100% certainty that my dad was a workaholic who spent his days at the office: sunrise to sunset, sunrise to sunset. I was an only child, and therefore didn't have to worry very much about competition and natural selection, but my mom was always afraid that I would become a pampered premadonna and therefore would make me feel soul-shatteringly guilty about everything from the fact I could play sports ("Before Title 9 girls didn't have these opportunities! *Do you understand HOW BLESSED YOU ARE???* *That's why you have to play THE hardest, Nina. Don't waste your blessing!*"), to the fact I often "forgot" to make my bed in the morning (DO YOU KNOW HOW LUCKY YOU ARE TO HAVE A BED? WE BUY YOU A BED AND THIS IS HOW YOU TREAT IT? SHOULD I JUST GIVE THIS BED TO THE MAN WHO SELLS STREETWISE IN FRONT OF THE JEWEL? HE WOULD MAKE HIS BED! HE WOULD APPRECIATE THIS BED!" deep breath, "I am

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

disgusted, Nina, just *disgusted* by your ungratefulness. Your father works his ass—erm, your father works his *hiney* off to put food on the table for you, not to mention that comforter”

“Why would we put food on the comforter?”

“HOW DARE YOU SASS ME, NINA BAUMBACH. You’re not going anywhere this weekend young lady... and I’m considering cancelling your birthday party!!!”

So, you can see, the stigma attached to being spoiled was, in my eyes, equivalent to the bird flu. What deep psychological ramifications my mother’s efforts against diva-ism had are still yet to be determined, but the most obvious consequence was that I was painfully embarrassed to be associated with the category by strangers simply because of the school I attended. Like most private institutions whose tuitions threatened their student’s economic stability, however, Hubert Henry did not make it a simple process to detangle oneself from its net. Because its students were not required to take the usual state-issued standardized placement tests, it was nearly impossible to apply to any of the city’s public high schools. The only places that did not follow the same rules were the other private schools, and those were all of the same kind as mine...except for Saint Francis Borgia.

Saint Francis Borgia was located on the south side of Chicago a mile away from Michigan Avenue and blocks from the old stockyards. It had a strict dress code policy, staircases on which you were only allowed to walk one direction (students who dared to walk down an “up” staircase were often chased right back to the top by furious faculty members), and a detention policy ominously titled “SINS” or “Students In Need of Sanctions.” Examples of SINS included wearing pants that were “too tight,” which not only created many an awkward scenario between male professor and female student such as...

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Professor John the Baptist: Mary Magdalene, can I have a word with you?

Mary Magdalene: Oh, definitely, Professor. What's up?

Professor John the Baptist: Ms. Magdalene, your pants.

Mary: I'm sorry?

Professor John the Baptist: They're just... too tight. This is an institution with rules, young lady. Not the Moulin Rouge.

Mary: Um...

Professor Baptist: I'll see *you* in SINS after school.

But also managed to make life very difficult for those students with weight fluctuation problems, for example...

Professor Simon Called Peter: Gerta, those pants.

Gluttonous Gerta (*shifting uncomfortably in her seat*): My pants?

Professor Simon/Peter: Too tight. Don't you know your SINS?

Globular Gerta (*choking back tears*): But I've been wearing these pants all year, Professor Simon...er...Peter. They used to be baggy... I think they may have shrunk in the wash...

Unkind Erkel: Haha! Guys...remember when Gerta used to be hot?

Gigantic Gerta: Shut the fuck up Erkel!

Professor Simon-Peter: LANGUAGE, MISS GERTA! Congratulations, now you're up to two SINS! Open up your overused gob-hole again and I will gladly make it three... and I'll

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

see you after class, Mr. Erkel! Now, where were we before this despicable interruption? Ah, yes, chapter two: "God's Infinite Mercy."

