crosscurrents review
editor’s note

Pardon me for sounding overtly bleak, but it’s a terrible time to be an artist. Fewer and fewer people sit down and pick up a book or turn off the television and go to a museum.

Yet, starting with humble beginnings in pictographic caves, art has lasted longer than any dynasty, presidential term, or plastic product. I have faith that art is not going anywhere except museums and street corners and literary magazines. So, I suspect there will always be art and places to put it. As for the future of books? I’m not so sure. I do hope they last because the screens on iPhones are much too small and hurt my eyes.

And there will always be artists too. Thank God for that, as poor and hopeless as the worst of them may be, for they keep art growing soundly still! In and out of the classroom, in basements and in dorm rooms, in studios art breeds like weeds. At Puget Sound, Crosscurrents stands as a testament to the artistic devotion that flows through our university’s culture. Know the students that appear in this book are only a fraction of the creative talent and voice of our campus.
Crosscurrents strives to cultivate artistic development, to keep the conditions right for incubation. Young art is a fragile and boisterous thing. This is why we are lucky: at our small campus we see artists thrive without the immediate pressure of the real and dangerous world. There are critics out there with pens as sharp as knives. And hostile audiences too, ready to be pacified by our upcoming artistic voices.

Thank you to all who contribute to or support this publication and the wider arts. Remember, these times are desperate. So keep reading.

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“What we have here is a failure to communicate.”
—Strother Martin in *Cool Hand Luke*

In this town all mice are cousins,
one closed business looks like another.
Failure’s a silent partner in many bars.
You passed Wow’s Etc. for ten years,
kept it like some scary movie to be watched.
You favored what you imagined in the line
of broad backs leaning in from six a.m.
The beer sign in the window blinked
red letters across the slumped regulars.

This week you drive by Wow’s Etc.
before sun, the plot you refused to imagine
happens—dark darker than bar dark,
lights out not coming back black,
as if the girl you loved through ninth grade
moved away before you ever spoke.
All the grim stories of gambling debts
and deals gone wrong might have been hash-browns,
Bloody Marys, and wheat toast with no butter.
You fear if you watch *Cool Hand Luke* again,
Strother Martin will never have said the line.
Woman of Stone and Snow

—After LeeAnn Seaburg Perry’s sculpture “Garden Stroll”

She cradles this city
in the circle of her arms.
What we carry, she carries.
We nestle cupped in a bowl
rain shaped in stone.
She is home and away, a tether
so sure distance and direction
are songs we know by heart.
Facing north, she is a woman
with shawl, the all-mother
in a chain of snowy sisters.
To the east, the Yakama know
her chiseled veil, the organdy trail
a die sinker’s riffler shaped
into ridges, valleys and rivers.
Her skirts whisper Ohanapakosh,
Ahtanum, Klickitat. White light
descends, star, moon, snow.

KEVIN MILLER lives in Tacoma. Pleasure Boat Studio published his third collection
I fell in love with him on a Tuesday in September, a day when the sun was tinged red with the smoke of a distant forest fire and the larch had just started to turn yellow. It was one week after our fourth anniversary, and we’d gone out to cut wood in the same place we went every year, just the two of us in the old blue Ford with Maggie curled up in the middle. I thought I loved him already—his eyes were green, he made me laugh, and he always folded my socks after the laundry was done.

The old burn was littered with snags, and as we pulled into the turnout he showed me the one he wanted to fall. It stood straight and white just up the hillside from the road, a stripped lodgepole with the burn of a lightning strike spiraling down its trunk. I got out and Maggie jumped down after me, her tail in a frenzy. It was getting late for huckleberries, but I checked the brush by the road anyway, just in case.

He was having trouble with Dad’s old chainsaw as I lowered the tailgate and put up the side boards to hold the wood in, so I turned to watch. With the bar braced against a tree, he yanked the starter cord repeatedly, swearing and finally trying to drop-start the saw.

“Hey,” I called. “None of that. I like you best with both legs.”

“Best?” He turned, and he’d already managed to get a smudge of grease on his nose. “Does that mean you wouldn’t leave me if I went ahead and took one off?”

I laughed and hopped up onto the tailgate for a more comfortable view. “We’ll see. I’d be much more concerned if I couldn’t start that saw myself on the first try.”

“Trash talk? Really? About a chainsaw?”

“It’s not trash talk if it’s true.” Maggie jumped up beside me, licked my ear and settled her head on my lap.

He rolled his eyes and turned back toward the tree, trying again. The air smelled like gasoline and wood smoke, and in the tawny afternoon
light his hair looked almost red. Underneath his flannel shirt the muscles of his back stood out, and I tried to see him like the high school girls did: the ones who watched him during basketball games and then talked about “hot Coach Leland” in front of me in the concession stand line. We were friends first, eight years’ worth of friendship, and it wasn’t until my sister’s wedding that he kissed me behind the pavilion and told me about History class, when he first noticed my eyes were blue.

“I’m still not sure why you insist on trying Dad’s saw every time,” I said. “We can afford to get you a new one. How about a nice little 150? I hear they even started making them in pink.”

“My God this is humiliating!” He was laughing, wiping sweat from his face. “You’d think I’d never done this before.”

Just above the tree line to the north of the road I could see the south ridge of Snowshoe Peak, frosted white already and standing like a cutout against the sky.

“Well, I guess I always knew you’d be good for something.” He held out the chainsaw. “Let’s see if you’re all talk.”

“Are you sure?” I got down off the tailgate.

“Yeah.” He kissed my forehead. “You’re never going to figure out how to start the lawnmower, so at least I’ve got that on you.”

“Well, then.” I smiled. “Watch and learn.”

I fell in love with him on a Tuesday in September, when I braced Dad’s saw against my knee and pulled the starter cord, hesitating at just the right moment to feel the engine catch.
Desert Agave  Paul Wicks
In the Tall Grasses

Hudson Hongo

Quinn held the quicklime ready,
When I brought him to the fox deformed
By tooth of dog and paw of days, but
Paused: behold, there was a swarm.

Under fur the larval dance,
Ebb of flesh and flow of flies, that jive
That mocks the lunar waltz
For its constant measured fall. And all

Of it, even capped stalks
That look to be of Martian spore,
We then knew were not of the heavens
But children of a selfish germ. So squirm

My brothers, writhe and eat,
Flow like kudzu from open veins; your stains
Will prove matter in hungry states
To be a thing of malice, become things of grace.
untitled  Spencer Wu

raku fired ceramic
Dear Ward Davenny,

You’re Wrong About God.

or, To the Unbeliever, or, To the Overbeliever

Lauren Fries

When I see God, He’s nothing extraordinary. God is no explosive, enigmatic specter bursting forth from the heavens like orange spit-up from a baby with a fondness for carrots. I wasn’t sure God’s budget allowed for glory-swollen angels on cumulus chariots, or if funds were available to orchestrate a majestic backlight, burning through the roiling blackness to emphasize His well-groomed, deep-cleft chin. It all seems a bit melodramatic to me.

I pictured a restless insomniac who twitches at the slightest sound and who bites His bloody fingernails down to the quick. A wiry black beard, stippled grey, grew past a stubble seventy times seven Passovers ago. Eyes greener than envy glower from beneath a tangled mane. Let’s be honest: there hasn’t been time for a hairbrush since the seventh day. Hunched shoulders—they carry the world, after all—perch, black like vultures, on a body so fragile a butterfly could break it. You can count every rib, but only if you could stand to look at Him for that long.
His nose twitches, eyes dart, ears prick up
to catch faraway echoes, not of praise but of hunger.
They’re coming for the capital G, snarling to see it
evaporate once and for all in a pillar of salt and smoke.
This God no longer has a reflection;
it leaked from His eyes at the flood and escaped
from His fingers as He wrote on the wall.
You can’t see Him in your mirror or your photograph.
Try as you might to get a good shot, you’ll waste a whole
roll of film: your admiring arm encircles nothing.
Nothing, with the air below it simmering
like there’s something hot underneath.
Midnight Ornaments  
Drew Levin
in hindsight

Christian Brink

in hindsight
we were always better with numbers
than we ever were with words
like sunrise
Word Problem

Kevin Nguyen

Mr. X walks due east, impeccably dressed; Ms. Y looks lovely, and she’s headed west.

Their movement is based on a linear plane; direction is constant; their speed stays the same.

Simple arithmetic: can you project what they will say when their paths intersect?
Mr. X walks due east, impeccably dressed; Ms. Y looks lovely, and she’s headed west. Their movement is based on a linear plane; direction is constant; their speed stays the same. Simple arithmetic: can you project what they will say when their paths intersect?
February 1st – Your Introduction

I hope you will never read this.

It is with that declaration that I beam with reassurance, our professor not only swore that these letters would not reach their intended audience, but because we are required to handwrite all of our journal entries in pen he has promised not to read anything we have crossed out about this obviously pointless exercise, its a requirement to cross anything out that we don’t want read.

Ironically, this isn’t even a writing class but a sociology course at our city college, which pats itself on its back just a little too much and since this semester-long assignment of journaling is supposed to be a method for how we filter ourselves, exploring the human interaction in society to better understand why people choose to do what they do and say what they say or what they don’t say and whatever other bullshit that comes along with a sociology class and we, students compare and contrast what we write and what censor out in these entries.

