

The Avenue

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Literary Works from
Saint Joseph's University
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Fiction

Bebe and Jojo

Andrew Westveer

1.

Benito Bernal Diaz de Velasco was always a thirsty child. From his first day in the world, he drained every drop of *la leche* from his mother's breasts. Later he would steal the bottles of *refrescos* from his brothers who left them behind to fight each other and be the first to taste the sweet kisses of Maria Begonia. The most satisfying answer to his thirst, however, revealed itself when Benito tasted the drops of whiskey at the bottom of his *abuelo's* heavy crystal glasses in the dark library with smooth Moroccan tiles and blood-colored velvet drapes with their backs turned against the blinding afternoon sun. The very glasses, as told over and again by his *abuelo*, that were a gift from *El Generalísimo* himself for years of devoted service and loyalty to the *Falange*.

Abuelo's wife of fifty-three years was not a woman to overlook a single detail of life under the roof of *la casa* on Avenida Juarez, and certainly not one to indulge her husband's fantasies or her grandson's thirst for whiskey. While the others were napping or shopping or praying or chasing after Maria Begonia's kisses, Evangelina had her eyes on Benito. She was the one who every morning brought him *agua fresca* with crushed leaves from the aloe plants that grew outside the kitchen. She was the one who gave him the nickname "Bebe". Everyone thought this was for the initials of his name, or because Benito was the last-born child, but in fact was chosen because of the boy's unquenchable thirst. And it was Evangelina who forged the signature of Benito's mother on the application that got him accepted into the exchange program at St. Joseph's Preparatory School.

On the flight to Philadelphia, Benito drank four coffees, nine cans of cranapple juice and one glass of water with the crushed aloe leaf that his *abuela* had carefully wrapped and placed in his suitcase.

2.

Bebe pushed through the swarming students and walked right up to the blond boy in the navy blue cardigan leaning up against his locker before third period. Joseph Wright Yaedon looked up, startled, and leaned farther back. His copy of *Leaves of Grass* trembled and slid from his hand. Bebe, suddenly overcome with thirst, ran off to find a drinking fountain.

They spent every day together as fall semester turned to spring. Spring to summer. Freshmen to sophomore. High school to university. Joseph discovered a freedom he couldn't put into words. He laughed and cried, danced and skinny dipped and couldn't imagine a day without Bebe. Bebe was the first to call him Jojo. The first good reason to skip class. His first kiss. First bump. First hangover. First time he stayed up all night, passing the bottle of Amaretto to Bebe as they stumbled down the wet streets of Amsterdam and then, as the rain fell heavy, huddled inside a phone booth outside Station Central until the trains started up again. When Bebe asked Jojo to marry him, it was the first time Jojo cried from happiness. Bebe was always there. And always first.

3.

Bebe wanted to meet at the downstairs bar at Tavern on Camac. Jojo suggested the orange plaid couch in the poetry section of Giovanni's Room. They settled on a bench in Washington Square. Bebe arrived first. His hand shook a little when he touched the flask to his lips. He hadn't seen Jojo in three-and-a-half months and told himself it was just nerves.

Jojo stood for what seemed an eternity, as Bebe would later recall, and when he finally sat down, it was at the far boundary of the bench, out of reach of Bebe's touch. A tattered *Leaves of Grass* in his hands.

Bebe was the first to speak. "I can't live one more day without you, Jojo."

"I'm tired, Bebe. I have to write my stories. And I can't, with you around."

"Let me come back home," Bebe said. "I miss your stories. We can open a bottle of that amazing Rioja we both love. Just one bottle. I promise."

Jojo stood and held out his hand. "Just for tonight. And then you have to leave."

One and Only Love

Hannah Hershberger

To remember someone from a past experience is difficult and a skill that many people don't possess. There are always certain people that can remember someone's full name, hair style and eye color from one interaction with them. Those people may have a better memory than others, but they also pay attention to the people around them. They care to notice eye color, they are courteous enough to admire a new hairstyle, and they ensure that they remember a full name. These people take small interactions seriously and think deeper about minor conversations. Luke is one of those people and his memory of his first love includes every fine detail.

Luke was on his third Blue Moon when he noticed a familiar face standing on the other end of the bar countertop. He had only seen this face in person when he was younger, but Facebook lends a hand in keeping people updated. She was laughing at something funny one of her friends had said and was slowly sipping on what was probably a vodka tonic.

The clear liquid in the shallow glass and a lime drowning inside helped Luke come to this conclusion. A dark pink sweater hugged her naturally small frame and tight blue jeans, that frayed at the heels, accentuated her short stature. Her hair was in its natural state of curls, the same way she wore it when she was younger, and pink lip gloss glazed her mouth. As she went to take another sip of her drink, Luke noticed a large diamond engagement ring that looked out of place on her skinny fingers. He had always pictured her wearing a small, oval-cut diamond, with a solid silver band; something that wouldn't take away from her delicate hands and polished fingers. Luke wondered how he differed from the man who was occupying her time and if she truly loved him, or loved the obvious money that came with marrying him. He had seen pictures online from their engagement, but never saw the ring until tonight. They got engaged on Christmas, surrounded by their family and friends in New York. He was a recently divorced lawyer and popped the question within a few months of their relationship declaration on social media. The ring was large, too large to be genuine.