You could also get a SINS for chewing gum, coming late to school (or class), or a variety of other punishable offenses. Despite that facet, however, Saint Francis Borgia did have many positive aspects to it. Athletically and academically it was ranked among the top schools in Chicago, but even more attractive to me was that my graduating class would be over quadruple what it would have been at my old school, that the kids who went there came from all over and from all different socioeconomic and racial groups, *and* that the school had a reputation of being somewhat of a party school. Later on, I discovered that the school from whence I came had a party school reputation too, except the reputation was more along the lines of kids getting addicted to cocaine as opposed to parties with eight 30's of Busch Light. I don't know what about the term 'party school' intrigued me so much. I guess I just knew that a lot of fun (but oh so wrong) things happened at high school parties, and whatever those fun things were, god dammit, I wanted to be a part of them.

So I applied, and I got in. I informed my grade school friends they would have to go to high school without me, because I was moving to bigger and better things.

"But why are you going to a *Catholic* high school?" my friend Alissa had asked.

"Alissa, she's only half Jewish," cut in a now much older, but still equally zealous, Laura, "Duh."

"Its still weird."

"Why? Her mom is a Christian."

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"Yeah, but don't they have, like, up and down staircases there? That's, like... Nazi dictatorship. Why would you willingly leave a perfectly fine school behind to go to a Catholic Nazi dictatorship?"

"Uh, great point Alissa. I forgot about all the Catholic Nazi dictatorships. I feel... so stupid? Oh wait...*that doesn't make any sense.*" Now might be a good time to mention that Laura thought Alissa was, in general, a huge dumbass. I felt the need to interject for Alissa's sake before the conversation took a turn for the worse.

"I don't care that its a Catholic school. You guys are the ones that are making this a big deal. I heard that none of the kids over there even really care about that kind of stuff at all. *It's high school.*"

Famous last words.

I'm just going to fast forward past my first year at Saint FB's because there isn't much there that would be of interest for you at all. Being a freshman blew by me in a flash of awkward encounters...the first time I got a SINS (an elderly teacher saw my ass-crack when I bent down to get a book out of my locker), the first time I went to mass during school (my first day), and the first time I went to one of my long-awaited high school parties (I threw up all over my friend's mom's rose bushes). I survived. By sophomore year I was a war torn high school vet. Okay, I knew I didn't run things, but I wasn't afraid of going to school anymore. It was a big step for me, and I was proud of it. I even sat with boys during my free periods. The first year, boys had eluded me altogether. The most action I'd gotten was when Pualo Alexander tried to play footsie with me under the table during homeroom, which resulted in my leg going in involuntary spasm, and, unfortunately, my shoe flying off and hitting him directly in the

ballsack. To my credit, I'd known the boys from my old school since before I knew how to spell my own name, which made it difficult to understand how to interact with ones that I had never met before in my life. But by sophomore year I was entirely cooler and more assimilated, not to mention nowhere near as likely to have my shoe hit an admirer's genitalia. I felt like I was finally starting to find my place in the world, until second semester, 4th period, when my backpack ended up in the hands of Michael Jameston.

The incident started off innocently enough. My friend Claudia and I had been bored one day during a free period and decided to try out her new fabric markers on my new book bag. We had only gotten so far as bedazzling my name on the left shoulder strap with a baker's dozen of hearts and stars when blue-eyed blonde-haired Michael Jameston, a junior and the captain of the swim team, snuck up behind us and snatched the backpack and markers from our unsuspecting female grasp! Our shouts of "Miiiiicheaal," and, "Give it back, dickhead!" fell on deaf ears, mostly because we were giggling and trying to look cute the whole time. Michael sat in the corner of the lunchroom with my backpack on his lap and a look of sprightliness on his fair, peach-fuzzed face. Two boys stood guard; blocking him from view and intimidating us into submission. Claudia and I's curiosity eventually outweighed our outrage and we waited patiently until the bell rang and Michael stood up, threw me my bag (which hit the table in front of my with a hefty bang), and ran off.

"What did he draw in it?" asked Claudia excitedly as we climbed up the stairs to our next class, Geometry.