The twist: we are writing these journal entries to someone. What the professors wants each of us to look into is why we decide to say or not say to that particular person and, aside from selecting the the professor, we get to choose anyone we want to write to, and I chose you since I figured you would never really want get an opportunity to read this and we have a prompt for each entry, which we write as a letter to you as and all this prompt asked for was an introduction, so that was it.

February 8th – A Place You Place Your Filter

Apparently there were some specifics to the prompts that I breezed over didn’t notice when I read it. So to not detract from this next equally
important assignment, I was told decided to briskly list the following: 1) My name is Melvin. 2) I work in customer service at—and I do write this with some absolutely no shame—Buff Stuff’s Platinum Gym. 3) I promise to proofread, capitalize, properly word and use apostrophes in my entries. 4) And my goal is to expand on the entries, spending more than five minutes on them so to delve into the prompt. Now that I’m “introduced”, today’s assignment is to tell you about a place I commonly filter myself—and what better place to discuss than my job.

So let’s “expand” and “delve” into the world of the Customer Service Industry—where I am always wrong the customer is always right. If you waltzed through the sliding doors of Buff Stuff’s, you’d enter the sterile building, seeing the small, oval counter that I’m stationed at. Everyone who walks in must slide their card through a small card-reader, and that then unlocks the doors to the aerobic kingdom. On the other side of the door you would see endless rows of elliptical machines, where members synchronize themselves perfectly with one another, almost appearing like cogs in a gigantic, aerobizing machine. And I am the man who mans the front counter, encountering every kind of person you would think to see at Buff Stuff’s: the fat health-seeking people, the very pretty and lonely people, the unhappily married folk, and of course the overly steroid-filled buff people. But I see them all for who they really are: customers.

Now I know you understand that there is an obvious need for filtering what you do and do not say as someone who deals with customers. And as a compliant good customer service employee, I, like you, make a very valiant effort to filter politely without compromising my integrity or my job.

An illustration of individuals who have painfully heavily accommodated themselves to customers would have to be the director of our department, Mr. Dirk, whose name conveniently seems to be a derived from Dick and Jerk, and the department supervisor, Brett, who I will never call “Mister” since he is just an overachieving 17 years old. They are not just true-believers in the morality, standards, selflessness for customers, and all the messages that Buff Stuff’s upholds, but true-believers in determining my pay, my shifts, my ass kissing for the month, et cetera.
At the beginning of every day, Mr. Dirk and Brett always stroll into the building and the sliding doors part for them in a rather Moses-esque fashion. Mr. Dirk usually places his hands on his hips, deeply inhales and exhales before peering around his well-oiled, aerobicizing machine. Mere milliseconds then pass before Brett comes forth, imitating each and every individual action that Mr. Dirk had just performed. They then both firmly shake the hands of whoever’s working at the desk before routinely asking: “How’s the gym?” Whatever positive response they hear or don’t is followed by an automatic: “Great!” And once a year, once a month, infrequently, they accidentally ask about my wellbeing. When done purposefully, it means that they want something from me.

Such a wanting occurred a few days ago. I had dashed through the sliding doors that morning, not noticing a cord by the entrance of the gym until it resulted in my fall to the floor. I pulled myself up, hoping that no one had really noticed me for a change. And no one had. The cord was connected to a drill, which was being held by a man, who was on a ladder, which leaned next to the door. The man above the doorway was fixing the Buff in the Buff Stuff’s Gym sign. Before I could criticize the man on the poor placement of the cord, I resumed my run to the back office to clock-in in a few minutes late now. As I approached the office, the doors swung open and there stood Mr. Dirk.

“Melv!” His wide and fake grin slowed me to a halt. He waltzed out of the back office, and Brett’s head peeked out from the office before the rest of him followed after Mr. Dirk, matching his pace with perfected brown-nosing, accuracy. Mr. Dirk’s hand extended out, gripped mine, pulled me in close enough to see his greasy pores and said, “Let’s go for a walk.” I tried to ask why, but Mr. Dirk just put his arm around me as we started down a row a synchronized ellipticallers. As we walked and Brett and his disparity trailed after us he asked me, “Have you heard of Bethany Stuffét, the great-granddaughter of Mister Buff Stuffét himself? The woman who has single-handedly taken over as President for the U.S. franchise? She has performed profound wonders in her work with our organization. She has literally transformed the image of Buff Stuff’s Gyms all across America, inspiring health-seeking leaders to spring forth and join our astonishing team. Think really hard about all the work that she’s done for us.”
Yeah she probably puts the B and S into Buff Stuff’s, I remember thinking. But instead, I said, “Certainly.”

“Well, she finally prepared a formal visit to our gym!” I was still waiting for the words to slip his lips—he needed something. Never had I been on a manipulative friendly stroll through the facility with the bosses in all the five years of working there. “Such a visit would be highly progressive steps forward and this is the kind of recognition that my hard work has always deserved.” We stopped at the front door of the gym. I made sure to not step on the cord though made a point not to point it out to Mr. Dirk. And then the words came: “Only problem: she’ll be here during the final days of the Directors Retreat.”

“Yeah, we had to RSVP like ASAP and they were very strict and very selective and we can’t bail out on them,” explained Brett pining after us like the little 17 year old he was.

“And with you being the most experienced staff,” said Mr. Dirk, his hand now giving my shoulder a friendly squeeze, “I am going to rely on you to step up in my absence, not the entire week, just the first few days of her visit. And I know, no matter what complications, that you love Buff Stuff’s and you’ll do everything in your power to make everything run friction-free!”

“Smother than smooth!” said Brett.

Before I could truly compromised myself to this “work filter”, either God or the Powers that Be or whatever ironies of life exist stepped in saving me from saying, “Friction-free’s the only way to be!” by allowing the Buff of the Buff Stuff’s Gym sign to fall from above and to land upon my head, knocking me out for the next five minutes. Perhaps I should thank the genius fixing the sign for being careful enough make sure I didn’t embarrass myself by saying that.

But yeah, that’s pretty much me filtering working.

February 15th – You Addressing Your “You”

Before I begin the next prompt, I was asked to follow up with what happened at the end of the last entry. After waking up, telling my bosses what year it was, who was president of Buff Stuff’s, signing off on some forms that only guaranteed that I wouldn’t get workmen’s comp, and resting for a whole five minutes, I went to work for the rest of my eight hour shift.
After, I went to the doctor, who more or less asked me the exact same questions, before he sent me home.

Now, the professor has told our class that we haven’t been capitalizing on the use of the “you” and he wanted us to try harder so his assignment seems less pointless. So for our next assignment, our professor said that by the end of it, if we don’t think our “you” is working out correctly, we may change the recipient of these entries. But first, for the actual assignment, we must write a specific interaction that you and I had recently, so I figured I’d talk about Tuesday.

My housemate Anthony and I both work at Buff Stuff’s, but in different departments. Whereas I am stuck stationed at the front desk, he is lazing lifeguarding at the pool. Though I am one of his closest buds since high school and I would never say this to him directly, but I worry if he will ever really amount to anything and even question if our—never mind. Anyhow, being as it was a Tuesday, we always venture to the same shop that brews not only the tastiest coffee, but supplies a fine wine variety and some of the best beer in town. It was lightly snowing that Tuesday evening and what’s better than a beer after a long, repetitive, meaningless, normal day at Buff Stuff’s to warm us from the cold. Plus, I may have the slightest of crushes on Dani, the beautiful, blonde barista that works every Tuesday evening. For every single customer that came to her counter, regardless of age, size, gender, smell, hygiene, stupidity, intelligence, or whatever else others would judge a customer upon, she would smile the brightest of smiles that brought countless people into her tiny shop, day in and day out. Though sometimes I wonder if she really does care about everyone or if she if it’s all an—never mind. Anyway, we assumed our seats at the same table at the far end of shop that provides an ideal view of the counter where Dani was, the spotlight from above shining down upon her, while Anthony sat and looked out the window at the barren cold world.

“Well Melv, what line are you gonna dish out to her today?” The same somewhat snide smirk sprouted across my housemate’s face that appeared every Tuesday visit. His gaze like always preoccupied outside. “Will there be actual verbal communication or will it just stumble into more mumbles like last week?”

“Hey, it isn’t my fault that I bit my tongue last time!” I sighed, my
gaze on Dani, as always. “Besides, I'm not using lines anyway they're more
like...” The exact thought I had at that moment was that, I'm just laying
down the sturdiest support system for future affections. I replied, “I'm just
saying that I'm laying down the—I mean, I'm just being courteous to a
fellow person in the customer service industry.”

“Oh, you're being a pansy.”

“But at least an adult pansy.” I paused, unsure of why and what I
had just said. I meant nicer comment aside from what I had thought, which
was: Even if I am in fact a pansy, but at least I had semi-adult job after four
years in college and not a job that most 16 year olds could do. But I knew
to never say such a thing to the overly critical Anthony. Having mistakenly
blurted out the first bit, I tried to recover by saying, “At least I'm a—” But
I stopped mid-sentence because Anthony's stare seemed cemented on
something outside. “What?” I turned around, breaking my gaze from the
blond barista to peer outside. All I saw was the snow-caked ground.

“Nothing, just wanted to see if I could make ya look.”
Same smirk, same place.

You're an ass, I remember thinking.

“Yeah, I know I'm an ass.” Anthony chuckled, but it subsided to
a serious tone. “But bro, stop and think for a sec: what's beneath it all?”

My eyebrow cocked with its usual doubtful amount of curiosity. Anthony
elaborated before I inquired. “Y'know, the snow.”

