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The Avenue

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Literary Works from
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Fiction

The Air Phone

by Teresa Tellekamp

Mom bought the Air Phone last spring at a yard sale, a few months after Dad passed. Those days, she didn't leave her house much, and I was relieved to get her outside, so she could talk to other people, move her joints, and breathe fresh air.

I still don't know what drew her to the plastic laundry basket filled with junk at the end of the McCormick's driveway, but when she saw it, she stiffened like a scared cat. She pushed an alarm clock and pair of patent leather shoes aside and lifted a green rotary phone from the basket.

I placed my hand on her shoulder and watched as she turned the phone over in her hands. She held the receiver to her ear.

"What do you got there, Mom?" I said.

She looked up and handed me the receiver. The top layer of green paint was bumpy with dust.

Then, she smiled. I nearly cried right there, at the end of the McCormick's driveway. *A real smile.* It was like watching my kids take their first steps all over again.

"It's neat, Mom," I finally said before clicking the receiver back into place. "I'll find out how much they want for it."

"It's for you," she said.

"That's sweet, Mom, but I really don't need this."

"No, dear," she said. "The call's for you. It's Daddy."

When Dad had the stroke, Mom was in the kitchen on the phone with her brother. Dad was standing at the counter, eating cherries and spitting the pits out in a soup bowl. I can imagine the sound of the pits clinking against the glass, the same sound I'd hear every morning before school while I finished my homework at the kitchen table. I can imagine that clinking stopping, suddenly, and Mom turning around to find Dad belly-up on the tiles. She hung up the phone, helped him off the floor, and sat him in a chair. He started to speak, but the words came out like they had been through a blender. The right side of his body went limp, and his head drooped to the side.

She called me. I told her to call an ambulance.

In the McCormick's driveway, as she handed me the receiver of the green rotary phone and asked me to speak to my father, I felt the tight panic that must have gripped her chest the day Dad fell.

"Mom," I said, lowering my voice, "What do you mean?"
"Let's pay and go home," she said. "I think I left the oven on."

In Mom's house, there's an end table next to the front door where she likes to keep potted plants and pictures of my kids when they were babies. The photo of Dad at their fiftieth wedding anniversary party is at the center of the table. When we got back from the McCormick's yard sale, she placed the green rotary phone next to Dad's photo.

We made coffee and watered the plants around the house. She invited me to stay for dinner, and I told her maybe tomorrow, I needed to go home and get the kids ready for swimming lessons.

"He'll call again. Maybe you'd like to chat, next time?" she said as she hugged me goodbye.

"Mom, you're scaring me. Are you feeling okay?"

She laughed—God, I missed her laugh—and brushed her hands against her sweatpants.

"Don't worry, dear. I'm not going crazy. Come back tomorrow. Bring Whitney and Benjamin, okay?"

The next day, I brought the kids to Mom's house. We entered through the back door, so they could surprise her.

Whitney and Benjamin ran straight to the kitchen counter and stuck their hands in bowl of chips.

"Don't fill up on junk before dinner," I said.

I was about to call out to Mom when I heard her voice at the front of the house. I listened. She was talking about the kids.

"Can you believe Benny's in second grade? He looks like a jack-o-lantern with that gappy grin. I could just eat him up. And Whitney learned a whole song in Italian. *Non posso disparar*. She sang it for me last week. Ten years old and singing Italian arias!"

I followed her voice to the front door. She was holding the green rotary phone and cradling the receiver between her shoulder and head.

"Mom?"

She turned around and smiled.

"Would you like to talk to Daddy?" she said.

The tears came so quickly I forgot my kids were behind me. But they didn't notice. They were munching on chips and wiping crumbs from their cheeks.

"Cool phone!" Benjamin said. "Does it work?"

I watched Mom. My eyes read, *don't you dare*. She ignored me.

"Give it a try," she said. "Grandpa's on the phone."

If she's not already dying, I thought, I could kill her, myself.

"Ben, Grandma's just playing. It's make-believe," I said.

"Grandma's play make-believe?" Whitney asked.

My daughter, my fellow bullshit detective. I should've known better. I ignored her and turned back to Mom.

"You're their mother," Mom said, as if she needed my permission. "May I?"

I sucked my lips in and dipped my chin.

She handed Ben the phone.

"Go on, sweetie," she said. "Say hi to Grandpa."

He swallowed the wet wad of chips on his tongue.

"Hi, Grandpa?"

We all waited, and for a moment, even I expected to hear Dad's voice crackle through the earpiece.

"What do you hear?" Mom asked Ben.

"Whoosh, whoosh," Ben said. "Kind of like holding a shell to my ear at the beach."

"That's right," Mom said. "It's our very own Air Phone. And if you listen really hard, you can hear anything."

Ben frowned and stared at the chipped green paint.

"So, it works for people in heaven?"

"You bet," Mom said. "Go on, tell Grandpa about your day. He's listening."

Ben chatted into the phone about swimming lessons and math class and his best friend Liam and their new, secret handshake. He talked the way he does with me when I pick him up from school, when I nod and "mm-hmm" back at him as his words summer-sault from his lips.

Then, he stopped. Took a breath.

"Bye, Grandpa. Love you."

Whitney tapped Mom's elbow.

"Can I talk to Grandpa too, please?"

It went like that every week. We'd find Mom standing next to the end table by the front door, talking to Dad on the Air Phone. Then she'd pass the phone on to them. I wasn't sure if the kids thought it was a game, or if they believed their grandma, and thought their grandpa really was listening on the other end, but they seemed to enjoy it, so I didn't stop her.

Every week, Mom asked me if I wanted to talk to Dad. And every week, I shook my head. No.

Mom was quick to forget his bad temper. His paranoia. His conspiracy theory that I was plotting against him. He turned the hardware store over to me before retiring, but, reluctantly, and only because Mom begged him to focus more on his health. He'd barge into the store unannounced, raving about a mysterious unpaid bill or a client I'd wronged. He talked about me to our business partners and told them I was driving his business into the ground. It always came back to me. A contractor or sales rep would visit me at the register and, picking their cuticles, bring up Dad's latest rumor.

Mom held mass for Dad every month, even though we all knew how he felt about church. During Sunday dinners, he'd hold his wine glass up in front of the kids, move it slowly from left to right, and mutter in gibberish. They giggled. Mom stabbed pasta with her fork and kept her eyes down.

What hurt most of all was how he treated Mom, how he scolded her like she was a child, how she believed him. I'd hear his voice in the kitchen, the words hot and full, as if they could burst: "Irene, you idiot, what's the hell's wrong with you?" When I'd peer around the corner, I'd see Mom scrubbing a spotless counter.

But he adored the kids. I can never take that away from him. Or from Mom. I let him exist in the Air Phone, where he tells them what they need to hear.

Yesterday, I visited Mom with a bag full of groceries and her mail. I found her napping on the living room couch with a fistful of snotty tissues.

I put the food away, rinsed her coffee pot, and walked back to the front door to leave her mail on the end table. I stared at the Air Phone and listened to Mom snore. I picked up the receiver and held it against my cheek. The air passed through—*whoosh*, *whoosh*—and I looked up at the ceiling and blinked back tears.

"I don't know what to say to you," I said. "I did my best. I hope you see that, now."

Outside, the wind picked up. A tree branch brushed against the window.

"I'm taking care of Mommy. We'll be okay. But I feel so guilty, Daddy. I feel so guilty that I don't miss you."

The sky was preparing to empty itself. The air held a heavy pause.

A Long Way from Home **by Val Casola**

What I remember most about Jada is the way she'd crack open her Coke can in the Fresh Grocery employee lounge. Her long, acrylic nails snapped the tab of her \$1.25 vending machine purchase with ease. The sound—crisp and instantaneous, like a popped gum bubble—filled the bare room like a helium tank fills a balloon. Her glossed lips would seal around the opening like a suction cup as she took a sip and set it back on the table, never touching it again as she scrolled on her phone. At the end of her 30-minute break, she'd throw the can in the trash, letting it spill into the plastic garbage bag.

Jada hasn't shown up to work in two weeks. She didn't answer her phone, her apartment door. No one knows where she is. I see her picture on a poster for the first time in the bus stop shelter as I wait for it to arrive. In it, she isn't smiling and she's not wearing her hoop earrings, big enough for a small fist to fit through. The scratched safety glass blurs out the right side of her face, but on the left, I can make out one of her dark eyes, the straight line of her mouth, and a head of tight, blonde curls. It tells me she's 5 foot-something, went missing on March-something, weighs 100-something, was wearing a dark-something. I don't know if a milk carton would do her more justice. I don't know if they even put missing people on them anymore.

The crowded bus is quieter than I thought it'd be, the rain a broken metronome. All of the seats are taken, so I stand in the center aisle near the back door, my arm sandwiched between backpacks and shoulders to hold on to a cold, metal pole. The wet rubber squeaks against the bus walls as the door opens and closes at each stop like the squeegee I use to clean the store windows. The marquee displaying the time and stop is off, the screen cracked. An older woman sits by my left leg, reading a book small enough to fit in the palms of her hands. She holds a magnifying glass to see the text.

With each bump in the road, the plexiglass windows shake, the sound of their vibrations mixing harmoniously with the bus's loud engine. Most people riding seem to emit the same radio frequency: don't speak to me. I've never taken this route at night before because I've never needed to, but it was my turn to cover one of Jada's shifts. She always restocked the pasta boxes, placing

the penne next to the rigatoni, both in between the spaghetti and elbows. I noticed small, curled bits of her cherry red nail polish towards the back of the shelves, probably from scraping them against the screws holding the unit together.

The night shift had it easy. The supermarket was quiet, only a few grocery carts clattering down the aisles, wheels squealing while customers searched for last minute odds and ends—one woman I checked out purchased three tubs of vanilla ice cream, dish soap, and a tabloid. One of the cashiers plugged his iPod into the radio system, replacing the usual sounds of Michael Bublé and Adele with rap music. The night manager on duty, Bryan, didn't even glance in his direction. I didn't have to pretend to search the back for another bag of frozen jumbo shrimp that I knew we didn't have, reassemble endcap displays, or return as many ditched products to their original shelves, and I got to play several rounds of Candy Crush every time I went into the storage closet. In Aisle 9—International Foods—two lightbulbs flickered. I marked them on my maintenance chart. A leak Jada marked a few weeks ago in the last dairy refrigerator was addressed with a piece of duct tape. Her sloppy initial, a single 'J,' could've been mistaken for an 'O.'

At the end of the night, I handed the maintenance chart over to Bryan for review. He chewed on his lower lip as he inspected my findings and scribbled his initials at the bottom. We walked out of his office to find the rest of the night staff congregating by the automatic exit doors.

"...she didn't wait at the bus stop with you?"

"Nah—she went right by it. I saw her turn right at the end of the street, and that was it."