"I don't get it. Its just a bunch of numbers and letters," I said, confused. "It doesn't even spell anything."

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"Maybe its a secret code or something," said Claudia.
"Like, maybe he's trying to tell you he's into you."

"Yeah, I guess that could be it," I said, still extremely confused. "But didn't he just hook up with Emma Smith?"

"*Maybe thats why he needs the code,*" Claudia strained to keep her voice at a whisper.

"We're not in, like, fourth grade, Sherlock Holmes. If he has a thing for me he should just tell me like a normal person. Immature!"

That night when I got home I stared at my backpack, wondering what Michael could have meant. I though he was cute and would have been flattered if he had had a crush on me. I decided to ask him about it tomorrow in private, just in case he felt like he couldn't tell me in front of everyone else (to be fair, he *had* just hooked up with Emma Smith). The next day I grabbed him as he was entering the lunch room for 4th period.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" He looked so nervous. Cool it, lover boy, I thought. Its fine, I know you like me.

We sat down at an empty table. It was forest green color and covered in breadcrumbs, like Hansel and Gretel had just given up and dumped their stash on top of it. It also smelled mildly of grilled cheese. Not romantic, but it would do. I turned my chair to face Michael, and displayed my backpack. He paled.

"You never exactly told me what this meant," I said, smiling. "Are you...trying to send me a message?"

"No! No! Of course not... I just thought it would be funny, cuz you're, like, Jewish and everything. I wasn't trying to send you a message though. Like, it was supposed to be a joke. Not a message. Definitely not a message. Shit."

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Now I was confused. What did being Jewish have to do with anything? I voiced my confusion.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Like...you know how at concentration camps... they give you a number...I don't know...Shit, I'm sorry...."

I looked back at my backpack in horror. What was a sophomore in high school supposed to do when her crush suddenly commits a hate crime against her??

"It seemed funny before I did it," Michael was losing it, "but now I feel really bad. Shit... let me buy you a new backpack. I don't have any problem with Jewish people. I thought it would just be a joke."

"NO!" I stood up. "You douchebag!" I stumbled backward and pushed towards the double doors of the lunchroom, falling into the corridor. Michael didn't try to follow. Possessed, I wandered towards the front entrance of the building. Leaving during school without an approved reason was a very grave misdemeanor, but I felt like Jonah, trapped in the belly of the whale.

Over the doorway was a huge cross. The Jesus attached had half-lidded languid eyes, and he looked down on me with an expression that seemed to be saying "sorry." My mind-rabbi shook his fist at him, and motioned to me to go through the door. "Lets get out of here," he seemed to be saying, "before its too late."

"They know not what they do," the eyes hanging off the wall said pleaded, "That's why I'm up here."

"He looks high!" whispered my rabbi. His accent was strong and Yiddish. The "h" in "high" sounded gurgled. "What's wrong with these people?"

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I took a step towards the door and placed one palm on the cold handle. The Chicago weather outside froze bones and whipped faces with a wet rag. I looked down at my backpack, which was still dangling from my free hand. I read what was written on it out loud.

“140603A”

Was that who I was? How did these people view me, like a combination of numbers and letters that was code for “Jewish?” I pushed the handle down, and felt the icy blast hit my bare arms.

“Exactly where do you think you’re going?” a heavy voice barked in my direction. I whipped around and the door sucked shut with a bang, trapping the remnants of the cold air in my skin and the folds of my clothes. The cross jostled above my head.

“Um, just, um, well, you see... I was...checking the temperature.” The heavy voice belonged to Father MacLean. Father MacLean had a wicked carrot top and a mean pair of vocal chords. The church at St. Francis Borgia was meant to hold the entirety of the school plus a large Irish congregation, yet he rarely used a microphone. Standing too close to his baritone harmonies during “Lord of the Dance” would have made even Satan ask for earplugs.

“Sure you were. You’re lucky I’m in a good mood right now, Ms...?”