My eyes narrowed. “Probably whatever was there to begin with,
right?” I chuckled at the stupidity of the question, and it was in that
moment I thought, That's kinda dumb.

“Thanks for the support in your feedback, bro,” said Anthony,
knowing me well enough to read into my doubt-filled look.

But I shrugged and returned my sights to the counter. A long line
had formed in front of the blonde barista that did not look to be subsiding.
With Anthony's stare out the window, it left me to take charge. “Coffee?
Beer? What's our poison today?”

“Nothing's ever better than beer.”

And so we rose and meandered into the line. Standing there, I kept
thinking about... well, this class unfortunately and about this silly filtering
concept. Watching Dani ahead of us, smiling and greeting every single
customer who approached her with her kindness and warmth, I wanted to ask Anthony what she really thought of us. But watching him stand there awkwardly and mindlessly bopping his head along to whatever song was playing in the shop, it became painstakingly obvious that he may not share the same response. Instead, I asked him something a bit more simplistic, “Do you ever filter? I mean, do you ever think—I mean, about what you’re trying say?” I cleared my throat. “Okay, once more with coherency: do you ever carefully choose and filter your words before saying them due to the kind of work we do?”

A single blank and empty blink escaped his eyes before blurring, “Like a coffee filter?”

I reconsidered then the complexity of what I had just asked. Biting my tongue as I remembered Anthony’s inability to handled complexities, I tried to reword my inquiry. “You really don’t—I mean, you don’t like being, uh tact, I guess would be the word? Censoring yourself, thinking and processing things before you say them.”

Over the loud grinding of beans, the caffeinated chatter of customers, and the shouts of the not-so-sober, the annoyingly uncontrollable laugh that burst from Anthony could be heard. And his response, “Uh, no. Fuck that.”

The expected, Anthony response.

We took a few steps forward in line before he said, “Why would I need to? I guard, bro. I mean, I don’t need to socially interact with people for work. My job is to make sure they are protected and don’t fuckin’ drown and shit. If I wanted to worry about filtrating myself I would work at the front desk.”

It’s ‘filtering’ dumbass. We took another step forward. “So you think do need to, right dumbass?” I paused, clenching my jaw at my word slip.

“Um, yeah.” Anthony paused. “I mean, it is your job... ass-face, since we’re apparently doing the name-calling-thing. But I mean dude, you do it every day of your life.”

He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I thought. “What’re you talking about?”

“Dude, Melvin, you just did it!” We walked forward again, catching another glimpse of the nearing Dani. But Anthony’s careless shrug caught
my attention. “You think way too much.”

Well one of us has to. “Yeah well one—I mean, how so?”

“You always pause and you have process-face,” said Anthony. “Like, you’re clearly figuring out the most careful or non-judgmental thing to say would be, which you do at work any time I see you talking to members or your bosses or even me sometime when you’re there. But you do that whenever you’re outside of work with me too. Or even to anyone who you see on the outside too. You’re kinda living in your processing-head, bro.”

I frowned, stepping forward, only one person away from Dani. “But all the time though?”

“Dude, this whole going after the coffee girl is a perfect example of said filtratedness,” continued Anthony. “You don’t even know this Dani-girl. You pathetically wander over every Tuesday when this girl works. And then, my favorite part, is that you barely babble your same beer order to the barista-babe. You. Definitely. Filtrate. All. The. Time.” We took another step forward. “You over-think what you want to say and then you’re left with near to nothing.”

“And how can I help you two today?” Dani’s words hummed through the air, and both Anthony and I turned away from one another to, whose knowing smile was waiting for our reply.

I froze, registering that the previous step forward placed us in front of Dani. Lost in contemplation over Anthony’s comments, I realized that I hadn’t decided on my drink for the day and I wanted today to be different to show that—Shit. “Uh... yeah. Shit. Yes, can I—”

“We’ll just have our usual.” Anthony’s hand landed on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze and I wondered why my shoulder seemed to be the ideal grab spot for everybody.

“You mean a pitcher of our cheapest?” asked Dani.

“Yep.”

Those were my words to Dani that day: a small spew of awkward sounds, stutters and a pause. She smiled her every day smile, we gave her our cash, and we parted ways. I gave a soft groan. It would be different next Tuesday. I wouldn’t look like a fool finally have something to say. Anthony and I returned to our seats.

Plopping down in my seat, I was jolted upward by a vibration from
my cell. I pulled it out of my pocket and I frowned when I saw Brett’s name flash across the screen. It was his way of showing me he had nothing else to be doing on a Tuesday evening reminder to make sure to be ready for next week. As soon as the beer arrived, we resumed Anthony’s conversation about the changes he thinks happen beneath the ground when it snows that I was unable to logically follow before we progressed back to our small apartment.

So yeah, that was my interaction with you last Tuesday, and I think uphold the utmost certainty that I know who the you is that I am writing to now.

February 22nd– When Do People Filter Themselves Around You?

Well, I really hope that you probably know by now that there’s something wrong. Allow me to show you by explaining my yesterday to you. I’ll revisit the prompt at some later juncture.

Over the last few days, I’d been keeping to myself. Surely Hopefully, you have noticed my absence. My head has kinda hurt and I’m really tired lately, so I’ve been hiding sulking? at home. You also don’t seem to be around as much or are you avoiding me?, so I haven’t really had a chance to talk to you, or else I would try discussing this with you in person—or, at least I would have before everything went to hell yesterday.

With the bosses on their trip, I was the default “chosen” lead staff on duty. So I stood there. Welcomed members. Did nothing new—until a particularly plump woman wandering through the sliding doors, though I worried that she may not fit through them and then came to my counter. In near hysterical voice, She said, “Why hell-oh there sonny! This here yer gym?”

Clearly, I thought. “Yes.”

“Huh.” Her huge, blubberous face crinkled with confusion (over what?). “Well I’m just swingin’ by to get a tour of these here facilities and—” Her large brown eyes, which reminded me of gigantic chocolate donuts leaned forward, examining me. “Are you all right there kiddo?”

No. “Sure.”

“Now I don’t care to be the judge of ya or anythin’, but you’re kinda contradicting yourself there,” said the woman. “You said ‘no’ then ‘sure’—I
just don’t understand what you’re tryin’ to get at.”

*I didn’t say no.*

“Yes you do.”

“Shit.” And she was right. I hadn’t meant to say what I actually wanted to say; I was thinking aloud but I had. And I had again. My palms and face and pits and anything other place where sweat could think to formulate started to moisten as the woman leaned in closer to me. “Sorry, I must’ve—I mean, is there anything I can help you with?”

“You don’t know who I am do you?” asked the woman.

“A really fat person. Oh. Shit.” I couldn’t control what I was saying. My filter was gone.

One of the other employees must have overhead me and relieved me from the front desk so I dashed to the back office to take cover. I out peered from the office, wondering who this woman was, and my inquiry was answered when the back office phone rang. It was the employee from up front, who informed me the name of this plump woman: Bethany Stuffét.

“Fuck,” I whispered. And if she was on the phone ranting and raving to someone it was either one of her relatives, some other useless person, or possibly the most useless person I knew my bosses. Without hesitation, I grabbed my stuff, ran to the back, clocked out, and left through the back door.

It is fair to say that “something being kinda wrong” is quite the understatement.

**February 25th – What If You Didn’t Filter**

The irony of what today’s prompt would have been about isn’t lost upon me. I plan to return to these prompts soon, but I have to want to tell you about what’s been happening.

Yesterday Anthony and I went to the hospital the day after my work incident. My doctor’s expert guess hypothesize was that the damage was much more extensive than he believed. No shit. He went on about some my random doctor jargon, falling short of just saying that he had—fucked up. But what we knew for sure was that I wasn’t able to say anything except for the first thing that came to my mind. My “filter” had left the building.
And then, Anthony mistakenly decided to take me to Dani’s. Anthony minimized summarized my biggest problem when he told me that I had been fired. And he wanted to lecture badger explain to me over our favorite pitcher at our shop—though I repeatedly voiced to him that I did not want to go anywhere or interact with anyone wanted to be left alone. Instead, he dragged me out and this is what he told me:

“Melvin Meets Miss Stuffét’ has definitely been the hot topic of talk at work as of late, bro,” noted Anthony, as we stood there in line. “She called up Mr. Dirk the second you left, and she waited in the building till they got there and, aside from being pretty tomato-ish from the sunburns, they were hella redder from being hella embarrassed and hella pissed.” We took a step forward. “Man, have you ever seen a person of that proportion throw a fit—because that’s what that big-ass woman did. Blubber versus the tomato-twins—it was painful, yet intriguing, to watch. Like an eclipse. But seriously, I think the most horrific experience for me was when she went into the pool—it was like whale had plummeted into the waters of a Sea World show.”

“That’s nice,” I said. My attention focused ahead of us—not on Anthony’s rant. It didn’t appear that Dani was in charge of the counter today. Where is she? Is she here today?

“Oh, right.” I frowned, realizing what I had accidentally said aloud. Anthony then said, “Because, it’s always about her—but never about your bro.” Anthony scoffed. “I mean, who picked you up from work so you wouldn’t be attacked by that big-ass whale-woman? Who went with you to the hospital? Who helped key that dumbass doctor’s car? Who brought you here for beer and all have to say is ‘Oh sad, where’s Dani’?”