Luke remembered her from middle school. They weren't friends, but they worked on a science project once and he sat behind her in Seventh grade English. He remembers her burnt red hair that curled at the ends. She liked to twiddle with the bright strands while their teacher lectured about the eyes in *The Great Gatsby* and death in *The Outsiders*. Luke noticed her on the first day of sixth grade. She was new to the town and had to give a small speech to Luke's math class. The basics: her full name, where she was from, favorite color, sports that she played. She didn't talk much, especially in class. When she was called on, she sounded breathy and winded, despite her many years as a wing on the girl's field hockey team. Luke went to a few of her games each season, sat in the corner of the crooked metal stands and silently rooted for her to score. She never scored when he came to her games, but the team always won.

Luke never had an actual conversation with her, except when they exchanged IM's about the science project and that one time he asked her to dance at the Friday night shy dance. Luke's mother had convinced him to go despite his hatred for school social events. He didn't argue with his

mother because he remembered that the girl he loved, loved to dance. Luke and his friends would rather sit at home playing Nintendo than dance to Britney Spears' latest pop hit, but tonight, Luke was determined to get out on the dance floor.

Luke walked into the middle school gymnasium and headed straight for the bleachers. Without his friends beside him, he immediately felt awkward and needed to sit down and out of sight from his fellow classmates. Looking around, Luke noticed the popular kids dancing in a huddled circle and jumping around to the offbeat. Girls were looking around the circle, hoping that a slow song would come on and that one of their male peers would wrap their small arms around them. Luke felt sad when he watched the boys disperse to their picks, leaving a few of the girls heartbroken and left to dance with themselves.

When the slow song started, Luke took another long look around the large room. That is when he saw her standing by the snack table with two of her closest friends. He was shocked that someone that beautiful didn't get asked to dance. Her hair was doubled Dutch braided with a few

loose strands that brushed her face. She wore a light pink dress with little white sneakers. She wore these white sneakers almost every day, and yet, they didn't look dirty. The crisp white shoes complimented her fair skin that was seen below the trim of her short dress to her bony ankles. She turned away from the snack table and began watching her fellow classmates sway along to the slow tempo of a hit radio song. This is the moment Luke's hidden confidence made an appearance.

Luke eagerly stood up from the unstable bleachers and walked over to her. He tapped her slender shoulder with more force than anticipated. She turned around and smiled a genuine smile. The same smile she gives to her younger sister when she sees her in the hallway at school, the one that she gives when her teammate scores a goal, the same one she gives to Jimmy Evans when he buys her a cookie at lunch. Luke managed to blurt out "want to dance?" despite being the most nervous he had ever been. The confidence he found on the bleachers had slowly dissipated the moment he stepped within three feet of her.

She smiled at him and answered “yes.” They danced to James Blunt’s *You’re Beautiful*, right in line with a few of their classmates. Jimmy Evans stood to Luke’s right side but she didn’t look at him once. Luke’s hands trembled as he gently gripped her waist tighter during the bridge of the song. Luke can still remember the silky feeling of her long red hair that tickled his hands as they danced and the way her hips felt as he gripped them. Her green eyes were hazy under the black eyeliner over her lids and her lips were too close to not be kissed. He almost put his mouth on hers but James Blunt’s soulful serenade ended before a kiss could start. Luke immediately let go, ran his hands through his straight brown hair, waved at her and walked away. Embarrassed and afraid of what to do next, Luke stood near the exit doors and called his mom for a ride home. That was the last time he asked her to dance and the last time they spoke to one another.

Those three minutes were memorable to Luke, but he knew that the short time they spent in each other’s arms meant nothing to her. At school the next week, Luke was just the guy who sat behind her in English and occasionally

asked her for science notes over IM. As soon as high school began, Jimmy Evans asked her to dance at the Halloween Bash and they dated until graduation. Luke hoped that they would bump into each other during the summer before college so he could ask if she wanted to go see a movie sometime, but they never did. He did add her on Facebook, which was the closest he was going to get to being in her life.

Luke’s middle school flashback ended and he was back to sitting on the uncomfortable bar stool at his favorite drinking hole. Luke’s eyes wondered until he spotted her again, still chatting with her friends and smiling at something they were saying. He hated that he was watching her from afar instead of sitting next to her with their hands intertwined. The ring on her finger should be one that Luke picked out and slipped on during the end of a proposal. The feelings he had for his middle school crush have yet to cease. His lack of confidence during that middle school dance interrupted what could have been their love story, or at the very least, a friendship. He took notice of her when no one else did, and yet, Luke didn’t let her return the caring gesture. He didn’t let her know him. He stayed quiet and was

too embarrassed to talk to her again. He distanced himself from the one person he cared the most about. An observant boy with a love for a girl who didn't get the chance to love him back.

A thought crossed his mind to go over to her, reintroduce himself, make a stupid joke about dancing with his dream girl at a middle school dance, and offer to buy her a drink. But, he didn't. He was afraid she wouldn't recognize him or want to talk to him. Luke remembers people; people don't remember Luke. Instead, he told the bartender to put their bill on his tab, signed the check and walked out right as she looked his way. She was smiling one of her genuine smiles and that was all that Luke needed to see.

An Expert from Quicksand Kids

Teresa Tellekamp

This summer already feels like a story I've written before.

I bite into my bacon egg and cheese sandwich and flip to the first blank page of my new journal. The spring-loaded ink cartridge clicks against the barrel of the pen as I let the first sentence run blue on the yellow paper.

The tourists are back. Lydia and Beth are starting to panic.

The line at the Country Store has already reached the end of the candy counter. Dads in Ray Bans and pink shorts herd their blonde babies along, passing lemon bars and coconut pies and sea-salt chocolate chip cookies. "No, you can't have it," is the parents' anthem.