“Weinstein.”

“Weinstein, eh? German?”

“German?”

“Is your family German?”

Jewish!

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“Polish.”

“Interesting. Well, Ms. Weinstein, if I hear that you open that door during school hours again, I won’t be so forgiving. Now get back to wherever you are supposed to be. Off with you.”

The dining hall was not an option, so I walked past it and slipped into the girl’s bathroom. I almost turned and walked out when I saw Claudia. At first, she didn’t notice me. She was staring at herself in the mirror: putting her hair up, shaking her head disappointedly, and then taking it down before uniting her eyebrows like conspiring fists and putting it back up again.

“Hey, Clauds.”

“Hey girl! I heard about what happened with Michael. I’m sorry, that really *sucks*.” She looked over at me with empathy. I waited for her to say more, but she turned back and took out her hair tie again.

“What’d you hear?”

“That he wrote those numbers on there as a joke ‘cuz you’re Jewish. He said you didn’t think it was funny and now you’re pissed. Are you super pissed?”

“Yeah, I guess I’m pretty...pissed.”

“Are you going to tell on him? Abby said he could get expelled for something like that.”

“Claudia, I don’t know.”

Claudia stared deeply into the mirror and we stood in awkward silence for a few minutes. I didn’t know what to say. Claudia’s reaction had been what I had dreaded: one that was uncomfortably injected with naiveté. But she was also one of my friends, and I felt almost protective of her inability to comfort me.

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I sat down on the floor and placed the backpack facedown next to me.

“My brother says there are a lot of Jewish kids at his college.”

“Cool.”

She laughed. “Yeah, we had one of his Jewish friends stay over at our house over spring break. He was mad nice. Really hot too. He didn’t look Jewish.”

“What do you mean, ‘look Jewish’?”

Claudia looked over at me cautiously. I could tell she knew something was going wrong with the conversation, but she couldn’t quite tell what it was or how to stop it.

“You know... dark hair, kind of short, big nose.”

“Big *nose*?”

“Yea, like a Jew nose. You don’t have one though, don’t worry.”

I flipped my backpack over so that Michael’s decoration faced me. Gently, I traced its outline with my middle finger.

“Claudia, have you ever seen Fiddler on the Roof?”

“What’s Fiddler on the Roof?”

“It’s a reality TV show. It’s about a bunch of Jewish people getting nose jobs.”

“Oh,” Claudia looked scared, “No, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Claudia, do you ever feel like there’s a little rabbi in your head, and you can’t get it out?”

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Claudia moved towards the doorway. “No, Nina. You’re acting weird.”

I stood up quickly and rooted myself between Claudia and the exit.

“Do you think Michael should get expelled? Do you even know what the Holocaust is? Do you know what this means?” I shoved my backpack in her face. “Read it out loud to me, Claudia.”

“What the fuck, Nina? Stop acting crazy. I didn’t write it!”

“Read it out loud to me.” My pulse was ten times its normal pace, my anger unbeknownst to me even as I was consumed by it.

Claudia tried to walk past me, but I pushed her back.

“Fine, you psycho. One, four, zero, six, zero, three, A. Are you happy now?”

“Say it again.”

“Are you serious? One, four...no. Let me out of this room! I’ve never seen this side of you before. You’re messed up.”

“No, you know what’s messed up, Claudia? That you think all Jewish people should have big noses, and that it’s a big deal that your brother knows more than one. And don’t pretend like you feel bad about what Michael wrote, you and I both know that’s complete bullshit. You think you’re better than me because I’m Jewish? You think I’m greedy? Were you surprised when you came over to my house for dinner and we didn’t eat brisket made of dead babies? Here’s a curve ball, stupid bitch: the Holocaust is never funny, and you’re completely ignorant.”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

Claudia's face danced between tears and rage. Her jaw fell slack and she stared at me like we were meeting for the first time.

“One four zero six zero three A,” I said, and walked out of the bathroom.