Oh shut up Anthony. I cringed, unaware of just how loudly I had just said what I thought. “Sorry.” My new, automatic-Melvin response. “I really didn’t mean to say—”

“No, bro, speak your mind!” He never realizes just how loud he can be, even over the rest of noises that cluttered Dani’s shop. “Filtration’s off, right? Tell me what you really think.”

“No thank you,” I replied.

“No, really, what do you think of me?” And then I did. I told him he’s my friend. He was my selfish,
self-centered friend who I could equate to my selfish, self-centered bosses who only utilize me when they need something. There were a few other honest, hurtful comments, but I finished by declaring that, “You’re too focused on you to even really know me.” But then he said that was it. Knowing me. It was something not even I really knew. Since I’ve “filtrated” myself so much in life, I’ve become a shallow and hollow shell at best so to be the best server of service the public. But I’m not actually the person that I filter myself out to be—I’m still the person that my head injury has forced to the surface. The depth of this conversation fizzled out right after that, resulting in yelling and shouting and a gigantic uproar in the shop. Each of us stormed out of the separate entrances of the shop out into the cold, only to inevitably end up back at our apartment, where we slammed our respective doors, once and for all shutting the other out.

But I was justified. I mean, he’s too busy with himself to even really know me! But I know that you know me!

Right?

March 1st – Another Interaction with Your “You”

So, after what happened with Anthony, I’m trying something new. I’m embracing the fact that I must say what’s on my mind. As of today, I swear to not cross out anything else I end up saying—on the page or in real life. I like me. Why censor myself? As of today, I’m ready to show the world (or at least a cute girl named Dani) that I’m not just another face to be smiled at. I stand out. I matter. I am important. I’m not worried about what I’ll say, because when I say it, I’ll prove Anthony wrong, showing that I am comfortable with what I have to say and what I think. Screw you, Anthony. I don’t really care that you aren’t talking to me. I can talk with my “you,” my Dani. And everything will all go the way I want it to. By now, I know that “you” know who you are and I know that you won’t have a problem with that. And I won’t be censoring myself around you anymore.

...It’s only been a few hours since I wrote what’s above this entry, but nothing went right. And considering everything, and the fact that if anyone asks I would reply give I response, I don’t want to put into words what happened. I am now aware that there are others that filter themselves in their work environment and are completely different people outside of work.
And... yeah, it’s fair to say that Dani does not see me the way I see her. Anthony isn’t talking to me. Hell, I’m not even in this class anymore due to my head injury and my fear of what I could say to my professor. So I’m just replying to the prompt so that... Well, I don’t have to worry about what I’m about to blurt out because I don’t anyone else to talk to... Well, except for you...

March 4th – Your Worldwide Filter
You aren’t who you think you are.

For our last assignment we’re suppose to discuss the importance of how our censorship to our selected “you” models and shapes how we project ourselves to others. Well, since I am no longer enrolled in this class, I’m going to change the prompt. I’m going to reveal my “you”.

I realized throughout the course of my entries that this “you” has changed drastically or seemed inconsistent. At first, I thought I should write to Anthony, until I realized by the end of my “addressed letter to ‘you’” that I wanted to it to be to Dani. I wanted to show her some piece of me that is actually “me” and not the filtered guy I am at work or the filtered guy who pines after her in line. But now that I can’t filter I... well, I’ve reread these letters and realized who my “you” is: My you is myself. I’m coming to terms in these entries with the person that I suppress because that’s all I have left now. And I realize don’t really like myself that much at the moment.

The doctor, who I am going to be trading for a different doctor in the very near future, explained how there wasn’t anything he could really do. I am the one who will need to be working on controlling what I am thinking, thus resulting in what I am to be saying. Seeing as he wasn’t going to prescribe me anything, I decided to return home. And it was at home where I encountered Anthony again. After an exchange of not-so-pleasant pleasantries, Anthony told me we were going for a walk to talk. It was a little warmer now, the snow had started to melt, so puddles filled our path as we walked. Anthony told me beforehand that this was going to be a one-way conversation—regardless of whatever I may blurt out.

“You are kinda a self-centered smartass.” It was a statement that I really didn’t disagree with. Anthony had not only taken lead in the conversation, but the destination of our walk. “And bro, I totally get it:
you look down on me. You have whatever precognated—” I automatically corrected him when I blurted the word “preconceived” though it didn’t halt his speech. “—preconceived thoughts about me. But hey, I do the same with you. With the blonde barista—” My new flex interrupted once again, calling her Dani. “—and even with that fetus-kid that’s unfortunately your boss. Although I’m rightfully pissed and mad at you, I’m realizing that if I completely ignore you and push you hella far away, then you’ll be too far away to grovel for forgiveness. And honestly, that’s half the joy of being mad at someone.”

“No it’s not,” I blurted. I clenched my jaw right after. “I mean... you’re not mad?”

“Oh, no I am,” said Anthony. “But even you said it—after I egged you that one time a few years ago—that at the end of the day, I am still your bro.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And, I’m sorry. Honestly. That was said, obviously filter-free.” We stopped. “I am, really. I don’t know even how long I’ll be broken like this, so I understand if—”

“Hey dude, who’s to say you’re broken?” Anthony just shrugged. “Maybe you’re finally fixed.” Anthony smiled. As I smiled back, his smile only widened, and I finally noticed he wasn’t even looking at me. When I asked him what he was looking at, he replied, “And since you’re jobless, I figured I’d help you try to start the job hunting gig.”

I frowned. Turning around, I saw the coffee-beer shop with the cute blonde barista who, even if she didn’t want to, would smile and warmly welcome me if I came in. I turned back to Anthony, who was enjoying the sound of his own childish snickering. And so, as I had to, I told him just that. And to that, he replied:

“Thus, you’re still kinda a jerk. But hey, I’m alright with that.” Anthony cleared his throat before he resumed walking and I matched his pace. “Now, as groveling commences, you’re required to listen to my latest theory about changes and what we’ll find after the snow melts away.”
These works, selected by the Crosscurrents staff, embody the craftsmanship, creativity, and originality of our journal. The artists’ contributions alongside their respective professor reviews provide the balance all art requires: discussion.
POETRY  Hyena  -  JAMES GAINES

ART  December never felt so wrong  -  LAUREN SANFORD

SHORT FICTION  On Love and Bullshit  -  BETH MURDOCK

reviews by
1. Aislinn Melchior
2. Janet Marcavage
3. Tiffany Aldrich-MacBain
Hyena
James Gaines

Quickly, quickly.¹

The Hyena Guides² came to our little city,
rising³ up through the asphalt,
carrying their kismet like beasts of burden.
Anachronisms who can’t get past their own ideas⁴,
walking carrion-eaters⁵ beside them.
Quickly, quickly, but not too quickly

1. Don’t run, don’t walk, either way
2. they might be real, mightn’t not
3. Like daisies made of sepia ink⁶
4. ideals, iduns, idudn’ts, ididn’ts
5. oddly silent⁷, consuming the waste

6. harvested from intelligentsia
7. a hollow opposite of laughter follows them⁸

8. Like the ghosts of children who died in cars
review  by Aislinn Melchior

The first thing I was reminded of when reading James Gaines’ poem “Hyena” was of the exegetical tradition. Footnotes are the poor remnant of such scholarly and interpretive work. The text itself was a beautiful thing then, hand-copied and encrusted with opinion like the setting of a gorgeous gem. We are left with black and white and a more mechanical enumeration of learning. But this is on the dead page, of course, and poetry is spoken.

With “Hyena” one can read straight through or one can digress.

Like a scavenger one is drawn by the ticking numbers as by a scent and pulled towards the footnotes and the footnotes of footnotes. The structure—and the interruptions of the structure—express the distracted attempt to find space for poetry and the hectic failure to do so. All is disjunctive bites.

We scavenge but do not hunt. We move past the words without thought and are left with senseless carrion, bolting disordered words.

Or, we can see “Hyena” as the willingness to stop for a moment and smell the offal. For a poem to mean, we must let the words rupture and spill from words to thoughts and from thoughts to words. The footnotes invite us to chase meaning and to tear at the language for more. They represent the allusive nature of the word that allows the furled rope of intestine to deliquesce and resolve into dew. Language calls us to the ripening feast, our yellowed teeth reciting.¹

1. re-citing

AISLINN MELCHIOR is an Assistant Professor of Classics in her fifth year at the University of Puget Sound. She teaches Latin (often), Greek (occasionally), and a wide variety of courses in translation.
December never felt so wrong

Lauren Sanford
review by Janet Marcavage

A pair of glassy limbs hang like specimens with a dark, almost black background. The pair of reflective forms could be a microscopic or macroscopic view of glass, ice, or another translucent material. The mostly solid forms are detached and amplified to reveal minute bubbles and cracks. The cropping of the limbs isolates them from a recognizable place, adding a sense of mystery. Where have these forms lived?

The title of this photograph, *December never felt so wrong* reflects the recent winter’s frozen past. The temporal icicles are frozen in time, yet the warmth of the black background and reflected umber tones thaw their bite. The environs of the icicles are ambiguous; reflected bits of yellow text peak through, but it is not readable. The surface quality of the limbs appears mutable. The color and shapes will change as people move around them and the light shifts. The photograph preserves this suspended precipitation. The icicles have a sense of solidity, yet we know that are tenuous and will eventually melt away.