The night manager pushed his thin, round glasses up his nose as he approached the group. "This isn't the time to be spreading gossip. Especially not about something this serious," he said, pulling his keyring off his belt loop.

"It's not gossip," the accused girl said as we walked through the doors. She couldn't have been older than 16. "We both closed the night before she stopped showing up to work."

"Did you ask her where she was going?" Bryan asked her as entered a passcode to turn off and lock the exit doors.

"That girl never spoke to anyone," the young girl replied.

Jada wasn't the friendliest—*isn't*—the friendliest person on our staff. She doesn't talk to many people at work, but then again, neither do I. When we stocked shelves together, she sometimes

wore big headphones, what sounded like the Billboard Top 40 leaking out. She always appeared to be elsewhere, her movements repetitive and rehearsed.

There was one time she was painting her nails in the lounge as I walked in, ready to clock out and grab my bag from my locker. The red was almost the same color as her Coke can—just a shade darker. I sat in the plastic chair next to her as she placed a topcoat on them and said my first words to her: "Can I use that color?" She dragged the small, square bottle by its white top across the laminate surface of the round table, stopping in front of me. I opened it and slowly pulled the brush over my nails, putting on a blotchy layer. We spent the next 10 minutes side-by-side in the lounge, nothing passing between us but the odor of the polish. Jada stared intently at her phone, carefully scrolling along with the skin of her finger to avoid smearing the wet color. When I was done, I closed the bottle and slid it back to her. She didn't acknowledge my thank-you, so I slipped the shoulder strap of my bag over my head and went home.

The bus driver hits the brakes, almost throwing my body down the center corridor. My face smashes into the arm of a tall man standing next to me. His tired eyes roll over my body and I feel like a tiny bug he wants to flick away with his pointer finger. Perhaps the thought is only fleeting because his gaze turns back to the window. Passengers exit through the front doors even though there is a tattered, peeling sign above them that states "PLEASE EXIT THROUGH REAR DOORS" in red. No one says anything to the bus driver. Not even a goodnight.

A child's squeal from the back of the bus floats above the bus's engine. He stands bundled in a winter coat on the seat next to his mother, his body as tall as her torso. He runs his tiny hands over her lips, the dark circles under her eyes, and he tugs on her eyelashes.

I am glad his mother isn't wearing hoop earrings like Jada does. They wouldn't be in for very long.

My free hand softly touches my earlobe, feeling the empty earring hole.

I don't think I'd look good in hoop earrings.

In a swift motion, the mother picks up her son under his shoulders and sits him properly in his seat, her gaze issuing a stern warning. He barely has time to blink. Another woman across the aisle, dressed in a long fur coat, wiggles her leather-gloved fingers at him. Her shoulders lift to her jaw as she smiles at him.

I catch the eyes of a man, probably around the same age as my father, sitting towards the front of the bus as I turn away from the little boy. There is a smile on his stubbly face, too, from watching the little boy misbehave. He wears a blue suit, his striped tie hanging loosely from his neck, and the top few buttons of his white dress shirt are open, light chest hair sprouting into the air like they're searching for sunlight. The hair on his head is graying on the sides. He rests a brown leather briefcase on tops of his "manspread" legs. When he looks at me, the joyful smile turns into a smirk. His eyes leave my face, but not me. Suddenly, his five o'clock shadow and gelled hair are less attractive. I use my free hand to pull my zip-up sweater to cover more of my body and look for something else to catch my attention, my gaze turning to the window. The sky outside is black. All there is to see is the reflection of the bus's bright, fluorescent lights mirroring its own insides.

I don't know where I am.

I always request my stop right after we pass the laundromat around the corner from my house, but I can't see it because it's so dark. I pull my phone out of my pocket to find my location on the map, but my map won't load. My brain does not know how to tell my stomach there is nothing to worry about. My stomach doesn't know how to turn the lights on.

It is 12:07 a.m. The man across the aisle stares at me. He leans his elbows on his briefcase and rests his hands on the sides of his face, like he's relaxing and enjoying the view, except there is no ocean, no cooling breeze, no fruity cocktail in his hand. I imagine a gun nestled between papers and folders inside—or a knife.

The bus pulls over to the side of the road and the burly man next to me looks like he's about to get off the bus. "Excuse me," I ask before he gets too far away. "Do you know when we're getting to Orchard and Dexter?"

"This is 11th and Park," is all he says before he gets off. I can't even see his silhouette disappear into the night through the window. I don't know where 11th and Park is.

The man is still staring at me. He sits back now, drumming his fingers on his briefcase. I wish I hadn't said my stop aloud.

I pull the yellow wire to get off at the next stop because I don't know what else to do. The cold burns too harshly for this time of year. My breath floats in the air like smoke from an extinguished flame. The street is empty. A few parked cars scatter

the road shoulder in front of a deli. If something happened to me, no one would notice.

I feel something—a pair of eyes—on my back and hear shoes on the sidewalk. There is someone behind me. I cross the street even though I don't know where I'm going.

Just act like you do.

I remember reading somewhere that men look for targets who they can grab easily. I pull my long hair out of its ponytail and position the pointed end of my house key between my pointer and middle finger. I imagine all of the things that could happen to me on the street. The cold barrel of a pistol against my hair. The rough brick on my back as the man pins me to it. The sting of a sharp knife against my throat.

Did Jada feel any of these things?

Did she scratch someone's eyes out with those nails?

Was she just trying to get home?

I am surprised I remember the words to the Our Father.

I turn off the main road down a side street. I want to look over my shoulder, to look my attacker in the eyes so he thinks twice about what he's about to do because I'd be able to identify him if I got away, but the cold forms shackles around my neck. The man is going to attack me for the \$40 I have at the bottom of my purse under some old receipts. I hope that's all he wants. My heart tries to jump up my throat. Maybe it's my dinner. I knock over a garbage can to make some noise and a barrier between us. Something seeps into my shoes.

I hear the garbage can move. My feet are at the starting line, ready to run. I don't know when my chest stopped rising and falling. The night's hoarding all the oxygen for itself. I look for a place to escape. There are stairs that look like they lead to a back entrance ahead. I duck down them. A motion light by the door turns on. I stand flush against a brick wall for the next few minutes, waiting for the sound of his footsteps to pass, but I hear nothing.

Hesitantly, I climb the steps and peek my head out into the street. He is not there.

No one is there.

Bunny Ears

by John Rafferty

I wake up. I can't move. My breathing is shallow and I'm lying in piss, that goes all the way up my back. The right side of my face is covered in dried chunky vomit, and as I finally gather enough strength to sit up a bit, I see that there is more vomit on the comforter. A cold sweat has dried slightly on my forehead. My hair is wet, same with the pillow. I slowly move the comforter and sheets off me and there's no smell of urine. I think for a few moments and realize that it's not piss; it's soaking wet from sweat. I eye the clock and it's eight-thirty. I strain and get to my feet and walk slowly down the vacant hallway, past my roommate's doors, to the shower. I clean myself up quickly, dress, in a daze. I see my sister hanging so peacefully in her room. I'm five. Same depression found in me.

Heading to my car, it's so hot and muggy. And my brain, my head, are swollen and empty, like a balloon not fully attached.

At the gas station, I have trouble pulling myself out of the car. My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I almost start crying, but choke back the tears. I need a large bottle of water and a sports drink to rehydrate, put sugar into my body. I drink some from both and then vomit next to my car—a mixture of water, lime sports drink, and blood. People watch me but say nothing. I get in the car and head to work. I have to get to work.

Work is a tutoring job at a learning center. People need to pass GED's. I help them. Muscles aching, all curled up. Something is definitely wrong inside. But I push through it. I've been working with a man named James. He's in his late forties. He's soft-spoken and determined. Has a football player's build, but gentle in every way. He'll soon be taking the GED. I almost didn't make it in today; I almost let him down. I feel guilty and worthless. I can't let him down.

I leave at lunch and buy donuts and orange juice. I feel better, and then much better in a rush that flows through my body. I run to the bathroom and I can barely pull my shorts down before I shit. Blood is mixed in with the feces. I stare at it, frightened, trying to think of how it could be something not so serious, nothing to really worry about, and then flush it all down.

Work is over, and as I drive to older sister's house to babysit, I think about the pack of razor blades and snub nose revolver in the trunk. I fucked up last night: I downed half a bottle of aspirin and

drank as much vodka as I could but didn't die. Now there is another day; obligations to be met. The woods with slit wrists is the best way—the gun is too much of a mess.

I keep driving and I hate myself. I fucking hate everything about myself. I'm hopeless and worthless. I don't deserve happiness. I deserve to die. The depression is winning. I have too much pain to make it through.

My three-year-old niece is named Ava. In her room she gives me a bunny costume for my head. It buttons around your chin and has big pink ears. We play hide and seek, but she doesn't know how to hide and makes me hide out in the open. She shrieks with laughter every time she finds me.

My mind is so low, my body is so low. We walk to the ice cream store. I still have my bunny ears on. It's not that long a walk, but I'm exhausted. I struggle to keep my mind together. I must keep going. I hold onto to her hand. I walk closest to the road to protect her.

"I like your costume," the teenage girl laughs, as she serves us. I smile and hand Ava her blue water ice. We sit on bench by the side of the store. I eat soft-serve vanilla ice cream and drink a soda.

"Why are you still wearing the bunny ears?" Ava asks.

"They're helping my brain." I put down my food and hold the ears all the way up. "See. They're antennas. They only let in positive thoughts."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They just do," I say.

"You can take them home, but you have to bring them back."

"I will," I say.

"You're so funny," she says. "You're gonna wear those?"

"If I have to, yes. I will."

30th Street Station

by Chris King

Every weekday, I take the West Trenton train from Neshaminy Falls to 30th Street Station. I leave my house at 7:10 in the morning and drive my forest green Honda Accord to the parking lot across the street, where my car resides until I return at night, when I sprint to it like an Olympic runner as every commuter makes a mad dash to their vehicle, attempting to be the first one to exit the lot and beat the steady stream of traffic.

But before I get home and deal with that gladiatorial race, there's the ride to and from 30th Street Station. It's a commute that takes me from Bucks County to Center City, a commute that brings me from my home to my job in Admissions at Drexel University, a commute that I've become so accustomed to that it plays in my mind like a favorite film—I know every music cue, every set piece, every line of dialogue.