Cassie Vernier

Cassie Vernier



I'm from Clarkston, MI. I am a junior in LSA studying Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. I am currently working on a thesis project pertaining to sexual differences in asymmetry between male and female paper wasps. I took a creative writing class last semester and the piece that I am presenting is a short nonfiction story that I wrote for that class. My favorite books are *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat. After graduation, I plan to pursue a graduate degree in Ecology and secure a job in academia.

The Day I Grew a Pair

All I had wanted was to be able to fit into my new leather boots. My girlfriend's mother, true to her nature, stopped at a box marked "free" on the side of the road on her route home from work. She told me that there didn't seem to be anything worthy of taking from the box, save a pair of mahogany leather riding boots, which she had given to me the next time I saw her. A result of the sentiment and the fact that they were in a rather good condition, I eagerly attempted to slide my feet into them. Sadly, they were too tight.

Being someone who often customizes my clothing, I wasn't discouraged, and decided to make the shoes fit, whatever the cost. The next couple of weeks, then, contained much research concerning, and many failed attempts at, finding a way to stretch the leather out. My father, knowing from past experience that I would never give up, told me I should take them to a professional. True to *his* nature, he suggested a shoe shop where he could get me a deal because the owner was the brother-in-law of his childhood, and current, best friend. J.P. Shoe Shop, located on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Pontiac, MI, was the scene of the craziest day of my life.

My father, Reuben, the son of two Mexican immigrants, was one of 8 or 9 children. The numbers are a little blurred, mainly because many of his siblings have moved away, or have disappeared, and I never met all of them. They grew up in Pontiac, MI, a suburb of Detroit that can be said to have followed the same line of destruction: Booming in the 1950s, both fell victim to the immense poverty and street culture that resulted from the "white flight". Although beginning his life in the "respectable" era of Pontiac, my father lived an impoverished life while under the care of his stingy parents. He has often told me stories about how his mother, refusing, or perhaps unable, to buy him a new pair, would

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

use scraps of fabric to repair his torn pants, making a sort-of mismatched, hybrid pair.

My father grew up through the transformation of the city, experiencing, and, to some extent, partaking in, the developing crime and violence. While stealing cars and doing drugs, he had always planned on getting out of the city, getting a respectable job, buying a house and having a family, which he would spoil with whatever they wanted. He did so, after meeting my mother, and studying to be an electrician. After marrying her, he got a job at GM, working his way out of their starter mobile home, and eventually securing a 2-story house, located on a small, private lake about 50 minutes north of Detroit. Since the birth of my older brother, he has been the sole provider of our family.

Although his lack of hesitation to oblige my wants and desires might be a direct result of the way his parents treated him, his father's stinginess sometimes still shows through. Like his father, he has always been one to try to save a buck. For example, there have been occasions where his temper has been severely unleashed on me, simply for leaving a light on. It seems that this apple, while trying to roll as far from the tree as possible, couldn't help but get caught in the roots of its father.

Therefore, to quench my father's ever-present desire to save a little cash, while still satisfying my desire to, one day, fit into the boots, I heartily accepted his offer to drop them off at this J.P. Shoe Shop on his way to work one morning. About a week later, a Friday in late August 2009, I headed to Pontiac, clad in a new leather jacket, a gift from my father, on my 2007 Yamaha Virago motorcycle. Enclosing on the specified intersection, I knew I had found it; the shop was the only non-liquor store within the vicinity of that portion of Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Outside the building, were three statues of Mexican men wearing leather ponchos and paper sombreros, stuck into the ground with 3 wooden posts.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