JANET MARCAVAGE is an Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Puget Sound, specializing in printmaking, and the mother of a curious 15-month old daughter. Janet creates lithographs, etchings, and screenprints in her studio. Originally from Philadelphia, she studied at The University of The Arts and The University of Wisconsin-Madison. Janet’s prints will be exhibited in Puget Sound’s Kittredge Gallery in Spring 2010.
I've occasionally mused that if, by some bizarre Rube Goldberg mechanism of a cosmic joke, I became a parent, it might be fun to invent five to seven blatant falsehoods to present to my children as truth before they are ten years old. I don't mean the usual myths like the existence of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, or that Buster went to live on a nice farm in another state, or any explanation pertaining to where babies come from. Nor would I ever intentionally burden my children with the kind of banal prejudices, so unfortunately ubiquitous, that would morally and socially handicap them. I'm talking about assertions that are truly outlandish—so far from the truth and so off the wall that no one my kids encounter will be able to fathom how they might have come to believe such a thing. I'd like to concoct these lies carefully and arrange them in such a way that they will be exposed and debunked, one at a time, at key moments throughout my offspring's lives, injecting a kind of absurdist amusement to the situation that only I (and presumably my spouse, since I don't think this game would be as fun on my own) will appreciate, should we happen to be present.

Whenever I speak aloud of this dastardly plan, people tend to find it mildly abhorrent. "How could you lie to your kids like that? They're going to hate you!" I suppose part of the reason I allow myself this rather twisted meditation is that I don't really take the idea of myself as a parent that seriously most of the time. The idea persists in the corners of my consciousness though, perhaps because it has been my experience that children will absorb a number of queer untruths in their single-digit years quite of their own accord, without any sort of grand design on the part of their parents. I certainly did. In my tender years I grew up with the benefit of three generations of champion bullshitters, in the form of my father, his father, and my older brother, Stephen. The men in my family seem to be bred with a gene especially geared towards detecting and exploit-
ing gullibility. Since practically no one is more gullible than a six-year-old girl, they each at various times took advantage of my squishy, receptive little brain. In each case, the information they gave me was dutifully absorbed and, in due time, regurgitated with results ranging from localized awkwardness to generalized shock. What follows are but a few selections from the library of possible anecdotes about the various critical heresies that were more or less deliberately engendered in me by my supposed loved ones.

My paternal grandfather has had cancer of one form or another off and on for most of my life—bladder, colon, prostate, you name it. A walking public service announcement for early detection, he goes to the doctor religiously and has been fortunate in each case to get treatment before the situation gets too dire. When I was about five or six, he had it in his kidneys. During this period of my life, my parents and brother and I would leave our home in Georgia during the hottest part of the summer and spend a few weeks in Washington with the grandparents. All these sojourns sort of blend together in my memory, but I distinctly recall being very small, gathered with the family in my grandparents living room, and approaching my grandfather in his recliner. He leaned down so that we were speaking very closely face to face, and said with great seriousness, “Beth, do know where your kidneys are?” I did not. “They’re right…” He suspended the word as he moved his hands to either side of my doughy little cranium. “There!” he said, and tapped my temples decisively. “And now I’ve only got one.”

It was at least three years before the subject of that particular branch of anatomy came up in conversation again, and I didn’t really think about it in the meantime. Why would I? It did not become relevant until the moment when my parents were suppressing laughter and Stephen was asking me, did it really seem logical that, in the magnificently ordered human body, the kidneys should be located at the furthest possible distance from the orifice that completed their function, and if so, did I ever experience headaches that vanished miraculously when I urinated?

My father’s particular brand of untruth was usually less about deliberate or premeditated misleading than about latching on to childish
speculations about the hows and whys of daily life and constructing elaborate fictions to substantiate them. When Stephen and I were perhaps seven and nine, we would frequently have play-dates with another pair of siblings, Jessie and Jimmy. Jessie and Jimmy’s family had a cat whom they allowed to roam freely around the neighborhood and who, having somehow slipped through the cracks of every Bob Barker campaign, was frequently pregnant. One summer, the cat gave birth to a litter of no less than seventeen kittens. I know it sounds improbable but I was there and there were seventeen of them. Stephen and I went home that day fairly bursting with amazement at this spectacle of feline fertility. We jabbered on about it all through dinner and didn’t fight for an entire day. You can only imagine our consternation then, when at the next play-date a few weeks later we learned that the kittens had come upon a pool of antifreeze in the driveway and were now all dead. On the car ride home, my dad tried to help us make sense of the tragedy. “That’s a shame,” he said, “but it’s not that uncommon. Animals drink it pretty much whenever they find it. You have to be really careful keeping it around when you’ve got pets.”

“Why do they drink it?” we asked.

“I dunno; they like the taste, I guess.”

“What does it taste like?”

Silence. “Gatorade.”

“Gatorade?” We liked Gatorade. We always had it in the house because Dad liked to drink tall, iced glasses of it after jogging. “What kind of Gatorade?”

“The green kind. Animals drink antifreeze because it’s sweet and delicious like green Gatorade.” I don’t know why we assumed our dad would know what antifreeze tasted like. Perhaps it was because he was a high school science teacher and we always imagined him in a lab coat surrounded by bubbling test tubes, his profession instilling in him an innate affinity for all things chemical—more likely because he was our dad and knew everything. In any event, he was never much of a cat person.

Although my father and grandfather derived occasional amusement from testing the limits of my credulity, they fell vastly short of my brother in terms of frequency of deception. My brother also surpassed them in the
arena of topic selection, giving me devastatingly false ideas in areas where correct information was absolutely vital. The third generation bullshitter showed promise early, before we were even in grades with numbers on them. His greatest triumph came about during the period when we first began experimenting with swear words. To this day, I’m not certain of how much credit he should actually be given for telling me that “the F word” meant the same thing as the word “fart,” because I think it happened before either of us had really grasped the concept of “fuck” as a verb. Still, it turned out to be a pretty disastrous misconception for me.

We were sitting at the dinner table with our parents on an unremarkable weekday evening when my dad broke wind. Stephen and I dissolved into giggles, Mom tried to frown, and Dad pretended to be embarrassed. Then Stephen, evidently feeling brave, said, “I can’t believe Daddy farted!”

Now, when you’re five years old, “fart” is kind of a risqué word in and of itself. You would never dream of actually cursing, but words like “fart” or “crap” occupy a sort of gray area that yields variable results when trespassed on. You might get in trouble, but on the other hand, your parents’ friends might find you charming and hilarious and you’d be a grownup for about thirty magical seconds. On this particular occasion, when Stephen said “fart,” he got a warning look, but overall, the comment seemed to fit in with the tone of the situation. Given our close ages and the nature of sibling rivalry, I couldn’t very well stand to be outdone in this arena by my stupid big brother. I had to up the ante, so I said, “I can’t believe Daddy fucked!” Stephen got two Girl Scout cookies and I got a bar of soap.

I can think of at least three more such instances of misinformation, and that’s just if I limit myself to stories regarding the definitions of swear words. If I had more time, and if the idea didn’t seem so gimmicky, I could probably recount my entire life story as a series of vignettes about thinking one thing and then finding out it wasn’t true—life as a series of punctured preconceptions and upturned assumptions. It may sound at first like a rather bleak framework for interpreting the major plot points of one’s existence, but I don’t think it has to be. In the first place, sometimes the truth turns out to be better than what you’ve been told, even if your
ignorance is exposed in the process of learning it. Even taking into account the times when it’s much, much worse, I think the pattern can be seen as a kind of growth process, like some kind of asymptotic curve (though approaching what, I can’t be sure). In addition to continual improvement in information, I find that there’s intrinsic value in developing a mindset in which you’re constantly anticipating that the facts you’re given might turn out to be false, regardless of their source.

With regard to the source... I suppose that’s where the issue gets a bit thornier. Certainly, it seems cold and a little sadistic to deliberately lie to your children solely for your own personal entertainment, but to do it with some high-minded idea of building character seems even more perverse to me. I don’t really think my male relatives were so premeditated and diabolical about it at all. When I think about the way their constant barrage of falsehoods affected my general outlook on life, I see them as a paradoxically stabilizing force. I learned to depend on the fact that they would always be screwing with me, and to recognize it when they did (most of the time). Before long, I picked it up, this pattern of reflexive bullshitting, of slipping little absurdities into conversation wherever you can, just to see if you can get away with it. I learned to temper the serious with the ridiculous in an almost unbroken stream, accustomed to being around people who were sharp enough and, perhaps more importantly, knew me well enough to spot the shifts. Rather than making me feel like the proverbial rug was being constantly pulled from under me, the lies I was told as a child marked me as part of a cohesive family unit. In later, more challenging times, when so many assumed truths have turned out to be false, our ability to bullshit each other has been a vital link in the maintenance of our communication.

I can’t say for certain what lies I’ll tell my own children, hypothetical as they may be. I will lie to them; that’s a given in any relationship, so the lies might as well be amusing. I hope, at any rate, they will be the kind that my kids will eventually see through, and that they are strong enough to bear the illumination. If I am able to carry on my family’s tradition of bullshit, perhaps my children will be endowed with the wit and fortitude to withstand any of the inevitable upendings of truth the world can inflict.
Almost anyone who is a parent has at least considered using his or her child for a little harmless amusement. I still recall the guilty but unstoppable laughing fits my husband and I had at the thought of dressing up our infant as a pirate in an effort to alleviate the stress she was caused. We never did it—just walked around saying “Aarrrgh” to her for a while—but the impulse was our glowing salvation. In “On Love and Bullshit,” an essay about the connecting power of humor, Beth Murdock describes a tribe who turns laughter at the expense of others into a form of art and love.