"The Skittles? Do you see all those crazy colors?" One mother asks her son, who was stabbing the glass counter with his chubby finger. "Those colors will get on your insides and give you diseases."

Twinkle bulbs drape along beams and run from the top of the screen door to the register.

Lydia's curly white hair catches the pale glow as she scuttles back and forth behind the counter to take orders and dole out pastries. Her daughter, Beth, confronts two boys who were sword fighting with fistfuls of red, plastic coffee stirrers. Beth inhales and smoothes her apron over her hips.

"I won't say it again. Those are *not* toys," Beth says. The boys' mother blushes and yanks them back by their wrists. One brother's baseball cap, two sizes too big for his head, flops sideways in front of his eyes. He stumbles behind his mother and brother out of the Country Store.

The Tourists swarm Long Island's shady shores during the Fourth of July weekend. This weekend, especially, it's easy to pick them apart from The Locals.

The Locals don't bump into each other as they press toward the front of the line. They don't wave their hands at Lydia and Beth.

The Locals chat quietly in the corner about the best restaurants to get fresh oysters and poetry on the Long Island Sound. The Locals also know Lydia and Beth have an eat-before-you-pay system.

That's one easy way to fish out The Tourists; they'll hover

over the register with their wads of bills, waiting for someone to "just ring me up."

"You'll pay when you're finished, dear," says Lydia. She scribbles on her notepad and points her pencil at the next customer.

Mom, Dad, and I have spent nearly every weekend together in the East Meadow house since I was old enough to walk. It's a one-hour straight shot to the end of the Long Island Expressway, then another forty minutes past corn fields, vineyards, and barns. The first time I drove down alone, my mom's only direction was, "Follow your nose 'til you hit the water."

Now, Lydia and Beth know our orders by heart. Their warm recognition is a badge of pride.

"Maisy! One bagel sandwich for your old man, and an oatmeal-raisin cookie for your mother," Lydia calls out to me, waving a brown paper bag over the Tourists' heads. I smile at her and bring the bag back to the long bench by the door. Black-and-white kindergarten class photos, Domino Sugar boxes, and rifles hang along the green walls. I finish my sandwich, crumple the foil into a little, silver ball, and read sticky note advertisements posted to a beam.

Garage sale! 15 Merrivale Lane, Sunday from 8 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Pick fresh strawberries at Mag's Farm.

Looking for a chess partner. Call 631-233-7457.

Two old men share the green bench next to mine. I can tell by the way they nod their shiny, sun-speckled heads and don't make eye contact that their conversation must be very important. I set the tip of my pen against the next empty line on the page, and listen.

"How's Kate?"

"Doing her best. You know how it goes."

"Yeah. Poor thing. He's a real son-of-a-bitch. Still can't fathom it."

"Mm."

That must be Kate Fields' dad and one of his buddies. Kate's got two little kids with "B" names, like Brandon and Bryce, or Bruce and Bryan. Her husband had an affair and she found out after answering his phone while he was playing basketball in the driveway with the kids. At least that's what the neighbors are saying. Plus, I haven't seen his silver Porsche in the driveway for weeks.

Of course, these are the things we do not discuss. Not out loud, anyway.

Definitely not in print. But my dream is to win a Pulitzer someday, so I have to start building up my portfolio. And the stuff I cover in the Soaring Falcon, our school paper, isn't nearly as interesting as the gossip around East Meadow.

Back home, Mom frowns when I place my journal in my bicycle basket before pedaling into town. I drop her oatmeal-raisin cookie on the counter as a peace treaty.

"No eavesdropping, Maisy-Daisy," she says from the sofa. "Write about your own friends' drama. Leave mine out of it."

"Don't worry, Mom. The Russian spies I report to are off this weekend."

Dad clears his throat from the kitchen sink. He doesn't think my Russia jokes are funny.

"Maisy-Daisy." He says my name like a warning.

I tie my hair high above my neck and push through our front door. They call me Maisy-Daisy when they want to put me in my place and remind me that I am the child and they are the parents and, therefore, are the ones who always know best.

I was born jaundiced with a shock of white-blond hair. The nurse told Mom I looked like a little daisy, my round, yellow face framed with white. In the hospital, Mom says she whispered, “my daisy, my daisy,” over and over again until “my daisy” became “Maisy.” The name stuck and stayed, much to the disappointment of the old Italian aunts and uncles on Mom’s side of the family. They were hoping for a name that could have been in a Frank Sinatra ballad, like Maria, Valentina, Gianna, or Julia. Something that ends with a real vowel. Not a sometimes-vowel.

At the real house, the old Italians like to drop in unannounced with way too much food for three people and far too many questions about when I’ll get a “nice, good-a-lookin’ boyfrien’.” We don’t even have a place to hide from them at the real house, since we barely know the neighbors.

But the house out east is our sanctuary. We leave our screen doors open when Mom makes baked ziti; the neighbors always come. We feed tall, orange flames in the fire pit out back. The neighbors see the smoke from down the street and arrive with wine glasses and coffee cakes. We exchange bottles of Long Island wine for vintage cast iron skillets salvaged from garage sales.

We leave our chairs in the same spot on the beach all summer long, and every autumn, we make the long, silent procession from the dunes to the garage where the chairs house mothballs and spiders until May.

On my bike, I pass the lavender field, the old fire station, the farm stands, and the short, white churches, until the trees and sod farms part like curtains, revealing an overpass with glittering blue water on both sides. I pedal and breathe deep: the bay to my left, the sound to my right, and hot, black tar beneath my tires.