Here's how it goes: I wear my Phillies World Series hoodie and my kelly green Eagles hat and sit in my favorite spot, a two-seater in the second-to-last car that's four rows from the front and faces the direction towards Center City; if I have to travel backwards, my stomach feels like a free-falling elevator, plunging to the bottom floor with no support to stop it. I place my Zone 3 TrailPass in the ticket holder and wait for the Septa worker with the lamb chop sideburns to check it. He once told me his name was Gary, but I always refer to him as "Logan" in my head, probably because his facial hair makes him look like a much-too-old actor who auditioned to play Wolverine in the *X-Men* films; he almost had the role, and then Hugh Jackman swooped in and snatched it from him. After Logan checks my ticket, I pull out my beaten-up but not yet broken Beats headphones from inside my backpack and place them on my ears. Duct tape holds the right side of the headphones' band in place. I cracked it one hurried morning back in October when I dropped the Beats as I was trying to stuff them into my bag. Ever since then, I have handled the headphones with surgical care. The sounds of The Eagles, Elton John, and Fleetwood Mac are essential for my morning train trips. Once the music pours into my ears, I close my heavy eyes and rest, but never sleep. The sights and sounds and smells of the train fade away like subjects in an old photograph, and my body acts as an alarm clock—it first goes off at Elkins Parks and then Fern Rock and then Temple, but I keep hitting snooze until the

final bell rings as we arrive at 30th Street Station. With stiff legs and red eyes, I walk off onto the platform and head down into the congested lobby below. I enter the line at Dunkin' Donuts, where Ravi, who always works the morning shift, has my Dark Roast iced coffee and everything bagel ready for me. I smile and say, "thank you" and make sure he keeps the change, and then I'm out and off walking the seven minutes to Chestnut Street, where I spend the rest of the day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., before my night class.

It's a simple routine, one that doesn't feature too many twists and turns. In movie terms, it's much more *A New Hope* than *The Empire Strikes Back*. But it's a ritual that I've grown accustomed to, like Sunday morning Mass with my grandparents or Saturday afternoons at Miller's with the guys, drinking buckets of beer, eating mountains of wings, and trying to keep straight who made which bets with whom as we watch college football. That's why I'll never forget the moment I saw her in that second-to-last car. She got on at Somerton and sat in a three-seater in the second row and read Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (I had never read the book and only seen the first three episodes of the show). I stared at her chocolate brown hair and her grey-blue eyes and the single dimple on her right cheek for so long that Logan had to tap me to ask me for my Zone 3 TrailPass, and I only got to listen to five tracks from *Rumours* because I didn't take out my headphones until we reached Jenkintown. But even without the music, the rumbling of the train and the murmuring of the passengers and the smell of frost and old leather still disappeared. In fact, the commute seemed faster than it had ever been before, and when I got to 30th Street Station, my legs felt stretched and strong, and my eyes opened wide and saw clearly. I didn't stop for coffee or a bagel, although I still put a dollar in Ravi's tip jar, and when I exited the station and embarked on my usual trek to Chestnut Street, I swallowed the winter air like it was water after a long run.

Since that morning, stealing glances at her has become my new routine, my new ritual. I even pray to God about her during Mass and tell my friends about her during commercial breaks of the football games. I mention her dark red lipstick and her lilac jacket and the books she reads, from Atwood to John Green to Toni Morrison to Raymond Carver. I imagine where she goes when she gets off the train at 30th Street, whether she's a

concierge at a nearby hotel or an editor at Philly Mag or a big-time employee for Comcast.

I keep imagining until my last trip to 30th Street Station before Drexel's Christmas break. I wear a black wool coat instead of my Phillies sweatshirt and comb my hair so it's up and off my forehead. I leave my beaten-up, red and black Beats at home and bring my copy of Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* instead. I sit in the three-seater in the second row of the second-to-last car and move all the way in; the two spots next to me remain open. My hands shake so much I can barely hold the book steady, as the train makes its next two stops: first Trevoze, then Somerton. And that's when she gets on again, and she wears her lilac jacket and has her chocolate brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. A Casper white scarf drapes her neck; she clutches a copy of *Gone Girl*. The lipstick she wears today is light pink; it glistens in the train light's faint glow. Without hesitation, she joins me in the three-seater in the second row of the second-to-last car and smiles as she sits down. I grin back. She sees the book in my hand and asks me what I'm reading. We talk all about Fitzgerald until we arrive at 30th Street. Before she gets up, I introduce myself as Jack and ask for her name. She tells me. It's Claire.

Before the Door and After

an imitation of Katherine Nolte's Before the Train and After
by Teresa Tellekamp

Robby said he wanted to finish the handle. It was still light outside, dinner dishes were stacked in the kitchen sink, and we were sitting on the carpet shuffling index cards, the ones that I filled with rules and categories for the homemade board game we'd looked up on Kevin's laptop.

It was quiet. Robby was pacing above us. We could see the orange liquid sloshing around inside the glass bottle, and hear Robby's hard, clumsy footsteps. We gripped our decks of cards as Robby's shadow passed back and forth over our legs. I could've outlined his shadow with chalk, and it would've looked like a crime scene.

Robby said, "I think I'm going to drink it all. Think I can?" and waved the handle above his head.

Kevin, Robby's roommate, looked at me, then back at his cards. He was shaking his head.

"Please stop," I said. My voice cracked. Then the alcohol was sliding up the neck of the bottle, flowing into Robby's mouth and dribbling over his chin. As he lowered the handle, I looked at Robby's eyes. They were wet and pink like sea pebbles.

"Fuck off," he said. I was scared he would go upstairs to his room and slam the door on me.

And he did.

This is what he said, the man who rose up from the drain: "Can I help you with that?" Water and suds spilled from his mouth when he spoke.

I was kneeling in my bathtub, searching for a key that fell down the pipe, the key I wore around my neck for fear of ever being locked out. But the man who rose out of the drain turned the water back on. The stream crashed against the tiles like a thousand copper keys tumbling down the drain, and it sounded like freedom, the way the droplets passed through the drain without permission.

It sounded like a drumroll, a revolution. It sounded like Kevin.

I love you means carrying change together, good or bad. Before the door and after. But when your hands are at your throat and you're begging in front of another door in a dark, empty

hallway, you feel the weight of his silence press down on you, a familiar nightmare, making it painful to stay and impossible to leave.

Love is not the back of a door.

A part of me is wearing away. It's the creative part that crafts excuses when he lashes out. What if the part of me that's disappearing is all that's been holding us together?

Kevin stepped out of the bathroom, dripping and singing. His skin had flushed pink from the heat, and his waist was wrapped in a towel. He was asking to help clear the drain before it was my turn to shower.

"I want you," he said, "I did before, and I do now."

"Kevin," I said, "You know I can't. We can't."

"Please," he said, letting his bare toes touch mine.

I held my palm over his chest but didn't touch it, like waiting for a flame to ignite beneath a frying pan.

And I woke in Robby's bed, a towel damp with vomit between us.

After the door, the morning immediately after, Robby apologized for his behavior and for what he said but swore he couldn't remember.

"*Teddy bear, long hair.*" He sang my nickname like he thought it would make me forget.

"You'd better get dressed. We have to pick up your sister before the funeral," I said.

His shoulders dropped. He bent over to pull up his pants, paused, and slammed his fist into the floor. Before the door, I promised to drive Robby and his sister to Hoboken where his family would bury their grandfather. I couldn't speak to him for that three-hour drive. I just couldn't.

But when his sister jumped in the backseat, I pretended.

There's no before the door, only after. Only this moment: We're in my Subaru. Robby's in the passenger seat. His sister is asleep in the back. He reaches out and places his hand on my knee.

"Not now," I whisper. "I'm not okay."

He says, "You will be. You'll feel better."

I move my knees together and stare ahead.

In the guest room at his family's home, I cry and hurl my shoe at a wall.

"There," I say. "That's how I feel. That's how you make me feel."

His lip quivers. He pulls me into his chest and kisses the top of my head.

"I love you," he says, and I turn my face away.

My hands lock around his waist. They are cold and wet. The murmur of guests from the kitchen drifts up the staircase into the guest room.

"Robby," I say, "How does it feel to shut me out?"

But he's already at the top of the steps. He hands me my shoe before he rushes down.

It has been three weeks since the door, but it still feels like I'm staring at the white wood panels, waiting for him to let me in.

Good or bad, I am with Kevin. He's kissing my neck. He's saying my name and grabbing the hem of my black stockings. This time I'm not dreaming.

"Please," I say, "I don't want to," but really, I mean, "Please, please I don't want to fall apart."

When Robby comes home from class I'm already gone, back at my apartment, scrubbing my skin raw with a washcloth in the shower.

An hour later, Kevin calls me and asks if he can stop by my place to talk.

"Have you ever felt this numb?" I ask.

His cheeks are red and shiny with sweat.

"It can be a one-time thing, if that's what you want," he says.

I hug my knees to my chest. "He'd kill me if he knew."

"Then we'll bury it," Kevin says. "He won't know."

Kevin says I should leave Robby for good. I've tried. Before the door, and after. I tried to let him off easy. "I need my space. I need time alone. I can't be with you the way you want. Not now. Not anymore." I tried to end it swiftly, too, a blunt-force "goodbye." But each time, his temper flared all around me like a black tidal wave. So, I call Kevin to make sure he's home when I decide that it's done for good. When Robby opens the front door,

Kevin hollers down from the top of the steps so Robby remembers that we're not alone.

Kevin and I are watching one of the new James Bond movies. We're sharing the recliner, our hips touching, his fingers tickling my ribs. I'm smiling but I'm not really there. I don't feel a thing.

His hand slides down from my ribs to my thigh. His other hand starts to tug at his gym shorts. I sit up straight.

"What's wrong?" he says.

"I'm scared he'll hurt himself," I say.

"Jesus, why? Because he can't hurt you, instead?" He shoves himself off the recliner and heads down the hallway toward his bedroom. "I'll leave you alone. Is that what you want?"

He grips the doorknob.

"What? What are you waiting for? Do you want me to go, or not?"

"I don't want to be alone," I say.

"So, you want me to stay?" he asks.

I bite my lip. I don't answer.

"Take care," he says. "Make sure you close the door on your way out."

There isn't much left from before. There's this: It's August, last year. Robby and I are moving boxes of clothes and books into his new bedroom on campus. He's hanging a Star Wars poster over his bed and letting me tape the corners down. The bedroom door knocks softly against the wall as a breeze rolls in from the window.

It's the morning before our first day of classes. "I'm ready for a fresh start," I say.

"Who isn't?" Robby says, and grins.

I smile, too, because we're both changing, every day. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow are open doors.

Maybe **by Leslie Briggs**

"Last but not least, popcorn!" Christine plopped down heavily on the couch next to me, the plush leather cushions absorbing most of the impact. Just like every Friday since I'd known her, Christine and I were huddled together on the couch in her basement under a fleece blanket. We had pretzels, candy, cans of Coke, and, of course, popcorn as we settled in to watch a movie marathon. This week, we settled on mid-century science fiction; *The Lost Planet*, *Them!*, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* were among the titles.