Anytime an author writes about growing up, she runs the risk of sentimentalizing what Murdock calls “the tender years.” Granted, Murdock’s subjects might naturally resist this pull: an indestructible grandfather; a father who farts at the dinner table; and a brother who is an evil genius. But no character is immune to an author’s personal susceptibility to the beauty and pain of the recollection and reconstruction of her own past. To the delight of her readers, Murdock retains an objective stance, content to be the straight-man in a series of comical, economically narrated sketches that move ever forward to the crux of her essay: the human tendency, even need, to turn experience into narrative, to create cohesion from confusion.

Her family’s penchant for “bullshit” provides Murdock with a “framework for interpreting the major plot points of [her] existence.” Hardly traumatized by her relatives’ gleeful delight in exploiting (and curing her of) her gullibility, she finds that bullshit unites her family, knits together moments, people, information, and misinformation. Ultimately, it protects them from life’s harsher jokes. “On Love and Bullshit” reminds us to hold our dear oddballs close. In helping us to laugh and letting us laugh at them, these people ease the pain that strikes us all when we learn, on occasion, that even deeply held truths can turn out to be false.

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The Art of Madness

Alyssa Christensen

I know exactly
what I want to do.
I want
to finger paint on you.

I want to try out
every startling,
brilliant hue.

Perhaps I will start with
a piercing jolt of yellow
that would splay your neurons
into shock—
I could rewire you to be
electricity.

Then
comes the flash of red
that would kick your head
into a mess—
oh just you wait
for the frantic frenzy
I can project!

And then, there is blue—
manic splash to match
your coursing, pulsing veins—
I know exactly what I want to do. I want to finger paint on you. I want to try out every startling, brilliant hue. Perhaps I will start with a piercing jolt of yellow that would splay your neurons into shock—
I could rewire you to be electricity. Then comes the flash of red that would kick your head into a mess—oh just you wait for the frantic frenzy I can project!
And then, there is blue—manic splash to match your coursing, pulsing veins—

Oh, you.
Can I retain the flash flood of color these ardent hands contain?
Or do my hands cover and contaminate—
painkiller poison paint?

This is what I do. Who are you this time, Mister, who?
I've got to get my hands on you.
True Whale Love a Rose

Graham Klag

oil on wood panel, acrylic canvas construction,
found wood, molding clay
Prime Time

Carl Larson

I wanna be in the Aegean Sea,
workin' undercover for the agency.
Swimmin' all around in that Cretaceous water,
I doubt you didn't know you didn't father a daughter.

The intimidating bouncer could not contain his laugh:
The yellow spotted quadruped is now called a giraffe.

They're creeping through the jungle and they're difficult to hear.
How will I defend with just a fancy chandelier?

One, two, three, five, seven and eleven.
Prime time freak out, I'm Ferdinand Magellan.
I'll explore the seas and circumnavigate the world.
I may be a grown man but I can scream like a girl.
The Man Who Walks in Dreams

Ian Greenfield

A party house is a torrid, terrible place to live. The man who told me this is a man who walks in dreams. His name was Clare Fortrand, which I thought was a woman’s name but apparently, like my own name, Rory, it could cross-dress on occasion—and because my name is ambiguous, I should say I am a man. I met Clare at a party in the house where he had just moved in with the beer-stained youths, and at the time the music was giving me a headache. We were sitting in the ugliest set of green armchairs the world has known. They had used to be sky blue but time and people had turned them to shit.

“But you live here,” I said, protesting his comment. He did, I thought, for I had seen him several times, coming out of the linen closet at the end of the upstairs hall.

I saw a flash of teeth through his brown beard, and he shook his head. “No, I don’t.” Clare put his hand on my knee and stood up. “Your headache’s going away.”

It didn’t that night, but for some reason I felt better. Clare interested me. I couldn’t put my finger on the reason.

I began the project of digging into Clare’s past. I started by dropping his name in conversation and seeing what happened. The consensus was that he was very quiet and a nice person, in an unobtrusive way. He did indeed live here. His room, which I had not seen, was in fact the space I had taken for a linen closet, and ran the length of the house by the eaves. He spent all his time in that space, and my roommate speculated that he cooked in there because no one had ever seen Clare in the kitchen. He liked to wear silk shirts and had tattooed arms, and his straight mousy hair was clean. He always had dried paint, all colors, on his fingertips. There was something I found strange about his eyes: they
never seemed to be focused right where he was looking. However, he was very observant. I didn’t notice that at first, because I didn’t lose things, but my housemates told me that Clare knew where everything was, even lost things. Especially lost things.

I met Clare coming up the stairs one day. He was twirling his keys on one finger. I asked him what he did, meaning what he did for a living.

“I walk in dreams,” he said. He gave me a nod and went into his room. I couldn’t see around him, and he closed the door before I could glimpse his sanctum.

*I walk in dreams.* I thought it was a screwy thing to say.

That evening there was another party. I didn’t want to party, and the truth of Clare’s statement came back to me. I had thought it was a little square of him to say it, that the house as a terrible place to live, but I realized that night that he was right. The house was only any good as long as I had the spirits for it. Otherwise the noise and chaos seemed malicious, corrosive.

I wondered what Clare was up to in his room and decided to find out. He was a smart talker, if nothing else, and we could shoot the shit until the night wound down. My only concern was that some couple would release their sexual tension on my bed again while I was out. I risked it.

When I knocked Clare came to the door instead of calling out, as if the long narrow room was a house and the hall his porch. He opened the door a foot and stood in the opening. He wore a blue bathrobe and red wool socks.

“Tonight sucks,” I said. “Want to chill?”

“Sure.” I heard him pick up his keys, and then he stepped out into the hall. “Let’s chill in your room. They’re moshing under my floor.”

It was a patent lie. Under his floor were the downstairs bathroom, broom closet, kitchen and a corner of the dining room. The worst noise was nowhere near his room. I shrugged and returned to the space I’d just vacated. I examined my things—scattered clothes, bottles, a few books, old CDs I loved, a computer blinking staccato as it downloaded a movie—and decided they were presentable enough. I sat on my bed and Clare took my computer chair.

“So you walk in dreams,” I said.
He tipped his head upwards. “Yes. When I sleep, I literally leave and walk through dreams.” He shrugged and gazed at the mini-fridge by my bed.

I gave him a beer. “Tight,” I said. “What kind of stuff do you see when you do that?”

“Whatever people dream.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Lots of strange sex. A lot of people running from something they can’t see. More of that than ever, seems like. I see places that look familiar, but I can’t place them until I walk by a building, say, with the same general frame and then it’s like, oh, that’s what their head was talking about—anyway, I see myself sometimes. It’s the strangest part. Creepy.”

“That’s nice though.”
He raised his eyebrows, which I took as a request to expound.
“I mean, someone dreams about you, it means you mean something to them.”

“What if it’s somebody I pass on the street one day?” He scratched his beard.
“They picked your face out of the crowd.”

“True that.”
He asked me to tell him about myself and I gave him the whole hometown-highschool-college-job spiel. I asked him the same and he gave the same: Clare was from Providence, Rhode Island, went to college in Austin where, he said, they had a collection of Aleister Crowley’s writings, and right now was living in our side-attic while he worked on his doctoral thesis.

“Philosophy?” I asked.

“Mixed with literature.” He would not be more specific. I began to think he’d spent most of his time in Austin actually reading that Crowley collection and the works of Crowley’s type. He was probably following in their footsteps in our house.

“Interesting,” I said. “What kind of hobbies do you have?”


I was still hung up on the whole black magic thing. “What does a guy like you think about?” I asked.
He shrugged. “Take renaissance, for example. It’s very Freudian. You can take it as an advancement or as a return to a state of infancy, of union with the mother. Almost as an end rather than a means. Either way, I’m kind of its agent.”

“Uh huh.”

He asked me if he could borrow my copy of H. P. Lovecraft’s *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, a favorite of mine for years, and I said sure. He flipped through it—there were most of the Randolph Carter stories in there—for a few minutes. I pictured him savoring the macabre fantasy. The book fit him. In fact, he still has it, and I recently bought a new copy to remember him by.

“Society is a demon,” he said out of the blue, and stood up. “I’m going to bed. Nice talking to you.”

It had been half an hour. The party raged below. “Sure, come by in my dreams.”

He chuckled and went into his room.

That night, I dreamed of Clare. We were floating in black space. A great heat rose from below, and I longed to rise into the cool airy heights. But I was trapped in a tatty green armchair, and I could not move at all.

Clare sat opposite me. He sat on a black throne. He wore many cabalistic pendants. They were tangled into a shapeless mass on his chest. He stared at me. Four minutes passed. He did not blink. I stared back. I did not blink. His eyes were hot with malice.

I did not mention this dream to him, nor did he say anything to me.

Clare and I walked around the house one day, plucking dandelions so the landlord would not immediately see the level of neglect his house suffered. “Best thing we can do for the place,” he said, looking up at the peeling paint. The roof on one side of the house sagged, cracked shingles spilling into the gutters. The roof was fine over Clare’s room, and the paint less battered, through no logic I could discern. Three windows on the second floor were broken.

“We can’t fix it,” he said.

“Gotta put a pretty face on it or get out,” I agreed. This was, I had
come to realize, the way Clare saw the world. It was as bleak as it was comforting. To admit that life sucked and there was fuck-all to do about it was pretty gloomy. No wonder Clare chose to believe he could walk in people’s dreams, in ideal fantasylands. It was how to survive.