Look at a map of Long Island. The ends fan out like a fish’s tail. We’re at the tip of the tail. It’s easy to imagine standing at the edge and leaping off.

In town, I run into the twins, Chelsea and Nicole.

“Why don’t you spend more time with the twins?” Mom always asks. “Those girls are going places, someday, let me tell you.”

Maybe, I want to say, but for now, those places are the basements and backyards of guys on the East Meadow lacrosse team, surrounded by tin kegs, loud, confident girls, and sticky ping-pong tables.

The three of us were closer in middle school, when it was cool to throw pretend-concerts in front of the twins' bedroom mirror. They always sang louder than me, so I'd kneel on the carpet and pretend to be the paparazzi, snapping photos through my fingers. I also pretended to enjoy that role just as much as my "stage time" (news flash, I didn't). But when Nathan Cross broke my heart in eighth grade, the twins were the ones who linked arms with me after ninth period and escorted me down the hallway so I wouldn't have to walk past his locker alone.

Sometimes the twins invite me out for breakfast on the veranda or afternoon shopping trips to the boutiques and thrift shops along the bay, but I haven't been graced with an invitation to one of their parties yet, which is fine. I don't feel like I'm missing out, I guess. What I do miss, though, is what we used to have. Even if they've always been snobs, they were *my* snobs.

Today, they're sipping iced lattes outside Pete's Cafe, staring at their cellphones. When I call out to them, my voice cracks. They look up, and their wavy, chestnut hair tumbles down their shoulders.

"May!" chirps Nicole. She rises from her chair, takes my both of arms in her manicured hands, and gives me an air-cheek-kiss. "What were you up to last night? Your Instagram post was so cute!"

It was a bedroom-mirror selfie before my date with Jake, the guy who shuttles the ferry back and forth between Fire Island and Greenport. It's one of the only photos of me on my profile.

The rest of the photos show some of my favorite things—the lavender field in my neighborhood, sand dollars in the dunes, Otis, our French bulldog—but only a handful of people liked those posts. The selfie, on the other hand, was a personal record-breaker.

I hate to admit that I care, but I do, just a little.

The selfie shows me grinning in my too-tight jeans and a sheer, champagne blouse that's not practical enough to wear more than once. Before posting that photo, I took at least fifteen others until my jaws were too sore to fake a natural grin. I also left out the fine print of the night in my caption, which would have read that Jake, like a fish on the boardwalk, was a flop.

I smile at the twins and check the post on my phone.
227 likes. Do I know that many people?

Nicole's comment is first: *Wow! Skinny-Minnie!!!*

Next up, Chelsea's: *Ugh, legs for days! Can you get fat
& ugly, plz??*

I hate when the twins say things like that. They're
Vogue-model-worthy. Two hourglass girls with dark blue eyes
and straight, laser-white teeth set in strong, square jaws. I
close out of the Instagram app, tuck my phone into the waist
band of my track shorts, and cross my arms over my flat
chest.

"I went out with Jake."

"Hot-ferry-Jake?" Chelsea asks.

"He's not. That hot, I mean. But yeah, ferry-Jake. I
probably won't see him again."

If I'm being perfectly honest, I went out with Jake
because I was bored. I'm one of the fastest sprinters on my
school's track team, but my mind moves even faster than my
feet. And as much as I love it out here in East Meadow,
everyone is just so...*slow*. Laid back. Like, stuck on perpetual
vacation-mode. It sounds nice, but trust me, that vibe gets
old.

It's why I practically jumped five feet in the air when Jake
asked me out while I was sitting on the boardwalk and
transcribing other peoples' conversations in my journal. I was
desperate to start having interesting conversations of my
own.

But there wasn't much substance beneath Jake's tan
skin and tight, hard muscles. He wasn't interested in having
conversations. He showed up twenty minutes late to the
Oyster Shack, swaying back and forth in his boat shoes like a
buoy.

"Are you drunk?" I asked him.

His massive arms swallowed me just as I was hit with
a wave of hot vodka breath.

"Stacy, what kind of guy d'you think I am?" he said.

"It's Maisy."

"Huh?"

"Maisy. My name is Maisy, not Stacy," I said.

"Aw shit, you're mad. Don't be mad. It's all good. We're
good. Let's go eat."

He kept, at a minimum, one hand on my waist at all times and breathed his hot vodka breath all over my neck while I waited for the waiter to rescue me and take our orders. But it was all downhill once our food arrived. I watched Jake throw back nine or ten oysters before his cheeks turned green. He inhaled sharply, stumbled out of his chair, and fell through the front door of the restaurant, heaving chunks of oyster onto the dock outside the restaurant and into the bay below.

How ironic. Back from whence they came.

He didn't bother returning to our table. And I didn't follow him out. I anchored myself in my seat and started counting loose threads in the tablecloth.

"*Diablo*, your boyfriend made a mess," said the bus boy. I buried my face in my hands and shook my head.

"He's not my boyfriend. But I'm so sorry."

The bus boy chuckled and set his plastic tub down on an empty table. When I peeked at him through my fingers, I noticed his eyes first—warm and black. I lowered my hands. The curls in his black hair reminded me of tiny tidal waves, frozen at their peaks. He had dimples, too, but not your average pinpoint dimples. More like the kind you'd trip over.

"Don't apologize," he said. "It ain't my restaurant. And believe it or not, this won't be my first time rinsing puke off that dock."

I smiled and lowered my hands. "Sounds like you're in the wrong business."