Christine flicked on the TV and we dove into our mountain of snacks. I started off with the Sour Patch Kids, a poor decision in retrospect since the sour powder melted my taste buds with each piece I ate. I took my time with these candies, sucking the little crystals until I could taste the sweet gummy beneath. Christine started with Red Vines, a treat I hated but that she liked to pull apart and eat strand by strand. Systematically, we ploughed through snack after snack and movie after movie until our stomachs ached and our eyelids drooped.

By the time we started our fifth movie, it was well into the early hours of Saturday. The rest of Christine's family was safely tucked away on the third floor of her house and we were trying desperately to milk some sort of caffeine high out of the Cokes we'd finished. After inserting the DVD, Christine returned to the couch and slouched deep into its cushions, resting her head on my shoulder. This wasn't unusual, we usually ended our movie marathons slumped together under piles of blankets, but for some reason I wanted so desperately to turn the lights on in the basement or to run to the bathroom. Anything to use as an excuse to stand up, to let her head fall from my shoulder and onto the couch.

I couldn't do that, though—I was definitely being irrational. So, with trembling hands, I grabbed a pretzel rod out of the bin on the couch next to me, careful not to jostle Christine's head on my shoulder. I chewed slowly, conscious of each time my molars came together to grind the pretzel into a fine powder. It felt like minutes before I could swallow, and I was consciously fighting with my throat and dry mouth to force the grainy bolus of pretzel down my esophagus. Verging on panic, I tried desperately to calm myself without making my nerves any more outwardly apparent

than they already were. *Stop freaking out! We do this kind of stuff all the time.*

Maybe, but you two definitely don't kiss all the time, the voice in my head reminded me snidely. And it was right, we didn't kiss all the time. I mean, Christine was my best friend, we aren't like that. Neither of us even liked girls.

That didn't change the fact that we *had* kissed, though. Last week, to be exact. It was after school during rehearsal for the school musical. We were waiting in the dark wings of the stage for our cue to enter and she reached over to me and grabbed my hand. Again, we were close, so hand-holding and cuddling weren't foreign affections. She stood in front of me, my hand still locked in her grasp and suddenly, before I even realized what was going on, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine.

The kiss didn't last very long, maybe two seconds from the moment our lips touched, but I felt like I had eons to memorize the moment. I wished for my consciousness to float outside of my body so that it might be able to take a snapshot of how we looked then. I wanted to know the way our hands looked intertwined. I wanted to see the expression on her face as our lips connected. I imagined us like the front cover of one of those dollar romance novels, our forms shrouded in the velvety backdrop of deep purple curtains. I began running through possible titles for our love story. *Waiting in the Wings*, perhaps.

"Ladies!" the deep voice of our director found us hiding among the curtains, the sharp snap of a clipboard hitting the floor of the stage echoing throughout the auditorium, "Do you think that *maybe* you'd like to put on a show today?"

We crept sheepishly onto the stage and chorused our apologies and started the scene from the top. I half expected Christine to kiss me again, but this time she stood on the opposite side of the wing, a sea of worn hardwood between us.

Maybe that was why I could feel an electric current at the space where her temple now rested against my shoulder, though that could have been the caffeine. Maybe that was why my stomach churned, though that could've been all the candy. Maybe that was why my heart thudded in my chest, though that could've been the scary movies. Maybe that was why I couldn't forget the soft feeling of her lips on mine, as I spent my days now recalling the shape of her mouth as I remembered it from just those couple of seconds. That would explain a lot of things, but neither of us even liked girls.

Detached

by Chris King

Swipe right. Swipe right. Swipe left. Swipe right. Swipe right. Swipe left. Swipe left.

I lie in bed, the glow of my phone illuminating the pitch-black darkness of my room like a miniature moon. I keep swiping from girl to girl and moving from dating app to dating app. Tinder? Check. Bumble? I got it. Coffee Meets Bagel? Just downloaded it today.

It's a mind-numbing but apparently necessary process, according to my friend Zach. He met his girlfriend of three months, Julie, on Bumble and has been a sworn advocate of dating apps ever since, encouraging me to be more active on them every time we hang out.

"Dean, how many times do you go on these things a day?" he had asked me earlier in the day as we sat outside of our favorite coffee shop, drinking overpriced cold brews.

"Once or twice maybe," I had told him. I had been trying to detach myself from my phone lately.

"You've got to pump those numbers up, Dean—those are rookie numbers," Zach had said, doing his best impression of Matthew McConaughey in *Wolf of Wall Street*.

And so, I try to listen to him, as I stare at my screen, searching through countless elementary school teachers, physical therapists, and financial advisors. Apparently, every woman in the Philadelphia area is an adventure seeker, travel junkie, fitness fanatic, beach bum, and dog mom. Does she love *The Office* and *Game of Thrones*? Of course, she loves *The Office* and *Game of Thrones*. Others lie about their ages (*I'm actually only 19, not 24*) or say they're only in the city for the summer for a theater production or tell you that they want "no hook-ups," even though they call themselves "an inspiring MILF." I take the time to read every single bio that accompanies the suggested five to six pictures on a profile, but I can't shake this feeling that the three to four sentences plastered there are essentially interchangeable. It's as if I'm car shopping and can't alter the make or model, only the color.

Every now and then, something a girl writes stands out in a charming way (The bio of a freckled blonde with striking brown eyes named Kathleen says "I turn into a pumpkin at 2 a.m." I don't know why I like it, but I do) or a not-so-charming way

("Just your typical black guy" is how one Casper-colored, duck-faced ginger named Susan describes herself. I cringe). But mostly it's the same predictable, generic bullshit with one fun fact thrown in from time to time. My fun fact, by the way, is that I'm a "cheesesteak enthusiast," because, you know, that really makes me stand out from the crowd. It was Zach's idea.

Maybe I just need to loosen up and have fun. Maybe I need to stop being such a cynical asshole. These women are people, too, and they deserve more respect than this.

But it's hard for me to muster up any type of consideration when my mind travels back to that brisk July night, the two of us slow dancing to Brady Paisley's "Then" in the mall's parking lot on our first date. Or the time she and I stayed up till six in the morning, drinking Mountain Dew and vodka and singing along to our favorite Disney movies (I chose *The Lion King* and *The Little Mermaid*; she picked *Frozen* and *Mulan*). Or the time she drew a stick-figure portrait of me at Macaroni Grill. She always did love that they gave us crayons with dinner; it was like an adult version of a Happy Meal.

She wants me to do this. She told me not to wait for her, to go back to school and get a job and meet a nice girl, someone who doesn't take the pickles off her Chick Fil-A sandwich and who leaves the volume of the car stereo at an odd number. To meet a girl who won't take a marketing position in California that starts the week after graduation and who will let me inside her house the night before her flight, so I can give her the memory book I made for her and tell she's going to do great things out West. A girl that won't start dating her "just a friend" co-worker Dylan after being gone for only three months and will tell me if she's coming home for Thanksgiving.

The clock on my phone reads 1 a.m. That's only 10 p.m. on the West Coast. I pull up my contact list. My finger hovers over her name. I let it glide across the screen like a blade on ice. Taking a deep breath, I reopen Bumble.

Colleen. 26. Her main interests include the beach, the gym, and her Jack Russell Terrier, Chase. She teaches first grade at her local elementary school and wants an adventure buddy to travel to Europe with her this summer. But she hates *The Office* and loves *Parks and Rec*. Swipe right.

Carol **a metafiction** **by John Rafferty**

Carol. Carol will be the name of the main character and the title of the screenplay. What does Carol want? Carol wants a baby. She wants a baby more than anything else in this world. Why can't she have one? Her husband is unable—and she doesn't want to adopt (explore why she doesn't want to adopt). Carol's husband is not who she thought she married. (Who did she think she married?) He leaves her alone all the time. Carol is thirty-nine. Her biological clock is ticking. How physically attractive is he? I feel like she can see and feel her aging taking place in front of her. Like many, life has not turned out the way she thought it would. Where did she meet her husband? College? I need her backstory. She's obviously unhappy in the marriage.

There is a teenage boy, eighteen-years-old, that moves into the neighborhood, with no one else; his parents died in an airplane crash. He's eighteen. He's allowed to live on his own. He has money from their deaths: life insurance, plane settlement, their wills. Who is this teenage boy? He has to be a mixture of innocence and damage. In a way, he has to have a screw loose. He doesn't live in his world (a teenage world); he lives in the adult world. But a child can never live in the adult world without dysfunction. In school, he's oscillates between being a non-entity and a troublemaker. What are his interests? Does he play guitar? Does he have a guitar teacher? Does he have any friends? I think no friends other than maybe he becomes some kind of friend with the guitar teacher. He is friends with the guitar teacher. The guitar teacher is either nineteen or twenty. He's just kind of a bum that didn't go to college, lives with his parents, and gives guitar lessons. This is too cliché. Need this to be better. Keep the age but change his character/backstory.

Start with a dream sequence. The opening scene is one of Carol in labor, sweating, pushing, fighting to deliver her baby. The doctor and nurses instructing her. Her husband holding her hand. Very dramatic. But as the baby is born, crying, new life emerging into the world, we cut. We see it was just a dream. We see Carol in real life in the moment when you realize your dream has not come true. In a bathroom stall at work, she sobs.

Is husband a jerk? No, that seems too easy: he must be nuanced into a non-cliché character. He's a businessman. Is he

unhappy in their marriage? I don't think so. I don't think he puts enough time into caring about his wife; takes her for granted—he's consumed with his own life, own wants and needs. What are his wants and needs?

It has to be commercial, but also intelligent; we're not splitting the atom here, but we want a solid picture, something that can weather the years. Make its way onto cable TV.

The kid, understandably, has a real obsession with death—sometimes morbid. (Don't veer too much into Harold and Maude.) Also, beware of *The Good Girl*, although this is a good example of a well-praised, but also commercially successful film we're trying for.

The kid gets Carol pregnant. Now she's gotten what she always wanted out of life and she's in trouble.

How does it end? The three different kinds of endings: the really happy ending, the really sad, depressing ending. Or the in-the-middle-some-good-some-bad ending. I think I'll do the in-the-middle-some-good-some-bad ending. I will.

Three-act structure. Most commercially viable. Inciting incident: Boy moves into neighborhood. First-act decision occurs when they enter into a romantic relationship. He tries for one at first, but she turns him down. Then she ends up giving into what she wants. (An obvious Graduate-based theme here, and, overall, running through the entire narrative.) Before that, montage shows them having fun and meaningful times together. Infusing happiness into one another's lives. The montage from *Lucas* is a good example but improve upon it. This plot needs to be buoyed by more creative characters. The plot, for the most part, is not original (which will probably help sell it), but you have to toe the line.

Third act starts with the new plan: Carol is going to help him find a girlfriend his own age. He's terrible with girls his own age and still in love with Carol. It doesn't work out. They try with the girl he tries to talk to at the first mixer, who denies him. Maybe they try another girl that he has a better chance at. No, the first still goes horribly, but the second date the girl doesn't even show up. He gives up on the plan. Won't go through with it anymore. He won't be humiliated. Low point. They get back together in secret.