As I took off my helmet, I looked at the poorly maintained street. I pictured a young, pudgy Reuben walking down it, with his mismatched pants, carrying his lunch in a plastic bread bag, to school. Thinking of how thankful I was that I didn't have to live that type of life, I made my way to the door of the shop. Because I was told to arrive as close to 5 p.m. as possible, I assumed that the owner would be expecting me. Apparently he hadn't because the sign on the door read "Closed". Feeling a little angry and inconvenienced, I knocked on the door once, per chance the owner might still be around; the shop façade did seem to have been something of an afterthought, fixed oddly on a what was still probably a house. Surprisingly, I was greeted by a familiar face; Alejandro (or Alex), the son of my father's best friend. He took after his father, both being rather tall and stocky; yet, while his father had long hair, he had a short Caesar-style haircut. Their likeness stopped at their looks, as Alex was a bit "harder" than his father. In fact, his parents considered him their problem child. This was demonstrated by the fact that he had been seen walking the streets of Pontiac brandishing a gun, as well as fathering 4 children from 3 different women by the age of 30, without having a job to support them. I was not aware of this aspect of his character-- yet.

"Tony! My man!" he cried. I was confused as to why he was here, as well as why he was so happy to see me because I didn't know him very well. "You know, we closed! But just fo' you, we open! Just fo' you, man, y'know? You gotta help out your family." At first I was a little taken aback to hear him call me "family", but I remembered that our parents had always called us cousins because our fathers were so close. I thanked him and entered the shop. The short, plump owner, then introduced as "Javier," called to me from behind the counter.

"Hey!" When he talked, his handlebar mustache moved up and down. It was the only hair on his head, save a few wisps coming from his scalp. He pulled my boots out from a bag next to

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

a pile of shoeboxes on the counter. “How do they look?” I noticed the polish he must have thrown in for free.

“Perfect!” I exclaimed, trying them on. They finally fit comfortably!

“Hey, you like motorcycles?” Javier asked, possibly noticing my leather jacket. “I got a motorcycle out back! You wanna see it?”

Being a relatively new rider, I was extremely interested in looking at, and talking about motorcycles. However, what he led me to was a rusted, mid-eighties Kawasaki, complete with chipping paint and a seat that had been chewed up by some animal, perhaps in an attempt to use the padding as insulation in its nest. While looking at the bike, Javier made small talk by telling me about a Quinceañera he had recently hosted at the shop that, in fact, doubled as his home.

“You know, we do a little drinking, a little smoking, a little...” he put his finger to his nose and sniffed, alluding to cocaine use. “You know as long as we keep it in the family, no one cares; we ain’t hurtin’ nobody.”

“Gotta keep it in the family, dawg,” Alex echoed, popping up behind me. He swayed slightly and was now carrying a bottle of whiskey. That was when I recognized his rosy complexion, unmistakably due to drunkenness.

“It’s like I say to Alex here: You drink, you smoke, you have fun, you do what you want, but you ain’t leavin. I say ‘gimme yo’ keys.’”

“And I say ‘here’s ma keys bra.’” Alex replied, flinging his hand out to throw an invisible set of keys to Javier.

“I say ‘gimmie yo’ keys.’” Javier repeated.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

“And I say ‘here’s ma keys bra.’ Alex said once more. This exchange occurred twice more for absolutely no reason.

“You do any, uhh...?” he placed his finger and thumb to his mouth, imitating smoking a joint. Before I could reply, Alex answered for me:

“Of course he does, man, he’s a kid!” Alex was right, but I didn’t want them to know about the drugs I did do, for fear that they would make me join them at their next “family” party, especially one that featured cocaine sniffing as an event.

“Cuz I can get you some good stuff, you know.” He then asked me if I knew a person with a Spanish surname that I have since forgotten.

“No, no” I said, meaning I didn’t want any marijuana.

“Yeah, they came here from New York a few years back, mafia, they got some good stuff! But don’t let that get out!”

“Keep it in the family, yo,” Alex mumbled, before taking a swig of his whiskey and listlessly repeating “Keep it in the family...”

This command fell lightly on my ears, as butterflies had just entered my stomach upon hearing the word “mafia” used so casually.

“Good mushrooms too! You ever done mushrooms?” Again, without waiting for me to reply, he added “You ever want any mushrooms, stop by. I’ll get you some good mushrooms!”