"Don't I know it."

The manager, Jerry O'Neill, stepped out from behind the bar. The bus boy picked up his plastic tub. Jerry walked to my table and patted my shoulder with one of his large, fat hands. I turned my head and smelled peppermint from one of his lozenges—if you smell peppermint or hear candy clicking against teeth, you know Jerry's nearby.

"Tough night, huh, kid?"

Everyone in town knows Jerry. He's one of the East Meadow originals. His grandparents owned the Oyster Shack and cottage on the bay before he did. Every year, right before the holidays, Jerry dresses up in a Santa suit, sits on the dock outside the restaurant, and hands out fish-shaped chocolates to the kids.

I was—rather, *am*—one of those kids. At seventeen, I still wait in line for a handful of chocolates. It's a joke Jerry and I have.

When I was twelve, he told me that someday I'd be too cool to wait in line to see Santa. I told him I would not. He said I would, too. We made a bet and shook on it: each year I check in with Santa, he prints one of my short stories on their specials menus. I've got a five-year streak, and I don't intend on breaking it anytime soon.

Jerry clicked the lozenge between his molars and glanced over the top of my head at the bus boy.

"Robin, mind grabbing the hose from out back?"

The bus boy smiled at me one last time before he disappeared behind a set of double doors.

"Don't worry about the check, Maisy," said Jerry.

"Oh no, really, I don't mind..."

"Kid, you didn't touch your food."

My plate was piled high with shiny oyster shells. The unlucky ones, the ones that never made it back home to the bay via Jake's esophagus.

"It's called being chivalrous," said Jerry. "A foreign concept to your generation, I'm sure."

I shrugged and raised my white napkin in surrender as Jerry snatched the bill. It's not about chivalry, but there's no point in convincing Jerry that I wasn't planning on letting Jake pay for my meal, anyway. I don't like feeling bought, especially not from guys like Jake who always seem to expect something in return.

"Thanks, Robin." I passed the bus boy on my way out. He was standing on the dock over a smooth, dark puddle.

"That's not my name," he called out after me. I stopped and spun back around.

"It's not? I'm sorry, I thought I heard Jerry in there..."

"I mean, that's not how you say my name. It's *Robín*."

When he said his name, the "r" rolled like beads under the lid of a drum, and the "b" slid into a "v."

Roe-veen.

"You can call me Row, if you'd like."

"Row? Like a boat?"

He laughed and shook his curly head.

"Sure, like that. Maisy, right?"

He wiped his hand on his trousers before extending it. His palm was rough and warm.

"Right. See you around, Row."

"I hope so, Maisy."

I was still smiling when I stepped off the dock. But before I turned the corner onto the pavement in the parking lot behind the restaurant, I heard Jerry bark at Row, who was still holding the hose. Something about not bothering guests, and learning his place.

Did Jerry really say that? Was he joking?

My stomach flipped. I almost went back. But then I remembered Mom's warning about spying on her friends.

Jerry is one of them. He's one of mine, too.

I hugged myself as I walked away, feeling as dirty and cold as the cigarette fossils scattered across the parking lot.

Back home, I dug through my underwear drawer until I found my journal. I flipped to a blank page, picked up a pen, and scribbled *July 3, Oyster Shack, Jerry O'Neill, 'You better learn your place.'* I wrote Row's name at the top of the page and circled it three times, then initialed the bottom right corner of the page. Mom taught me to sign and date everything important. It makes it harder for people to turn around and call you a liar once you've captured the full story.

"Wow, what a let-down, Maisy," says Nicole.

I tell the twins about the vodka breath and the oyster vomit, and leave out the rest.

Smoke and Mirrors

Julia M. Snyder

She was going to bite it. The wobble in her knees and the drink in her hands were cheap foreshadowing. Anyone who had ever seen a concert could see it coming; anyone who had ever worked any kind of show could probably predict the time of the impact within ten minutes of the actual bone-fracturing crash.

The marble steps in the grand hall of the Hansel Theatre pose the biggest challenge to guests and concertgoers of all ages, races, genders and genre-preferences. A miracle of design, the sweeping architectural statements were so glorious that it distracted from the ordeal of actually climbing all 63 steps to the Hansel's cheap seats. Glittering chandeliers, original to the 75-year-old theatre, bathed the speckled marble in dim light. It wasn't often that guests actually toppled down the steps, but the wear of thousands of feet had made the edges of each step smooth and treacherous.

Nothing makes time pass faster than a kind-hearted bet. To make the seven-hour time blocks of standing around more entertaining, the guest services and security team throws together a pool to see how long it takes some unlucky soul to stumble or spill a drink over the railing on to some poor mother or drunk bastard below.

"I'm feeling particularly lucky tonight," Noah surprised the staff as he punched his employee ID into the time clock. "I'm throwing \$100 down on a fall during hour two. Just you wait."

There had been some jeers from the team, but no one called bullshit. As far as supervisors go, Noah was ideal; tall, hot and serious about his job, he wasn't one to bet often. It's better practice to bet on spilled drinks later in the night — the drunker the crowds, the better your odds — but if Noah had \$100 to throw into the pocket of whoever won that night, it was his wallet.

I shifted my weight from my right leg into my left and leaned against the doorframe where I had been posted. As the only member of the event staff who was not liable to wander off to bum a few cigs, I was the ideal candidate to babysit the smoking pit. Which was fine with me. If I tilted my head to

the left against the door, I could watch Noah, who was watching the girl on the stairs. He was tensed for the impact against the bar, one hand hovering over his walkie, with a blonde bartender chattering into his ear.