What happens to the baby? She'd have to conceal it until she no longer can. What is that point? And what is the reaction of the husband? He could leave her/divorce. Try to force her to have an

abortion. But, ultimately, he has to accept it, although he's enraged, and the boy is banned from her life, their life. The boy stays away at first, but he will not accept; he will not allow this man, for whom he has little to no respect for, to dictate any part of his life. They begin their affair again in secret. Husband finds out and kills the boy. So now, husband ends up in prison. The boy ends up in the morgue. And where does Carol end up? A mental institution, gone, unable to speak or hear, unaware of the world, comatose? If that was your ending, you're now doing a really, sad depressing ending.

During the low point, the boy attempts suicide—How? Overdose on pills? What can he live through? he slits his wrists (he'd have bandages on both wrists.)—and that brings them back together. A montage during the low point (before he attempts suicide), where we see him go about his life: we see him at school; we see him at work (where does he work?); at home; etc.; he's simply going through the motions, in sadness. We have to see her, too, in her life. She'd also be filled with sadness.

Structure: Inciting incident; first-act decision; everything falls apart (the low point); new plan.

A sequence: (This is the mixer scene I alluded to earlier.) He's new in school, has no friends. He rides his bike to a school mixer (why can't he drive? Does that matter); tries to talk to a girl and it's both funny and sad (she denies him); We then cut to: him sitting on the bleachers watching the kids have fun. After this, I think he goes over to Carol's house. Is this the night they consummate their relationship? I think so. They are in love. They have true love.

Does Carol have a job? I think she works at a travel agency. How empty is her life? She has to have a job, but what? A teacher? Librarian? We risk getting into teacher/student type of cliché. I think that's a no. What about girlfriends? Are they all married with kids? Yes.

Does the boy have a job? If he does, it's just a stupid teenage job. Maybe a job at a gas station. He doesn't need the money.

This plot is too thin: I need more from my supporting characters.

Where does Carol end up at the end of the story? Unresponsive to her name in a psychiatric hospital? After all the mayhem, she cracks up? Again, you're headed toward the really, sad depressing ending. (I made notes about this above.) Maybe that's my ending.

Can I still make it commercial? I need to sell this—even if it never gets made.

Husband would find the amount of time the boy and Carol are spending together strange. This scene would come right after the montage. He would put them spending time together down and it would anger Carol; they're already unhappy and it would make her move further away.

Where does the story take place? It has to take place in a small remote town. Middle of nowhere to some extent, but suburbia, nonetheless. New Mexico?

Names. Only Carol has a name. Name the others.

The points aren't connecting; the story's just not working.

He has the most morbid obsession with death. He's carried into the house on a stretcher in a body bag. He sleeps in a coffin. Every wall in the house is covered in articles and pictures about the crash. It's how Andy Warhol would have done it: screen prints, essentially; different colors, color schemes, artistically plastering every inch of wall.

He has millions of dollars and he's spending all of it. His parents were just killed in a plane crash. Who gives a fuck? Living—and spending—recklessly in the moment.

Would he even be in high school, if he doesn't care that much? He just moved somewhere new, he wouldn't have to enroll.

The Scenic Route

by Teresa Tellekamp

I'm counting cigarette fossils in the gray pavement on my way to work, when I look up for a moment and see her. It's a cold, damp January morning, and she lumbers past commuters like me in their trench coats and boots. She's wearing a black bra and leggings—nothing else. Her belly is tight, round, and covered in pale stretch marks that seem to grow from the waistband of her leggings, winding riverbeds gone dry. I catch a string of words she utters in one shaky breath.

"Zebra. Apartment. Zebra. My baby. Oh, apartment. Oh, zebra."

She holds her belly with one hand and her back with the other. Then, right in front of City Hall, between a university bookstore and a glass office building, she bends over and heaves orange vomit across the concrete.

I stop walking, spin around.

Did anybody see that?

A man in a blue raincoat stares at his phone and nods his head slowly to the beat of music I can't hear. A group of women hurries into the glass office building, tucking umbrellas under their arms. Two teenagers share a cigarette.

"I'm going to get help," I say. "Stay there, I'll be right back."

She vomits again.

Will somebody help me?

I duck into a convenience store, head toward the wall of refrigerators, and grab a bottle of ginger ale.

Something to settle the stomach?

To my left, cashews, potato chips, pork grinds. To my right, granola and protein snacks. I grab two Nature Valley bars.

The cashier smiles at me and takes my debit card. She cracks bright, green gum between her teeth.

"Need a bag, hon?" She asks.

"No, thanks. Have a good one."

I pull the doors toward me. They're jammed shut. I groan, pull harder.

The cashier clears her throat.

"The sign, hon." *Crack. Crack. Pop.*

I look down and read *PUSH TO EXIT*. Outside, the woman squatting over a lumpy, orange puddle, parting and closing her lips like a fish.

I hesitate before gripping the handle.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

She shakes her head and continues to watch the ground.

I extend the ginger ale and the snack bars. She stands straight, stares wide-eyed at the food and soda, and embraces me. She knocks the front of her skull against mine with the force of her hug. I breathe in stale vomit, chalk, vinegar.

"The apartment, the zebra," she whispers. I think I hear "help me" mixed in with the rest of her soft cries, but I can't tell for sure.

"Please feel better," I say, as if that's within her control.

People bump into us as they rush to work. The man in the blue raincoat hasn't glanced up from his phone yet. I walk away, rubbing my head and wiping puke and spit from my left cheek with my coat sleeve. I go to work.

That afternoon, the next morning, the following week, I look for the woman, but she's gone. The cigarette fossils accumulate, but rain and street sweepers wash away any evidence of her.

There are more like her who wander along the same sidewalks. And I don't stop for all of them. I nod to music no one else can hear. I rush by, like I have very important places to go. Later, in the silence of my white apartment, I want to say a prayer, but words escape me, dust blown from dry river beds.

Fragment

by Stephen Jenemann

Goddamn radiator's bitchin' and moanin' again. Rattling and gyrating like some discordant high school band playing together for the first time. Thing's been dronin' on and on since November when they finally turned on the heat even though it'd been in the 30s by mid-October, whole school freezing our asses off for three weeks because they're too cheap. So yeah, I let 'em wear their hoodies in this fucking icebox, fidelity to the rules be damned. You'd think they'd say thank you, but no, they just act like I have to let 'em wear their sweatshirts, even though I'm the one who'd get in trouble if one of the administrators actually cared enough to come in and observe me. But I don't give a shit. I like my autonomy.

Anyway, now it's February and the radiator is reliably fucking up my class again as the heat tries to come on and fails, as it does every day thirty minutes into class. All it does is make an obnoxious jingle jangle from old age, neglect, and heavy textbooks placed atop it to prevent cold air from comin' out. The front panel keeps vibrating and smacking the row of desks like metal teeth chatterin' in the cold. For about twenty minutes every day it causes a ruckus and pisses my kids off, wakin' 'em up from their morning naps to bitch about something that I can't control. "Mr. I" this and "Mr. I" that, abbreviating my name, Mr. Illuzzi, like it's some crazy foreign name. Some teachers think being called the first letter of their last name is somehow endearing, like they've acquired some type of street cred rapport with the kids, but I just think it's another way for these kids to be lazy.

The radiator's working extra hard today, teasin' us with the false promise of a warm room. It's so loud that I have to raise my voice, which annoys the kids even more. Other than the radiator, the second most complained about thing most days is my voice. Apparently, it lacks emotion. Too monotone. The fuck am I supposed to do about that? Some of 'em just sleep right through the added noise, though, stirrin' and groanin' a little. This week's been real bad for sleepers. Been workin' on grammar, sentence fragments, which is a complete waste of time and the kids know it. "You jus' givin' us bullshit cause you don't wanna teach," Cierra said when I passed out the packet on Monday. "No... What? It's in the curriculum," I say, eyes wide, acting incredulous.

It's a lie. There's no curriculum for this class. No one thinks it's necessary for a bunch of kids who generally don't give a shit. It's a class of kids who failed their freshman year, which is hard to do in this fucking school. I mean you gotta really try to fail here. I call 'em repeaters, but technically they're called Tenth Grade *Provisional*. Stupid fucking name. They used to be called Ninth Grade Transitional. Then the powers that be felt that would upset the kids, create a stigma or something on account of still bein' called "Ninth" graders, so they changed the course name to Tenth Grade Transitional, but that apparently was too optimistic and gave the kids false hope, so they eventually settled on Tenth Grade *Provisional*. All this for a group of kids who don't care and who no one cares about? Whatever.

I was one of the first teachers to take on this shitty assignment. Requested it, actually. Back when I was all Hilary Swank *Freedom Writers* and shit, caring about the neediest kids. I was only in my third year, didn't know much about the dangers of stickin' your neck out and carin' too much. Fuck if they don't use ya'. I remember when they asked for volunteers to teach the repeaters, the principal himself, which was a big deal because he never came outta his office. He laid it all out, honest as he could, not knowin' what it'd really be like since he hadn't taught an actual class since the early 80s, back when the school's biggest problem child was a kid with a sideways hat. So, I guess you can say I knew what I was gettin' into. Full year. Hour and twenty minutes a class. All Tier III students. Which is what they used to call our real problem children. Now they call 'em maladaptive. Sounds like some disease they're tryin' to cure. Why not just call 'em kids? But what the fuck do I know? Anyway, that was when I was only in my third year, when I was young and hopeful. Or maybe just stupid. Three principals, a hundred and fifty repeaters, and five years later, I guess I see things a bit different.

Back in my classroom with the radiator droanin' on still, the kids are pushing the boundaries of lethargy. I would say it's on account of being off five days straight cause of the blizzard coming before the weekend. Whole school's outta sorts. I get it. Me, I was happy to get out of my fuckin' apartment, cooped up, eatin' shitty Chinese takeout. Don't get me wrong, I like a snow day, but five days was just too much. I get that way, sometimes, feelin' like I miss this place after a long weekend. Even though it pisses me off most days, I still feel, I don't know, something, something I can't quite explain. Anyway, everybody's a little off,

like I said, but with my repeaters it's something else. Lately, it's like a competition, seeing who can pass out the quickest. It's only twenty minutes in and there are already eight heads outta twenty completely down for the count. Some teachers might be pissed, but what the fuck am I gonna do? Scream at 'em like some spazz drill sergeant, all *Full Metal Jacket* style. "Take out your notebooks, fucksticks, and analyze this Iambic Pentameter, double time!" I used to do shit like that, when I was in my second or third year, make 'em think I was a lunatic. Flip a desk on occasion. Drop a textbook from real high up. Just to piss 'em off. One time I took my Westcott Yardstick and smashed it on my desk like I was choppin' wood with an axe, all lumberjacked up, and the top of it shattered, fragments splintering in all different directions. One big ass piece shot behind me into Hugo Hyland's hair and just stayed there, sticking out like a branch from a tree, everyone staring at it, all slack jawed and eyes popping, like something unnatural just occurred, a little slice of absurd divinity, Hugo himself not saying anything and lookin' up with a little fear and excitement in his eyes. I just stood there, not sure what to do or say, and eventually some kid saved me by saying, "Fuckin' wild. You a mad man, Mr. I!" And everyone started laughing. So, I don't do stupid shit like that anymore, mainly cause it never works and the kids just act like bigger asses. Now I just let 'em sleep.