It was now that I mentioned that I needed to “get home and get some dinner started for my girlfriend...” The butterflies persisted and I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Get dinner started? Pshhh, make *her* get *you* dinner started man! Don’t you wear the pants?”

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

I laughed nervously and followed them inside, in order to pay for the shoe repair. Javier walked behind the counter and Alex stopped behind me, drunkenly blocking my exit.

Instead of ringing me up, Javier stared blankly over my left shoulder. Finally, he said, "How Mexican would you say you are?"

Confused as to what prompted this question, I answered thoughtlessly: "Uhh, about fifty percent, a little less 'cuz my grandma was a little French."

"No, no, no, I mean how Mexican do you act? 'Cuz Mexicans live by trust, honor and respect, y'know? And those are, like, the keys to life, y'know?"

I agreed with this statement, but his previous sexist remark made me question the integrity of it. Before I could give this much more thought, I sensed Alex moving closer to me from behind. I turned around, he was holding a rifle. "Check this out, Tony!"

I backed into a heavily aged shoemaking machine while Alex took aim at some invisible enemy standing between Javier and me.

"It's no loaded, don't worry," Javier said, responding to the fear clearly shown in my face.

Still aiming, and with a seriously murderous face on, Alex said, "This cat came in here the other day, and was all, 'Ay Paco, whatchu got Paco?' and I pulled this bitch out and was like 'You know who you're fuckin' with, bitch?' ...Shit, the little pussy didn't know what to do." He lowered the rifle, and asked Javier to show me his .45.

"I keep that under lock and key, man..." Javier said inattentively. He was now gazing at a half empty 40 oz. of PBR in his hand, which he then almost drained.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

Alex, after having set the gun down, moved toward me, pointing at something behind Javier. He looked around to find what Alex was pointing at, eventually pulling out an ominous square mirror, and placed it, smiling, on the counter.

“Nah, man, my keys.” Alex said slowly and quietly. “I want my keys.”

“You ain’t drivin’ nowhere man, you drunk as a skunk!”

“I ain’t drivin’; he’s drivin’” He said, pointing in my direction.

“No, guys, I gotta go...” I began to say, remembering my plans to get out of there, which had promptly vanished at my fear of being shot by Alex. I began making my way to the door, but Javier stopped me.

“Come on,” he said bluntly, “you gotta show us a lil’ respect, man, a lil’ honor. You can’t just drive him around the block? Get us a lil’ something more to drink?”

I was afraid of what these men could do. I conceded. “Sure, where’s your car?”

Alex led me to a Pontiac Trans Minivan, parked in the back yard. Walking to it, Alex said, “We call this one ‘The Hot Box,’ you know why, man?”

I assumed the answer would have something to do with smoking marijuana frequently in the car, but I shook my head no. Entering the car I noticed my motorcycle, and vaguely cursed the now comfortable boots I was still wearing.

“It’s cuz it has no air conditioning and the windows don’t roll down! Hah!” he shouted, teasingly, as I got in and closed the door. I sat there examining the interior of the van, noticing how dirty it was. The floor was littered with wrappers and empty cups.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

Distracted by my disgust, I failed to notice that Alex had not entered the car, nor was he anywhere to be seen. Sweating in my leather jacket after only a minute in “The Hot Box”, my impatience grew and I angrily leapt out, and walked toward the shop. With the front door locked I went to the rear entrance. As I walked in, I entered upon a scene I had dreaded would happen: Alex was examining a small plastic bag filled with what I assumed to be crack rocks, while Javier took a huge snort off the square mirror.

“Ok, guys, I really gotta go, but thanks for the shoes and everythi-”

“Nah, man, here we go!” Alex said, setting down the crack. He grabbed me and steered me out to his car. “We’ll be quick, man, don’t worry!”