The bambi on the steps wasn't dressed for a theatrical metal show. She looked like she had showered recently and spent time in sunlight, to start. The heels of her patent leather loafers scraped against the edge of each step as if they were pleading with the feet inside them to stand still, stop this precarious venture.

Something akin to chainsaw noises escaped into the main hall as someone opened a door into the orchestra. Other than the occasional jeer of laughter from the chimneys on the patio, the main hall was still and silent. Noah hadn't moved; I found myself staring at his pale arms.

"You've got to leave that inside, buddy."

The middle-aged man's grunting as he chugged his warm beer was louder than the crowd. A cigarette fell from its perch behind his ear, but the man didn't notice that he was one stick shorter as he stepped past me to the patio.

When I looked back at Noah, he was looking at me. His hands had folded into the crooks of his elbows as he pulled

his shoulders up to his ears. *I dunno, man.* Just a simple shrug, not even a real smile. But he was looking back at me, and maybe that meant something.

The ballerina on the staircase had made it to the middle landing and was checking her phone. Her drink was forgotten on an out-of-reach stair. I watched a run of mascara streak down her nose.

I moved my hand to my walkie to call for a medic — obviously she was too drunk to let her leave the venue alone — when a cough rattled around the dome of the ceiling. Noah's shoulders had squared and his pale arms had settled back to his sides. He was still looking at me, but not in a way I'd be dreaming about. No longer casual, he shook his head once as a firm rejection of my action. As my supervisor, he really had the final say. I froze and watched as the clock ticked down the seconds till it was officially 7 p.m. Noah had an entire hour to reap his reward.

I looked away from our Bambi and tried to imagine that I wasn't standing in a drafty venue with five hours left in my shift.

"Sloane, can you come cover the center mezz aisle for Dave?" The walkie crackled to life in my ear, making me

jump almost completely out of the venue door. Noah was no longer looking at me as I walked away, leaving him in charge of the patio.

The show wasn't as horrible as I had thought — although I wouldn't call the noises richotechting from the stage music, the expansive gothic set designs made the chaos feel nearly reverent. I directed two more drunk patrons to the bathrooms and lost myself in the lighting design while Dave regained control of his bladder. His appreciative comments were lost in a wave of cheering, and before he could repeat them I slipped under the railing and started down the stairs.

Noah was missing from the empty hall when I returned. I grabbed a coke from the bartender and took my time settling my feet into the worn spots by the door to the smoker's patio.

"Can't take it with you, dude."

Another angry old guy, another chugged beer. But this one didn't stay out long enough to smoke.

"What happened out there?" I wasn't sure he was talking to me, but he waved a hand in my face to get my attention.

I ducked my head out of the door, ready to call the cleaning crew to come throw sand on whatever was left on the cement. It took me a second to focus beyond the patio.

The stretcher was not quite loaded into the ambulance. The scuffed bottoms of loafers stuck out from the blanket that had been strapped over the person going for a ride. I stepped out onto the patio myself, and bumped into the back of another staff shirt.

Noah stood to the side with his hand hovering over his walkie, looking just past the ambulance.

Vantage

Shyheim Williams

We were always interested in the sky. While he noticed the directions that planes, jets and hot air balloons were headed; I adored the patterns that eagles, hawks and falcons made in flight. That's how we met, you know. I was returning from a camp in Iowa that allowed me study birds up close, he was returning from Louisiana where he was interviewed by the director of LSU's aeronautics program. We met in the line for hot tea and scones near Terminal C12. He asked if tea helped me sleep on the plane. I responded, "chamomile," his favorite, too. We exchanged numbers. He took me to heights I had never known. He asked questions about me. He wanted to know about me. I'm only 18 years old, what do I know about me? And at that moment he promised to spend his life answering the questions for himself. 12 years. I love him assiduously for 12 years, and he, me.

We went from high school graduation, to college graduation, to marriage, a honeymoon in Bali and a babymoon in Denmark.

I wanted to watch the birds fly, he wanted to go to the nearest airport and watch the action of the landing strip while we drank wine and laughed at the reliability and convenience of us.

You see, you were both interested in the sky. After every argument, we would find ourselves lost in the night and in that darkness the steadfastness of our love was bound to the sky, shining brighter than my favorite star. This is where we belong.

On our fourth anniversary, he asked me questions about us. He wanted to know where we've been, where we are and where we are going. He wanted to affirm that chamomile was still my favorite tea to drink before boarding a plane and if I noticed the robin which was sitting just out of my sight. I told him I didn't and robins don't interest me because they don't remind me of you, he blushed. I should tell him now. I don't know how to say it. I....I'm pregnant. In that moment, I realized that I was having a child by a man I didn't even know. Four years all about me.

Nonetheless, he rejoiced. We cried. He because he will have the chance to be the father his wasn't, me because I didn't know how to tell him I didn't want to keep it.

On our fifth anniversary, I decided to start keeping journals. And here on our eighth, I look back at the previous and wonder how we made it. Me and him. That's all there was. He's always at home now but not, you know? I asked him about us. I wanted to know what he was thinking? Why did he quit his job? When did he stop loving me? Or did he? Did his love change? Why won't he talk to me? Does he know? No... he couldn't. I went to the alleys behind Main Street. The alleys where secrets are buried. Only I and the bearings of my soul now could unearth this secret. Nonetheless, I noticed a change in him. He never seemed to want to go to the airport anymore, and I never get the chance to look at the birds in our front yard. They tend to gather in front of her place and I can't bear to even glance in her direction.