Everyone's here today, probably on account of being out from the snow, their parents fed up with them. Even Kwame Adams is here, which is surprising because I haven't seen him in like a month. He'd been suspended for selling weed, I heard, or some bullshit. Surprised he didn't get expelled, if it's true. Wouldn't surprise me with Kwame. Knew he was a drug dealer when I read the email account he gave me to contact him when absent, "bricksindahood@yahoo.com" like that 50 Cent song lyric, "I ain't gotta write rhymes, I got bricks in the hood."

I ain't gonna lie. I dealt some weed in high school too. Well, I let my buddy Matt sell weed outta my car, but the point is that I wasn't perfect, so I don't pass any judgment on Kwame's life choices. But I wasn't stupid enough to state the fact in an email address and give it to my teachers. I gave Kwame some shit about it after I read the email. "You bankin' benjamins, Kwame?"

He looked surprised at first, but then went with it once he realized the other kids were lookin' at him. "Yeah, I get paid." "How much?"

"A grand a week," he said, looking around the room, cocky smile on his face, nodding his head, a childish bravado about him.

"Fifty-two thousand a year?" I said, acting impressed. "That's more than most teachers make with a masters. Just need a union and you're set." The kids laughed. Even Kwame laughed, which was rare for him, usually sitting sullenly, mainly on account of being almost nineteen in a class with a group of sophomores, or Ten Provisionals. Hell, we're all embarrassed in our own way. So yeah, I joke about selling drugs if it eases the tension every so often. Fuck it. It's my room.

Anyway, Kwame's back, and he hasn't wasted any time pissin' me off, choosing a seat that isn't his in the back, head down, hood up, knocking the fragment packet on the floor after I gave it to him. He's not a bad kid. Just does stupid shit. Like for a week after he got new tattoos on his forearms, one on the right saying THUG and the other on his left saying, LIFE, in Old English font, he'd take out his strawberry scented lotion, smelling nasty, pervading all over the room, and put a glob of it in his hands and rub it on his tattoos in real slow circles, saying he needed to keep them moist or they'd scab. I told him to put it away each day and each day he'd just say, "Just a minute," never putting it away.

By Friday of that week, I walked over to his desk, standing over him, looking down all intense like, looming a bit, but giving enough space not to seem too pissed, and asked, "You know Tupac had the same tattoo on his abdomen?"

"Nah," Kwame said, rubbing in the lotion, not lookin' up. "It was an acronym. You know what that is?"

"Nope."

"It's when each letter stands for a word, like N.F.L."

"Okay."

Now the rest of the class was paying attention, looking at me and Kwame having another one of our *special* conversations, but this time Kwame's not interested, not wanting the attention, so he just kept on rubbing with his index and middle fingers, real careful, acting like I wasn't standing less than a foot from him. It was the closest I'd ever been to him.

"Any thought on what it means?"

Kwame just shook his head, not taking his eyes offa his arms, making sure the lotion rubbed in all the way.

"It means 'The Hate You Give Little Infants Fs Everyone.'"

"For real?" Brandon asked.

The rest of the kids seemed interested, some wanted to talk more about it, but Kwame just sat there, acting like I told him something he'd known all his life. Now I was fuckin' pissed cause he knew the lotion should be away and I tried being understanding, but he didn't wanna play school.

"Alright, Kwame, gotta go."

And he headed to the discipline center with no argument, like he always did, throwing up his hood and leaving all his work behind.

Back in my fuckin' igloo of a classroom, I'm reviewing the fragment worksheet that only a quarter of 'em did the night before for homework. I'm up at my podium, white Oxford sleeves rolled up, tie loosened, slouching, lookin' like it's already the end of the day and I've been punched in the gut, tryin' to catch my breath. I'm calling on kids randomly, trying to get 'em to participate but it doesn't work. I look around the class, some kids' heads down, the rest sittin' up, some with their heads in their cupped hands, a certain vacancy in their eyes. Others' heads tilted to the left, right, back, or hanging straight down, hoods up, sleeping awake. They look like a broken version of that arcade game, Whac-a-mole, I used to pump quarters into as a kid down the shore on the boardwalk. I'm thinking of shuttin' it down, tell 'em to just take out their books and read. I look at the clock, forgettin' like I do every day that it's broken, like everything else in this school, and then check my cell phone for the time. An hour left till the bell. Too soon to stop givin' a shit.

"Can't you shut that thing up, Mr. I?" Elijah asks as he picks his head up, his eyes all sad and sincere.

"You givin' me too much credit," I say, leaning forward on the podium and looking over the rest of the room, half the lights on and the other half off for the overhead projector to display the transparency with the correct answers. My electronic projector's been broken two weeks, and apparently a simple light bulb replacement is too much to ask in this shithole.

"Now that you're awake, you mind answering number fifteen?"

"I didn't do it."

"Give it a shot. Maybe you'll surprise us."

Elijah picks up his packet offa his desk and flips it over, holdin' it close to his face,

"Because the monkey was left inside the room by himself." He doesn't say anything for a minute. Just stares.

"Anything?"

"Man, I don't know. Sentence."

"Good try," I say, tryin' to keep it somewhat positive cause he's one of the only kids who actually participates still and if I lose him, I'm totally fucked. "Unfortunately, it's a fragment." Elijah rolls his eyes, a half smirk half frown on his face, and lets his packet go. I just watch it fall with a silent whoosh as it slides off of his desk, its pages flapping like a bird with a broken wing. "Whatever," he says, before putting his head back down. I look up at the lights and brown stained drop ceiling tiles, an odd silence, except for the radiator still blasting away, and think again about just throwin' in the towel, tellin' the kids they won this round.

"That radiator sounds like a retarded monkey be masturbatin' in it."

My eyes dart from the ceiling to the back corner, realizing it's Kwame, who doesn't even pick up his head. I know he's just grinnin' under there like a real ass, knowin' he fucked up my class even more. The kids start laughin' all crazy like. Some of the sleepers pick up their heads, stupid smiles on their faces, not knowing what they're laughin' about. Ryan, the only white kid in the class, falls out of his seat holding his stomach, causing the floor to rumble and the overhead projector to shake, the light on the screen wobbling back and forth and catching me in its rays at the podium, about ready to lose it.

I scan the room and breathe in deep, like when your doctor asks, and exhale. Even for me, who can put up with lots of bullshit, this is bad. But this is how it's been the last three months and there aren't any signs of improvement.

After Obama won the election the kids came in all excited and hyped up. Clamoring about how they're feeling proud.

"My mom and aunts was cryin', yo!" Morgan said. "Wish my grandmom coulda been here."

"People was shootin' off guns and shit in the street. It was crazy!" Brandon was saying to Donald, who said, "We shoulda had a day off."

I remember agreeing with him. But it was the end of the first quarter, and I was preparing to give my, "If you failed" speech to incite a little hope and try to get these kids to still do a little work for me. It was only November, but things were already shit grim

for a few of the kids. I had my Do Now vocab warm up projected and told the kids to get to their seats and take out their worksheets. They were rustling around, jumping all over the place, more excited than I'd ever seen 'em, or any class for that matter. "Come on, come on, let's go." I turned on the teacher voice a little, raising my volume a few decibels, changing my tone, trying to sound a little stern but encouraging. "Happy everyone's excited, but we still got work to do."

"Unh uh! Ain't happenin' Mr. I." Faith said, staring at me like I'd asked her to write a ten-page paper on quantum physics as she shook her head back and forth.

"You crazy, Mr. I?" Elijah asked, also looking at me with an intensity I don't recall ever seeing in a student's face. "A black man got elected president last night. You know what that means?" I could see he wasn't just being rhetorical.

"I get the history of it—"

"I ain't talking about history, Mr. I. I'm talkin' about how it means right now. To us?" The rest of the kids stopped what they were doing and turned toward me, waiting for me to respond, probably on account of Elijah's tone. It was the first time they were all looking at me like they gave a shit about anything I had to say since the first day of class. Even then they didn't *really* care.

"Well...I can see you guys are excited... And that's nice, but we're still in school, and it's the start of a new quarter and—"

"What movie we watchin'?" I looked to my right and it was Kwame. He was still coming to class somewhat regularly at this point. He wasn't even looking at me, just brushing his peach fuzz beard, a half grin on his face, somewhat shrouded in the darkness of the half-lit room, like one of those cartoon villains as they devise an evil plan.

"Movie?"

"Yeah, *movie*. You made us watch that dumbass movie after the Phillies won the World Series, so we should watch a movie today. Right?" Kwame asked, still not looking at me.

After the Phils won the series, I went out with my buddies and got crazy. We were shooting fireworks and banging shots and having the best night of my life and then all the sudden it's three in the morning and I gotta get up for work in a few hours. I was still drunk when I woke but I knew I was gonna use a day for the parade, so I decided to go in, but I wasn't gonna teach. Could barely stand straight. So, I grabbed my *Rocky* and *Rocky II* DVDs, told the kids we were watching a movie, figured they'd appreciate

a day to relax. My other two classes were all excited, thanking me, telling me how much they appreciate me and shit. But my repeaters, they didn't care. Most of them said they hadn't even watched the game, telling me how "corny" baseball is. So, I decided to show them parts of *Rocky*, the training montage and then the fight, and I explained how this was a metaphor for my sporting fandom all these years—always getting to the championship and then losing. And then I show 'em the fight scene of *Rocky II*, when Rocky finally beats Apollo, and I extend the metaphor and tell 'em this is how I feel now. Like I accomplished something. I was surprised with how much I ended up talking, given that my hangover was kicking in. I actually felt like I taught. Most of 'em just slept right through it.

Then a few weeks went by and Obama won, and they expected me to show them a movie too, celebrate their accomplishment. After Kwame asked and they all remembered, they all started in on me.

"Right!"

"Yeah!"

"You better show us a movie!"

"Ain't fair if you don't."

They could see that I had no intention of showing them a movie, so they're getting rowdier and rowdier, making a huge ruckus. Eileen, who sat right in front of me, shouted, "He probably voted for McCain!" and all the kids started laughing and high-fiving.