Shaking in fear, I got in the driver’s seat and silently drove him to the liquor store, which was only about fifty yards away. The drive took a few seconds at most and I didn’t understand why he couldn’t just walk. He went in, and I waited for what was only about twelve minutes in reality, but which seemed like an eternity in my mind. This was due to my anger, fear, and the truth found in the name “Hot Box.”

Slowly swaggering out the door and making his way through the parking lot, Alex was almost hit by a very rushed patron attempting to park his car. After shouting vulgarly and vigorously grasping his groin, Alex finally got in the van. I drove him back and went in to say goodbye to Javier, again not noticing that Alex was not following me. Before I could say farewell, Javier, bouncing excitedly, asked me if I knew how to use the Internet. When I told him I could, he almost started floating.

“You know history?” He said with bulging eyes and a dance similar to a child who needed to urinate.

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Having taken a few history classes throughout high school, though certain I was unable to answer such a vague question, I responded, “Sure.”

“Well history’s going down on this here Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard!” Moving wildly he explained that the “government” offered to buy his shop in order to make the street four lanes wide. “Well I need you to find something out for me: I need you to find out how much they should pay me. Cuz I can’t trust no lawyer, you know? They’d just steal my money and I don’t trust no lawyer. So you can do that, right?”

“Well, uhh, it’s not like I’m not a realtor; I’d really have no idea how...”

“What you mean you don’t know how? You can do whatever you want to do, i’ don’t matter. You think I knew I was gonna sell shoes for the rest of my life? I wanted to be a musician, but look at me now! I can do whatever I want... so don’t tell me you can’t do this for me.”

Not knowing how to respond, I turned and looked out the window. Alex was sitting on my motorcycle and swaying back and forth. This was the last straw, since my motorcycle was my most valued property. Without hesitation, I began to run to the door, but Javier caught my arm.

“What’s the matter wit’ you? You don’t trust him? He’s just havin’ a lil’ fun, why don’t you trust him?”

I could feel the significance this moment held in my life. With strength conjured from somewhere previously inaccessible to me, I looked Javier in the eyes and dealt him a response.

“Look, Javier, I don’t care who he is, that’s my bike and I’m very protective of it. Now you’ve gotta start respecting *me* and listen when *I* say *I* have to go. Ok?”

His bulging eyes stared back at me for a moment, with something that looked like hatred. Miraculously, he softened and said, “You know what? ...I like you. ...I met your dad the other day; I didn’t like him very much. ...But you, I like.” With that, he threw open the door and shouted “ALEX! GET OFFA THAT BIKE!”

I marched through the door, straight at Alex and grabbed the bike before he even had the chance to set it on its kickstand. Slamming my helmet on, I said a vague goodbye. I didn’t hear him respond and I didn’t really care. I was leaving.

My girlfriend and I have since joked around, referring to the aforementioned manipulative and frightening situation as, “the day I grew a pair;” something that, although I hate to say it, is quite true. Honestly, I think this is simply a result of my exposure to the decaying state that Alex and Javier lived in. Although from my point of view, this was a strange and exciting situation, I realize that for Alex and Javier, this is probably a daily occurrence. The maladaptive behavior that develops in every decaying city in the United States often leads to lives like this. Though Javier and Alex profess to follow notions of respect and honor, values that once supported upright life, both are really only using them as a justification of, or an excuse for their debauched actions. I see now that if my father hadn’t consciously tried to separate himself from the life he had when he was growing up, I could have been living through this every day, oblivious to the horror.

It struck me, looking back on this day, that people get can so easily get stuck. The juxtaposition between Alex and myself, whose fathers grew up together, proves that there is a way out, and I am truly grateful that my father took that path. As for Alex, who, since this story, has had yet another child, with yet another woman, the world isn’t changing. Whether he is conscious of it or not, he is living in corruption, and fostering the system by fathering numerous children whom, it is obvious, he will not support. Like

Café Shapiro Anthology 2011

the alcoholism and lethargy that certainly drive Alex's bad decisions, this impoverished, street life is self-perpetuating, and not many can truly escape it.