On our twelfth anniversary, he got up that morning and made breakfast. He never cooked but we ate. And we talked. We talked about where we've been, where we are and where we could've been. We talked about her, well I did. What she could've been. What we should've named her.

Do you think that would've made a difference? He just drank his orange juice and played with his eggs. He threw me a bag and told me to get dressed, we're going somewhere. I get dressed and walk to the car. He doesn't bring anything. I notice the studio apartments and factories turn to medians and lakes to trees and mountains. He tells me to wait in the car and find the map he has in the bag. After he leaves the car I notice he leaves his phone and decide if I should try to stop him or just find the map and wait. I decide on the former, grabbing my water bottle and rushing after him.

I never saw a sky so blue, or grass so green, or a man so free as I saw when he dived off the cliff. I ran to peer over the ledge but noticed my journal. He knew. Returning to the cliff, I asked the sky where have we been? How did we get here? Where do we go?

And it answered; "Together... we can finally fly."

Antediluvian

Thomas Lederer

The wings of Harriet's nostrils flared with the sudden increase of chilling wind; by scent it was going to rain. It reminded her to look back again at Millie, struggling through the bramble and thicket, fearful her friend wasn't keeping pace. It was rare for the headmistress to give the Year Fives a half day, with only a small window between being let out from school and when Harriet's mom expected her home. The inevitable rain was threatening her schedule. "Honestly, Millie, you're taking forever!" Harriet wrapped each finger of one hand around a low hanging branch, feeling the cool tickle of damp moss between their cracks. She used the branch to pull herself onto a formidable rock in the middle of Black Horse Creek, giving her a position to lord over her friend.

"You're absolutely mad sometimes, Harry. I swear!" Millie was preoccupied with tendrils of thorns ensnaring her jumper.

"You see that tree that's fallen down over there? That's the farthest Billy Bailor has ever claimed to have reached. We've already beaten his record."

"So why can't we just stop now?" Millie finally disengaged

herself, but lurched forward and found one loafer deep in the frigid Black Horse, water above the ankle. She shrieked.

Harriet glanced to the woods around. Her sharp blue eyes trapped a restless juvenile energy, turning any statement or observation – no matter the intention – into a demanding question, burning with the fervor of curiosity.

The Black Horse emptied into a reservoir behind their school. That was boring enough. Its source, however, no student had ever seen, and the forest was thick and dark. Harriet denied these latent fears, but the condensing grey clouds and low, distant rumble of thunder helped fan them. The creek floods fast.

Another splash from Millie as she fell refocused Harriet's attention, this time annoyed. If Harriet could slip deftly through the rocks and the trees, why couldn't she?

"This is looney! I quit!" Millie pulled an arm from the Black Horse and straightened up.

"Quit? You can't quit!" Harriet's head jerked, her sable bangs spilling over her eyes.

"Says you I can't! And what's the point anyways?"

"Because we can't...because we can't..." Harriet thrust her

arm and frantically pointed behind herself upstream. "Stop? We've got to keep going! We might almost be there!"

"So? Harry, it's going to rain and I don't want to be stuck in the creek when it does."

The two girls glared at each other. The atmosphere was charged and Harriet could feel the hairs prickle on her lithe arms in the cold air, but she was too young to know whether it was from emotion or storm.

"So? No one's ever...Millie! We have to keep going!"

But Millie wasn't moved. Harriet turned, feet unsteady across the slippery rocks. She would do it; she would be the first student to reach the source of the Black Horse. Harriet could hear Millie trudge back towards school, but she would be the first.

The banks were only shrinking the farther upstream she traveled, the Black Horse thinning as it cut a deep gully into the pliable and spongy earth of the forest floor. The covert of trees and bushes became only the more impregnable the deeper into the forest she plunged. Harriet had none of the concern of Millie as the burs and thorns snagged and tore at her thick trousers, wool jumper, hair to her earlobes.

Hemmed in by steep sides, she took to the rocks in the creek, rubber soles grasping miserably at moss covered, uneven surfaces. It took the soft patter of the leaves springing with their own life for Harriet to pause for a moment. The rain had started.

Poetry

Companion Piece to Spilling Your Guts

Josh Dale

I took a smoke break drive around the block
and ended up in Flemington, NJ
spilt my guts for you at the witching hour
because why not cross borders
to take the edge off
I saw six deer and only one tried
to kill itself on my watch
burned through at least three CD's
of bands I know quite well
maybe you would too if you were here
Their main thoroughfare was underwhelming
because the town was already asleep
the occasionally porch light guided me
like a luminous checkpoint
the clouds glowed like war
but the roundabout was on steroids
if you were into racing and black & mild's
I'd hold my guts and Wawa hoagie down
It's funny how quickly

you travel forty miles
when you don't have a destination
or the gas needle falls asleep
the fact Pennsylvania charges it's son
a dollar to return home is a scam
but that's where you are
and I've finished cleaning up my mess

Goldfish Girl

Shekinah Davis

They're watching you
Pinning you to your innocence
From girlhood, you cannot lose it
They'll say they told you so
That they knew it all along
They'll mock you
They won't feed you
They'll post it on their feed
Some subliminally,
But you'll know it's about you
In that small tank, no that
Small bowl you must
Stay, even if it stunts your
Growth, you must keep performing

Keep entertaining, remain

In that innocent bubble

Swimming in circles

With no corners to turn

If the glass cracks

They'll mask the hole

Your first and final warning

Before they spew their mockery

They'll call you wild

Or joke about how

They almost lost you

How the world almost got you

Secretly wanting to tarnish your name

When the glass shatters

They'll freak out,

They'll go mad

The little thing is growing!