I can't remember really thinking about what I decided to say and do next. It just popped in my head, thinking I'd be funny or something.

I lifted my hands like a quarterback trying to silence the crowd on the home field. "Okay, okay. You win." They all quieted down, again staring at me, a little excitement in their eyes, shushing each other, Elijah finally shouting, "Shut up, yo! Let him speak."

"You guys wanna watch a movie? I got the perfect one. A real underdog story. Story about a guy no one believes in. Everyone said wasn't good enough. Wasn't tough enough. Wasn't experienced enough."

"Like Obama!" Brandon shouted.

"Right, like Obama," I said. "It's basically the same story. And after a hard-fought battle, blow after blow this guy comes out on top." I paused, looking over them, making eye contact with the

whole class, except for Kwame, like they teach you in college to really connect with the kids. They're hanging on my every word for the first time all semester like I'm some type of Pentecostal preacher. "Anyone know the movie?"

"What is it?"

"*Rocky III*!" And then I smiled.

No one said anything at first. Just stared for a moment, their excitement shot to shit. "You serious?" Elijah asked, looking at me, real pissed, his smile faded, lips curling a little, and his hands up to his face, like he's ready to shout something.

"Rocky beats up a black dude in the movie," Brandon said before Elijah could say anything. "Yo, you racist, Mr. I."

Some of the kids just started laughin', others talkin' again and the rest put their heads down, including Elijah. Kwame just sat there, smilin' the whole time, like he knew I was gonna fuck up. I ended up showing 'em *Remember the Titans*, feeling kinda like an asshole after I realized how pissed they were. That was three months ago.

I figured they'd eventually forget about it like most teenagers forget about bullshit that they didn't really care about to begin with. I mean, I've had kids pissed at me before, but for stupid shit, like pronouncin' their names wrong or losing their tests and makin' 'em take it over. Sometimes they hate me on account of conflicting personalities. Once had a class of freshmen, all girls, who decided just to be hostile for hostility's sake, like they signed a blood oath or somethin', "We Hereby Swear to Ruin Mr. Illuzzi's Day, Every Day, All Semester." But I never had kids pissed for some real shit, and it's never been a whole class and never been this long.

I thought about apologizing to 'em, but I'd never done anything like that before and wasn't sure what to say and then the days turned to weeks and it was like, what's the point? So instead I said, *fuck it*. I'll just put my head down, do the bare minimum and not bust their asses too hard, thinkin' maybe they'd appreciate being left alone or at least forget. But they didn't and now it's February and even trivial shit like sentence fragments pisses 'em off or puts 'em to sleep. So now I'm standin' in front of a group of comatose teenagers in a half light

classroom in front of some piece of shit overhead projector with a broken radiator rattlin' in my ears and I'm about to snap crazy.

I breathe in again and then think to myself, *Fuck it. I'm going down swingin'*. "Alright, take out your books."

"Which one?" Brandon asks.

"*Witness*. The book we've been readin' since last week." I turn on the other light switch and a few wake up but still most of them are out. I grab my yardstick and start tapping the chalkboard repetitively, flickin' the lights on and off, on and off, on and off.

"Come on, come on, come on. Wake up. Wake up." Some of 'em start rustling, lifting their heads, stretching their arms, acting like they've been hibernating. "That's it, that's it. You can do it!" I'm feeling something. Something I ain't felt in a while. The rest of the kids start waking up, pulling their heads off their forearms, rubbing their faces and the long creases across their foreheads and cheeks. Another minute and they're all awake, except Kwame, but I just leave him be.

"Okay, we all with it? Take out *Witness*."

"This book is corny, Mr. I," Cheryl starts. "What's it even about?"

"Good question, good question. Anyone help Cheryl out?" I look around and see Elijah and nod to him. He sighs but comes around. "About this town in... up North..."

"Vermont."

"Yeah, Vermont, and it's like the early 1900s and it's prohib... You know, they can't sell booze."

"Right, prohibition."

"So anyway, this black family moves in and some of the town's racist and so the KKK shows up and starts stirring shit up and now the town's all divided over what to do about the KKK and the black family, arguing about who to support."

We'd had the book for a week now. Most of the kids didn't mind it. It's a real easy read, a bunch of short, poetic vignettes with different characters speaking. Probably written for 5th graders, but whatever, it kept them somewhat interested and it was better than reading *The Outsiders* or some other middle school shit they'd probably read before.

"Who's the white lady on the back?" Faith asked.

"The author, dummy!" Brandon shouted across the room before I could answer.

"Yo, fuck you!"

"Calm down, calm down. Yeah, that's the author, Karen Hesse."

"What some white lady know about racism?" Faith wants to know.

I pause a moment, not sure how to answer at first, but then just say, "Let's read and find out."

A bunch of sighs, a few more "bullshits" whispered under their breaths, and a couple heads go down. They're makin' me work for it today, but like I said, I'm feelin' good, like I did my first few years of teaching, all excited, dancin' around, tapping my yardstick, acting like a cross between a conductor and boxing ballerina. I tell the kids to move their desks to the side, create a little stage, tell 'em we're gonna act it out some, like a play. Now they get a little excited, and there's a little energy I haven't felt from them in a while. Even Kwame picks up his head once he hears all the noise, but he doesn't move his desk and stays in the corner.

"Open up to forty-six. Anyone wanna read Percelle Johnson, the town constable?" "What's a constable?"

"A cop."

"I will." Brandon says. He always likes to read, which is nice, but it's painful cause he reads real slow, fumblin' over words every couple sentences, refusing to move on until he's said 'em correctly and not lettin' anyone else help. I assign the rest of the roles and we start.

"A girl goes and bobs her hair and her head starts filling with nothing but monkey business."

"What's a 'bob'?" Cheryl asks.

"A short, bowl cut, girls used to wear in the 20s. They called 'em flapper girls." "Whatcha mean, 'bowl cut'?"

"I'd show you on the computer, but the projector's broken so let's just..." I pause for a sec and think to myself, look at the broken clock, then my phone, and then ask, "You guys wanna take a walk in the halls, look at some pictures?"

Next thing I know I got nineteen kids walkin' down the main hallway of the school, past the bathrooms that smell like shit and piss most days and past the big "Beverly Hills High School, Where Everyone Is Royalty" sign right outside my door. I stay behind the kids, corralling 'em all in somewhat, makin' sure I don't lose any of 'em. I've never taken my kids outta class like you see in the movies or the way some of my colleagues do with their honors kids, reading plays like *The Crucible* and *Hamlet* in the rundown

courtyard every spring, some kids shouting, "Cause it's my name!" and "To be or not to be!" I wouldn't do it with my good kids cause I don't like being on display, but now I'm real nervous, thinkin' this might be a bad idea as the kids start cursin' and screamin' at each other, the few people in the hallway starin' at 'em like they don't belong in the school, let alone the hallway. I just look down at the alternating black and white tile, all smudged and dirty from the snow, and don't make eye contact like some embarrassed parent when their kids are actin' like asses.

We finally get to the pictures that I walk past every day on my way in when the school's all quiet, no kids in the building yet. It's the best part of my day. I might be rushin' outta here most days, but I still come in early. Just a habit. I like it in the morning, still dark outside, the building kinda lifeless, peaceful even, but still full of potential. I usually just go to my room, drink my coffee, grade a little, write an agenda and some bullshit objective, "The Learner Will..." and think about what's about to come. Mainly I just prepare in my head how to minimize as much bullshit as possible, hoping I can get through the day with a little dignity left to start over again the next day. The kids never see this side of what I do, and I always wonder if it might be easier if they did.

Anyway, we made it to the pictures and I tell 'em to stop and look. I direct 'em over to the pics from the 20s, all black and white, real nice, encased in these thick wooden frames, the glass clean and shiny. Probably the nicest things in the whole building. I tell them to look at the girls' bobbed hair. They get real quiet for a second, and I can see they're really lookin', thinkin' even. I walk up a little closer behind 'em, closest I've ever been to all of 'em at once. I wanna whisper, "Carpe diem," all Robin Williams' *Dead Poets Society* style, but I just enjoy the silence for a moment.

"They ugly." Faith says.

I shake my head, "They *are* ugly."

Some of the kids laugh.

"Ooh, Mr. I, you can't say that," Cheryl says.

"No, not 'they are ugly,'" I say. "They *are* ugly."

"Huh?" Cheryl shrugs.

"Never mind." The kids start screwing around now, so I tell 'em it's time to go back and they whine a little, but Faith says she liked coming into the hallway.

"We should walk around the school every day," Brandon adds.

We start heading back down past the courtyard, and the class is spread out now, some of the kids having moved ahead. I look

back one last time and see Elijah and Kwame behind me staring at a picture, so I go over to them.

"Whatcha guys lookin' at?"

"Who's this kid, Mr. I?" Elijah asks. They're looking at a smaller black and white photo of a football team with an older looking frame, not shiny like the other ones. It's got a small, smudged plaque that says it's from 1929. I'd never noticed it before.

"Which one?"

"The black kid," Kwame says.

"Not sure."

Elijah and Kwame are both just staring, kinda dumbstruck, their faces hidden in their hoods. All I can see is their eyes, this weird glaze to them, lookin' like a soft puddle after a hard rain. I'm not sure what to say, so I just stand next to them, my shoulder touching Kwame's, and stare too.

Kwame breaks the silence, "He looks sad."

"Yeah, he's like that girl from the book we readin'. What she say about herself about being 'buried in all the whiteness.' What's her name?"

"Leanora." Kwame answers before I can. I don't say anything another moment. They just continue to look at the kid in the picture.

Finally, I say, "You know there's a Beverly Hills Historical Society. They might know something. You want, I can ask."

They don't answer but they nod their heads, real slow, not taking their eyes off the picture. I just stand there with 'em, enjoying the silence again, when I hear, "Everything okay, Mr. Illuzzi?" from down the hall. It's Mr. Cole, the Vice Principal of Climate and Culture, and he's waddling towards us, his noticeable stride, walkin' like a kid wearing cowboy boots too big.

He's part of some new effort to improve teacher-student relationships, but really, he's just a disciplinarian.

Elijah and Kwame start walkin' away as soon as they see him.

"Wait, wait, wait. Hey! I said wait!" Cole picks up his pace and heads for both of 'em, ready to walk right past me, but I step in and put my hands up. "It's okay. They're with me." Kwame and Elijah stop and turn back around. The rest of the kids do too and start walking back to see what's happening.

"Really? Doing what?" Cole asks.

"We were looking at the pictures, discussing the school's history."

He thinks about it a moment as he continues to look past me at the kids, "Why're their hoodies on and hoods up?"

"My classroom's real cold and—"

"But you're not in your classroom. And even if you were, they're not supposed to have hoodies on anywhere. It's dress code. You know the dress code, right?"