At the same time, Clare is one of the most contented people I know. His secret was to give up responsibility for the human mess, casting off a million billion tons of weight from his conscience. It’s a neat trick, or he pretended it was. I’m not sure he really meant it enough—his conscience still pricked him now and again.

But God damn, I wanted to be like him.

There was a party one night in the fall that kicked all our asses, except Clare’s, to hungover wooziness. Two memorable things happened the next morning. The first was that when I stumbled down to breakfast I found a police officer waiting for me in the kitchen. We made small talk until I was fully awake.

“Your roommate?”

I recalled dimly that he had not been there when I awoke. I said so.

“He is, er, has, er, had alcohol poisoning.” The officer seemed very young, probably my age.

“How is he?” I felt weightless in my middle, as if gravity was changing its polarity around me.

“I’m afraid,” the officer said, “he is dead.”

I walked among the remains of the party. Several people were sleeping. Their wallets were out and open. The officer had checked their ages. The underage had hopefully all gone or else we were in trouble. Strange how I could think of that at the time I’d heard a good friend of mine was dead. I kicked aside a can of Blue Ribbon and it crashed into others, all of them just tossed on the sticky floor. There was vomit on one of the green chairs. I knelt by the other and worried at a tear in the seat until I teased out a blue thread. It almost glowed against the sickly backdrop of the decayed green. I left it sticking up an inch, a beacon of the chair’s better times.
The second thing that happened was that one of the sleepers on the floor awoke and told me Clare had been running around all night at the party. Clare had been in his blue bathrobe, flashing people, but the hungover partygoer couldn’t recall—not that I cared him to—what Clare looked like under the robe. We couldn’t decide whether it was a dream or not. Maybe Clare had actually done that, giving up on elusive sleep to join in the cacophony that thwarted his rest. Anyway, I hadn’t seen him so we’d been on opposite sides of sleep at the time.

Of all of us in the house, only Clare took my roommate’s death with any measure of serenity, though judging from his moods he seemed the saddest of us all. Oh, I raged and grieved and had a number of emotional collapses in which I stared at my ceiling for eight or nine hours with my iPod droning on, but I think that Clare, the loner, somehow saw my roommate—probably all of us—in a light we didn’t. He knew how to stand his own feelings, and—this was the thing that bothered me enough to really pry into his life soon afterward—somehow he knew exactly how to feel about my roommate’s death. He had a schema for it. And so his sadness passed before my roommate was inurned.

I hated that. I hated that death didn’t surprise Clare. I couldn’t think anyone could face it with such unflagging realism. The toll was too high. One had to either hide from it, or else go mad.

One day, seeing Clare slip into his room, holding a fat book under his arm, I resolved to find out whether he was an escapist or a madman.

I dreamed every night of Clare. It was the same dream. He sat on his throne. He stared. I stared. Never with fear—my gaze burned him as much as his did me. I demanded with my eyes. I demanded to know who he was.

One night, slipping again into the position of an abstract spectator to my own dream, I saw to the side of us, another Clare, in his blue bathrobe and red socks, sitting in a sky-blue armchair very much like mine. He was watching us—not the people but rather the dynamic between them. I wondered if this watcher was the real Clare, or if I dreamed them both.
I found out that Clare spent three years in jail right before coming to our house. I learned it from a college friend who worked for the FBI in Providence, his hometown—I’d called her to see if she could dig up any dirt. There was plenty of it. She sent me some faxes. At the very least this favor was a legal gray area, but it was edifying to me.

Clare Fortrand was born in Providence, but from age five to fifteen his military father was assigned all over the world and the family followed. Upon their return, Clare, the youngest of three children, was a moody mess. His transcripts proved he was brilliant. He was suspended from school three times, twice for violence and once for bringing a knife to school. He was arrested for shoplifting at age seventeen and never completed high school. He nevertheless got into college and went away for four years. He returned to Providence to get his master’s degree and enter a PhD program. His performance sparkled. He was arrested twice for drug possession and still managed to finish his studies. Then he was arrested for sexual congress with a minor—she was sixteen and they were both trying to do some sort of sex magic—and spent his three years behind bars.

I felt like a thief, sneaking into Clare’s sanctum without his knowledge—I felt that these records, not the contents of his room, were the real secrets he kept. But I kept reading, because I wanted to know how he could live so blithely in a place where a person had died. I did research on my own on his time in Austin. Mr. Crowley’s ghost arose before me as I learned.

Clare graduated summa cum laude with his bachelor’s, which was in English literature, with minors in philosophy and religion. On the other hand, while in Austin he spent time among a small “sect” of unknown activities, which disbanded the year of his graduation at the same time as several people disappeared in their neighborhood and the accusations of black magic started flying. At this point, I was not at all surprised. I decided that whatever it meant to be like Clare, the price of that serenity—which might have been mere callousness—was too high.

When I dreamed, I no longer saw the Clare in the blue bathrobe, only the black magician on his throne. I spent a lot of time around the
green chairs, trying to puzzle out their relationship to my dream. I soon noticed that the blue threads I’d exposed had turned to green very quickly. If I’d thought the chairs worth it I’d have hand them professionally cleaned.

The squirrel on the windowsill was the last straw.

I found it at eight in the evening, during a party. A blue light was on, and a strobe, and in the throbbing of cybergoth my senses were warped. I passed the window and saw on the outside sill a blue, veined thing like a strip of a raw haunch of ham. I opened the window and leaned out to get at it, for reasons unclear to myself, and in the normalizing light of the streetlamp I was able to see that it was a squirrel, cut open and turned inside out.

So the modern Crowley was up to his old Texas tricks, I thought.

I slammed the window and went upstairs. I banged on Clare’s door until my hands hurt but he didn’t come out. I shouted at him, accusing him of Satanism—though the practice of Satanism didn’t bother me in principle, it was the most articulate occult epithet I could throw at him. I called him a rapist and kicked the door. I didn’t so much as dent it.

Finally, I went downstairs to get help from the partygoers.

I found them in the kitchen. They were gathered in the blue light, in a haze of smoke, and they were laughing, chanting nasal ah-ah-ahs along to the techno beat. One of them had a knife and they were all looking at it. It was bloody. There was a smell on the air, something burning. The counter was coated in lines of pale powder.

Then some others came in, and they were holding a cat. The laughter rose loud above the music, and then I turned away gasping, not sure if I was crying or trying to breathe.

Clare stood in front of me, holding bulging grocery bags. He was chewing his lip and watching the mob. He had that unfocused look, a look like he was away, a little bit. I clung to that.

“I’m scared,” I said. My own frankness astonished me.

“Come on,” he said, and passed me a bag. He led me upstairs to his room.

The key to his door was silver and looked absurdly old. He opened
the lock—it clunked—and ushered me into his room.

It was unpainted. The bare dark wood had the gaps and knots shared by many old attics, but Clare had made it comfortable. The floor was covered in short colored rugs. There were five bookshelves, and near the largest of the three windows was an easel with a half-finished painting of our house on it. The house in the painting was well-tended. His bed was surprisingly simple, but he had lots of blue sheets, four or five layers of them, and a number of pillows. He had hung paper lanterns over the otherwise bald bulbs that dangled from the sloped, two-angled ceiling. Books were everywhere; there was a yoga mat in the middle of the room; there was a portable stove by an open window. He had his own cupboard of food and refrigerator. There was a computer desk, and by the monitor there was a picture of his family at his graduation in Austin. He looked no different in that picture than he did standing beside me.

“So this is the famous room,” I said.

He shrugged. “Make of it what you will. You can make anything of a space.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, drawing out my cell phone, “I want to call the cops on those people downstairs.”

“Go for it,” he said, and locked the door. “Make this place pretty or get out.”

I sat in his computer chair and dialed the numbers.

That night, I dreamed of Clare in his blue bathrobe and red socks, sitting on his black throne with that tangle of symbols around his neck. His eyes were lucid, clear, all here, and pleasantly bemused. We no longer faced each other but sat side by side, myself in a blue armchair, and what we were looking at was a giant dollhouse, with the back wall removed so that we could see the quick and the dead scuttling around inside, senseless and desperate as frightened rats.

Weeks later, I told Clare, “You can’t leave.”

“We didn’t change anything,” he said. “They’re still up to the same
old and there’s no good face to put on it. Light’s not so great for painting anyhow.”

I thought it over.

“Will you leave the paper lanterns?”

“Yeah,” he said. When he moved out the next day he tossed me the old silver key and I caught it two-handed.

“Come visit at nights,” I said. He grinned through his beard and that was the last I saw of him in waking life.

I’m still in that room. Which is why I said I didn’t live here. That room isn’t really a part of the house. Clare set it apart by choice, and by choice I continue to set it apart. I lock myself in there when the partying continues. As for why I don’t leave, the fact of the matter is that it’s the same everywhere, according to Clare. I still see him from time to time. He drops in about weekly and we talk over cans of Blue Ribbon while sitting in our thrones and watching the rats dance. I’ve adopted his distance from the world, but like I speculated there’s still conscience. There’s still the urge to fix what can’t be fixed.