The little thing has grown!

She's not little anymore!

They'll look for other

Mouths to pour in, to tell

About the bowl that burst

With added exaggeration.

You'll flop and flop

And flail about, gasping

For air, they'll watch

And they'll witness, never

Telling how they only

Approved of you in a

Small glass bowl

The Brave Man

Shaleia Rogers

Forward – Seems brave when read

Courageous and calm

A confident man.

Reminds me of the idea of an actualized person Nietzsche's,

“Man on the Mountaintop”

He is without fear because he knows himself Nothing can

hurt him Which scares others.

Backward –

He is afraid He is running away

A set of frightened eyes crying in the dark.

Green is a coward's color – envy, greed, jealousy

Wanting what others have

Instead of earning his own.

Creepy little thing cowering in the corner

Scared of the shadows

Waiting for the sun to come up.

Roses

Donna Weems

The roses have lost their smell.

Red was my mother's favorite.

Her smile, her gratitude.

Roses, Roses

Pink the innocence of youth.

Roses, Roses

White marking the end.

The faint hint of fragrance that lingers

down a hallway

over a crib

reminding me of the essence of spirits.

The roses have not lost their smell

it is I who forgot

meaningful beauty

of roses.

Fight

Kevin Pitts

Fight

I	II
Men's night make	Wrap my hands
A circle	Heart pounds
Pick a partner	In my ears
I go	Your eyes
First	Down

Known

Shaleia Rogers

The snow stopped. Paradise Juncture.

Here is my home, and here is the lake where he breathes as
the water freezes over for me.

Playful spirits blow on the flames of stars for brightness.

I am sure – my heart has found – the truth.

The young man inside of the old man

never hesitated to come bursting forth.

In the morning I'll take a trail

Covered with snow, tall trees happy

still, strong and dark green,

because they appreciate the secret.

I knew a bear once who found no joy in solitude.

So powerful in most ways, definitely, and so small in others.

Before my love came to me by the lake

I thought I had everything in solids touchable and real.

Welcoming all I have, I stayed long and earned my share.

Up on the hill, wind blows wild from the east swaying the
trees, while a fawn stares reflectively down at the lake.

It all moves fast, It's important to notice,

You will have what you need before the moon calls you back
and realize it all turned out to be what you desired.

Captivation

Hannah Hershberger

I stand in the middle of a sweat-soaked crowd,
rows of strangers filling the dimly lit room.

My feet hardly touch the ground
as I jump and perch on tip toes.

Rows away from the beaten-up stage
my anxious heart beats.
Lights go out, screams follow.
My lungs become sore from my personal shrieks.

The first chords of a too familiar song start strumming,
the crowd gets louder, my screams cracking.
He walks onto the stage,
hair neatly parted, voice tuned to perfection.
When the crowd settles, he starts singing.

A feeling of happiness, peace
surrounds me, fulfills me.
Everyone swaying and singing.
My eyes become wet,
music bringing me to a new place, a better place.

This, right now, is happiness.
The awestruck crowd,

connected by the single force on stage.

Jointly singing, together living.

Covered in sweat, my hair pulled back,

palms ache from clapping, voice hurts from screaming.

The song ends,

My smile lingers.

he starts to strum his second song, a grin on his face.

The crowd, his voice,

awestruck and captivated.

Doomsday (And Other Things That Startle)

Josh Dale

I was only a kid when Y2K came

and all those conspiracy tabloids

on Walmart end caps.

Is this real?

Of course not. These are meant to scare people,

God wouldn't do anything like that, right? Not since the great flood?

Of course not. Scientists say we will be alright.

That's what a fact is right?

Yes, pretty much.

Didn't help seeing the final scene of Armageddon

one day after school.

I don't think a 4th grader should comprehend

words of that gravitas

but I did and it only

made it worse.

Back then, both kids and adults were

worried on their own level.

I remember clearly taking refuge in

my grandmom's basement because

some faceless pundit said the

asteroid was on its way.

It didn't, and nothing did henceforth;
that fateful clock chimed
and returned to equilibrium.

Now, the tabloids are in our pockets
hardly fact, mostly nonsense
all day, every day.
I shouldn't have to explain, just
look at it all.

Dripping Home

Kevin Pitts

I'm dripping home in this
cup of coffee
from the great
machine
black and tall.

A light behind the orange switch
burns like intelligence
and tiered hot plates sizzle,
damning trailing droplets
to a vague vaporous exile
anything but black –
a single fret in the
parts-per-million
orchestra of
air.

But my cup is black
And although it tastes like old
saliva
The coffee warms my hands like
a fire
in the pause of a pearly afternoon
light.

Star Star

Donna Weems

Star Star

Reading the words to her

in a language unknown.

Middle name first name

Struggling to write with a balloon

on her arm.

Scar along her chest

flat and empty.

Star Star

Sharing a

scar on her chest.

Middle name first name

72 years

Star Star

Middle name first name

Bringing the message

by way of a dream

to Star Star

through first name middle name

A safe travel

73 years

Then two together

One apart from two

Four together

Star Star Star Star

Passenger Side

Julia M. Snyder

Dogs stick their heads
out of car windows
And I worry that their
Ignorance
Will lead to their
Demise.

But lately
I stick my head
out of car windows.
My chin rests
In the crook of my arm,
With eyes closed
To relish the
Vulnerability.

Proof