It’s the reason I’m passing along Clare’s aphorism about this torrid, terrible place. I’m telling you. Don’t live here.
such was the pleasure
of the day: the car, colored like
robins’ eggs, with
licks of rust,
parted the market crowd,
planting its old hinges, axles, and
bolts at the intersection of Blvd. and St.
and aggravating the local motorists.
curious pedestrians crossed, didn’t
cross, paused to watch the head-shaved
distraction and his head-shaved
orderlies.
the younger one spread, patted
a cloth on the asphalt. It read: gold
is the color of my discontent.
the distraction sat, put his legs
and hands like a flower, was handed a
jug of gasoline, the tin type that
pings as the liquid sloshes. he
poured it over himself,
dampening the flower.
unreliable sources claim
that the outline of a man stood, brushed
his monk’s robes and sank
into the manhole. but, the only thing
remaining, other than the disfigure,
was his shriveled heart, skirted
by the flames.

measured against the height of past
burnings (sacrifices, to honor The Way, etc.)
the flames’ upper limit was 17 ft.
the incinerated bundle toppled to its
right in no time, away from
the stink of feces and piss
repressed beneath the sewer’s steel lid.

one journalist, chewing on his pencil, commented—
“Human beings burn surprisingly quickly.”

an orderly stooped to
gather the cloth and heart, then
hurried off to let the statement sink in.
They ducked in the car, smarting
from the heat, put in the key
click click,
realized they’d siphoned the
rest of the gas. none for the getaway
My father doesn't know
where his father is buried
because that father,
hungry for scared children
and meat,
cooked my father's pet rabbit,
whose name he no longer recalls.

He remembers only
bits of fur stuck to the axe
and his father's rabbit stew.
I'd followed you closely, silent and concentrating, stretching my stride to match my steps with yours, and thus with our heavy rifles we'd wandered all day, leaving snow-muffled boot prints along elk's trails.

She and her herd had emerged suddenly, graceful brown phantoms from the forest depths; your upheld hand a signal, we paused motionless, the rifle’s muzzle returning her benevolent gaze.

The sharp crack of your gun echoed on the pines—the thin rumble sent hooves clattering; we ran dashing and leaping over fallen logs, chasing broken branches and red-specked snow.

When we found her she had fallen—her thick neck wedged between two skinny trees, her round chocolaty eyes no longer afraid; her chest heaved, and low moans hung on the cold air.

Later, squatting beside her great brown body, we built a small fire and gutted our benefactress, dipping our mittened hands in the cavity of her chest, where blood pooled and her soft liver lay, still warm.

In the hushed forests of late afternoon, I knelt beside you, Dad, washing our knives, snowflakes gathering on the wool of my coat. Did you thank her, as I did then, for the dinners to come?
Caroline.
Wizened, you scratch out advice to us
From behind your strung out hair;
And through that pitted face comes a scrutinizing glare.
You hiss your offense, our injury done to you.
We stared.

What do you see through those bare-boned blue eyes?
Cool kids in uniform, we are scene.
We wear skinny jeans and up-done hair.
We avert our stare and sit facing forward in our chair;
Oh, sweet Caroline of 17,
is the world unfair?
I am an old woman and I keep my mouth shut most of the time. When a word manages to crawl out I am surprised by the sound. Wrinkles cling to my skin like moss binding my lips, hands, eyes and mind. I spend most days here in my chair knitting and I don’t see any reason to leave. I’ve been to Paris. I’ve seen things. Grand things and tragic things and insignificant things, all things are embossed in my mind. I remember the day my first grandchild was born so wrinkled and strong with dark brown hair, and I remember the day we got a dish washing machine and I felt so elegant, scraping off the “tuna fish noodle dish” and placing each plate in the shiny box. Scraping any morsel of food into the garbage was luxury as I remembered a time when dishes looked just as clean after dinner as they did before dinner. Now I am done seeing. I have enough memories.

“Do you want some coffee, Mom?”
I won’t answer.

“Should I turn on the radio?”
It’s as if I’m listening to characters on the TV. They can’t be talking to me. I don’t want them to.

“I know she can hear us.”
“She always was stubborn.”

I have knitted all my children and grandchildren baby blankets as they entered this world, small squares of bright yarn tucked away in some cedar chest or cardboard box and now I am working on my own blanket. It is a secret task I take seriously. I can only knit in the wide workspace that opens under closed eyes when I am here in my chair. Here I create. I unravel and my favorite party dress and sodas at Woolworths and the ugly bits too, like friend’s funerals or the wind that snapped the cherry trees in half. These I handle more delicately, like knitting with angel hair from the Christmas tree. I spin birthday candles and Orion’s belt and seaweed from trips to the coast. I’m unraveling time to make myself a blanket of every mood and hue. It is my last great project.
Lonely Pantry

Stephanie Syrett

Milk and steak
  (she liked the oddest combinations)
Bananas and apple sauce
  (said they tasted like adventure)
Peanuts and refried beans
  (and now that she’s gone I wonder)
Scrambled eggs with apples
  (if the candy corn will miss the peanut butter)
Hot dogs and soy sauce
  (when there’s no one else willing)
Ketchup and macaroni
  (to put them together)
Milk and steak
(she liked the oddest combinations)
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(if the candy corn will miss the peanut butter)
Hot dogs and soy sauce
(when there’s no one else willing)
Ketchup and macaroni
(to put them together)
Bad Kids I Know

Isaac Lewin
On a cold fall evening
in an alleyway.

Erin Ingle

But soft! What light from yonder carport breaks?
It is the west, and you are setting down
your cigarette, into the raindrop lakes
that gather at your feet on dirty ground.

The ancient rusted gutter, caked with leaves,
drops remnants of its cargo on your hair,
and in my car I find it hard to breathe
the dusty tasting, metal-heated air.

I pull up at your side and shift to park
and crawl outside to study cloud-cloaked trees.
Fluorescent lights bite holes into the dark,
and hum their glowing song to you and me.

What better thing to do on Tuesday night
than stand with you beneath the carport light?
untitled

Lauren Justice

oil on canvas
I had been waiting for you since the day I was born, but I only began actually expecting you when the woman on TV began talking about planes falling out of the sky and the stock market crashing and disease wiping out entire cities. I drank tea while I watched the panic grow on her face and fell asleep in front of the TV for the first time in years. When I woke up in the dark before dawn there was only the snow of static on all of the channels so I turned the TV off and hugged my knees to my chest.

I wondered when you would arrive.

The electricity still worked in the morning but no dial tone sang to me when I lifted the phone to my ear to call my work. I didn’t mind that much. No one was going to be calling anyway. The stove still seemed to work so I put the kettle on and took stock of what tea I had. Moroccan mint gunpowder green, Irish breakfast black, lemon-ginger herbal, raspberry white. Which would you choose?

You didn’t come the first day, or the second. I couldn’t sleep in my bed anymore; it was too empty now, and I didn’t want to miss your knock on the door. I slept on the couch and turned on the TV even though there was still no signal. I stared into the pattern of white noise, and I thought that you were leaving me messages in it that if I just focused hard enough I could read. That if I listened closely enough I could hear your voice, telling me...

I always fell asleep first.

On the morning of the third day I found the spots on my tongue that the newslady had talked about and knew that you’d be here soon. It was just as well; the sun that morning was the color of a bruise and the air was becoming more difficult to breathe. I put the kettle on and waited.

When you finally knocked on the door you were immediately so familiar, so exactly who I had expected that all of my worries evaporated. I...
waved at the pale horse you rode in on; it snorted and tossed its mane like any other horse before beginning to destroy my lawn, and then you were sitting at my kitchen table as if it were the most natural place in the world.

We sat at the table drinking our tea (you decided on the raspberry white), talking of this and that—you mentioned how you had seen the fields in which my tea had grown, the leaves spreading in the heat of the sun, telling me that I should see it before you realized your mistake—and I felt the question rising in me, knocking against my teeth. What took you so long? I wanted to ask you, but I didn’t want to ask you like that, in the same exact words that I had asked so many other men before you.

But the question was still there knocking and I let it out, just like I had let you in.

“What took you so long?”
You exhaled and looked down into your tea, like the others.
“I’m sorry,” I said, and I went to the window and watched the sky fall, and your horse grazing below it. Indifferent or oblivious, I couldn’t tell.
You stood and moved behind me and put your hand on my neck, softly.
Your hands were warm. I hadn’t expected that.
“I’m here now,” you said into my hair.
“At the end of the world,” I said.
“What better time?” you said, and you were right.
I closed my eyes and put my hand on top of yours, and you turned your palm over so our fingers tangled. “I’m ready,” I said.
“I know,” you said. “You’ve always been ready.”
Then you unfolded your wings and wrapped me in them and finally there was only static.
shelter 2

Juliet Shapiro

h 22” x w 18” x l 17”

steel rods and molded rubber
What is Loneliness

a self-portrait

Kelly Howard  12” x 12”
black & white oil on canvas
Apostralgia
Leah Vendl

apostrophes misput
pricking in my eyelids
holes for empty lashes,

and the inconsiderate
un-illiterate
elite, saying

please,
wont they

learn their place?
sweet yellow and hot

Lauren Fries
Worker, is this poetic?
Am I the only one
Who sees prosody tied by twine,
Easily yoked to your shoulder’s strength?
It cleaves dirt into straight mounds and lines
Like structured iambs with rhythm and rhyme.

Straight like a hot wire’s path through wax,
Or a jazz tie
Coltrane might wear.
Do you know his songs?

My hands are clean, but bare
As a blank page,
Unaccustomed as Adam before his curse,
And his knowledge.

I need to escape, from something.
To romance, and romanticize grit,
To learn the mudras of your hands
Just...
Breathe somewhere wide.

Then rest
To think and write
If these devises tire my arms.
V Day  
David Pendleton  
Photoshop