I'm standing face to face with Cole, looking at his hipster beard, his beady eyes squinting, staring past me at the kids with a sense of bewilderment like he's never seen 'em before. As much as I'm seein' him, I'm hearing him more, his voice droning on and on about fidelity to the rules, the importance of discipline, respect for the hallways, quoting the school slogan, "Respect Others, Yourself, And Learning." He sounds like the teacher from Charlie Brown, *Wah Wah Wahing* on about a bunch of bullshit for bullshit's sake.

I finally come back to when he says he wants them to take their hoodies off. I smirk. "Okay. When I get back to my room, first thing I'll do is—"

"No. Now." He's turned his gaze back to me. I glance to my right and Kwame and Elijah are lookin' at me too. I'm not positive, but I can feel all the other kids' eyes on me now as well, wonderin' what I'm gonna do, hoping I step up. It's dead silent like it is in the mornings when I first get here.

I step aside and create a clear line of vision for Mr. Cole and all my kids. "You can tell 'em."

He looks over them one last time and seems to sense, for the first time, the situation he's created, but he doesn't give a shit and turns back to me. "I think it's best that you tell them. They're your students."

I breathe in deep, look up at the ceiling and flickering lights a second and then look back, making eye contact with all of them and none of them at the same time. "Alright guys, let's do what Mr. Cole asked. Take 'em off."

Saying nothing, everyone takes their hoodies off, except Kwame. No one says anything at first, including Mr. Cole. He knows Kwame from the discipline center, knows he can snap if you really push him.

"Kwame, you hear your teacher?" Cole asks, all condescending like, but still placing it on me.

Kwame doesn't say anything, just stares at Cole, lookin' like he's ready to lose it, his eyes no longer soft like when he was looking at the picture, so I chime in, trying to keep the peace,

"Come on, Kwame, be smart. It ain't worth it. It's just your hoodie." So, Kwame turns to me, same stare, and now I'm feelin' tense, regrettin' comin' out in the hallway, wishing I just shut class down and let them sleep the rest of the period. But now I'm caught in this hate, hate, hate triangle wishing I could just disappear, vanish into the floor.

I hold Kwame's gaze a moment longer and again feel the rest of the classes' eyes on me too. "Come on man, just let it go." And then Kwame smirks, pulls his hoodie off real quick, and laughs, more to himself, as he walks away, shaking his head, the rest of the kids following.

Mr. Cole shouts thank you over his shoulder as he walks the other way, but I'm not really listening to him. All I can hear are the kids' sneakers and shoes squeaking on the floor, a kinda labor to their walk, the little bit of enthusiasm they had completely gone now. They go back into the room, talkin' a little, cursing to themselves, but mostly silent. I stay behind, get a drink of water at the fountain outside my room, lettin' the water just hit my lips, not even drinking any, instead just tryin' to tell myself I had to do it, had to enforce the rules, had to make 'em take their hoodies off, had to, had to, had to, had to...

When I finally come in, all their heads are down except Kwame's. I walk back to the front, feeling Kwame's eyes following me the entire time. I head up to the chalkboard, pick up a piece of chalk and think about writin' some bullshit, impromptu journal question for 'em to answer but think better of it. As I'm standin' there, back turned, shakin' the chalk in my hand like a pair of dice at the crap tables, hoping the bell would just ring and let it be over, I hear the radiator humming still. Still rattling and vibrating. "Fucking thing," I mumble to myself, and then, "Fuck it!" real loud and go to the top drawer of my desk and pull out a hammer I keep in there for hanging pictures. I head over to the radiator, steppin' over school bags and empty seats, moving three or four desks at a time, the metal legs scratching against the tile floor. All the kids' heads are up now, starin' in awe as I wind the hammer high in the air and smash the radiator grill as hard as I can. The grill just vibrates a bit the first time. But then I hit it again and three of the metal strips bend a little and a few metal fragments break off. I aim for that spot again and again and again and eventually there's a big hole, so I stick the hammer down there, latch the claw underneath the grill and pull. I can feel the kids' eyes on me, thinking I've lost my mind, but I don't give a

shit. All I'm thinkin' about is destroying this fucking radiator. So, I just keep pulling and pulling and pulling until the whole grill pops off, but the noise is still goin', so I just start kicking the front panel. But I'm kicking Mr. Cole too. And Kwame. And the dress code. And Rocky. And fidelity. And 10th Grade Provisionals. And Karen Hesse. And Tupac. And black and white photos. And Robin Williams. AND MYSELF. Eventually I kick it so hard that the panel comes off and falls on my foot and I yell, "Fuck!" but then the noise stops, and the kids cheer and they're outta their desks, high-fivin' each other and thanking me and telling me it's okay. It would've been great. I would've felt good about myself, felt like I accomplished something. Instead, I just kept my back turned as they kept their heads down, feeling Kwame's eyes on me, standing halfway between the light and the dark of the room, hoping for the bell to ring.

Poetry

Caught
by Alyssa Fern

When I sit silent and you ask,
if I am okay
and I respond,
that I'm just tired
and you nod
in acceptance,
I am waiting for you
to care enough
to see the lie in my eyes
dancing frantically for attention,
dying to get caught
the way I am caught,
a bug trapped
in a spider's web
trying to escape
my own mind

Mania

by Shyheim Williams

The clock ticks by constantly
Winding, turning, marking
Time, clicking life forward
And then it stops

For a second I freeze,
Breathless.
Oxygen level decreasing
Like sand in an hourglass.

And my mind stills.
Aware of my vulnerability
then it jolts,
Suddenly rejuvenated.

My breath returns.
My head lightens.
And I see yellow,
For now.

Crawling Beneath My Skin

by Savannah Brown

Even when I am silent
Laying in the darkness,
Alone in my bed,
Chaos consumes my mind.

Trapped in my own brain
As my thoughts race in circles,
I can't control them—
The madness controls *me*.

I don't want any company
So, I shut out the world,
Close my eyes,
And let my head spin.

I wish I could run away from it all,
But it never stops dragging me down,
Forcing me into solitude,
Drowning me in despair.

Hiding under the covers
I hope my demons can't find me,
But I can't seem to get away
From the evil that lurks inside me.

You see, the truth is...

I am the monster in my head,
I am the villain in this story,
I am the enemy within,
And I can feel it crawl beneath my skin.

'Til Expiry

by Shyheim Williams

The fog refused to relent.
Another morning
Desperately searching for
A median that wasn't there.
Weather reflective of moods.
Concealed in consequence
We leave our dreams.
Unaware of the signs:
Nascent in childhood
Rebellious in youth
Iridescent in death.
We breathe.
Luggage packed
Spending minutes
Stuffing and twisting and zipping
Rushing to utter final goodbyes
As the door closes.

Perspective

by Teresa Tellekamp

We live in a Universe of opposites. If there is infinitely
big, then there is infinitely small. It's an awareness
that we are immense—we examine the inch
worm as he rises and falls over the tips of
our thumbs. And yet, we are specks—
we stand at the edge of the ocean
and clutch our chests as the
sun drowns beneath the
horizon. We believe we
are insignificant, but
know the Universe
exists on a
pinhead
.

The Current and Foreseeable Future of You and Me

by Val Casola

how backwards it is
to love someone whom you want
nowhere near your heart

Life Preserver

by Leslie Briggs

I don't want to tell this story,
But I know My Silence may harm others.
Telling my story will harm me,
But it won't be the first time.

I don't want you to know
about the way I tasted
salt and rust when my dad stopped me
in a stair well, hands like anchors
on my shoulders

"Is that true? What you told me on the phone, is it true?"
My Silence spoke for me.

I don't want you to know
about the numbness that crept
through me from
the tips of my fingers
and soles of my feet

It filled me
the way water floods a basement:
all at once,
indiscriminate and damaging
I became a woman lost
at sea, treading thick black water,
cradled in the arms of a hurricane.

I don't want you to know
about the weight that settled in
my chest—that gets heavier
each time I tell this story.

I don't want you to see
how guilt eats
me alive
even though I am The Innocent

I don't want you to see
me
pointing fingers
but it's the only way
I can see
the coastline.

Haunted

by Savannah Brown

Mascara runs down her face
And she realizes she's back in that same place.
The one that makes her feel like she'll never be good enough,
Even after pretending to be so tough.
But the truth remains,
Her heart will always feel these pains.
She longs to find happiness,
But day after day she still feels like a mess.
Who could love someone like that?
She's just a door mat.
Too quick to see the good in everyone,
Too slow to realize when to run.
So, as her eyes fill with tears,
She's reminded of her fears.
Will she ever know
Just how far things should go
Before she finally believes
It's not her worth that makes someone leave?
And although her tears make her strong,
They don't always help her see the wrong.
So, while her smile helps brighten others' day,
She's unsure if anyone can make hers stay.
She always says, "fake it till you make it,"
But how long can she take it?
All alone in a world of lies,
She hugs her pillow and cries.
She wonders why people say, "life isn't so bad,"
Because hers just always tends to feel so sad.
Her fault has remained how much she cares,
But at what point does this become her own burden to bear?
Still, one day she believes she will find a soul
That isn't playing a temporary role,
But rather reminds her that she isn't alone,
As she cries herself to sleep while reading messages on her
phone.
The feeling of not being wanted
Will always be what leaves her heart so haunted.

Gratitude

by Shyheim Williams

It's never too late.

It's when the ice melts
Allowing you to draw breath.

It's when the water fills your head
And extinguishes the fires in your mouth
That you begin to feel relief.

It's when the rain replaces your tears
Running down your face
That you begin
To feel the life its touched.

It's when the tree grows
That you are reminded
That there's more than just you.
And you whisper to the sky,
Thank you.

Morning

by Teresa Tellekamp

You open your eyes

The sun hides in the clouds
and tucks away his brush
Because your lashes paint
The landscape better than he can.

Time does not move you—
You move with time.
You laugh; the Earth spins.
You exhale; the galaxy expands.

The desert floor splits;
The sand quivers
and dandelions erupt
Like guerrilla fighters.

The bankers abandon
Their glass buildings
And plant seeds in the sidewalks
Where green vegetables grow.

The military academies teach
Meditation and medicine
And on the battlefield, soldiers
Drop their rifles and share poetry

Thanks to you and your eyes.

La Douleur Exquise

by Leslie Briggs

She smelled like stale cigarettes and off-brand Wint-O-Green
mints,
She bit me the first time we kissed,
her mouth tasted like cheap beer and adrenaline
and I tasted like fresh blood and naïveté.

She hung her head out the passenger window of my little blue C-
RV,
She smoked four cigarettes as cold air whipped in,
blowing out the flame of her lighter
and I drove too fast down Route 40.

She hid me from her loved ones like I was her prized possession,
She taught me how to blow smoke rings
as we hiked up the sides of mountains
and I fell asleep in her t-shirt after too much vodka.

I snuck out for Taco Bell burritos and late-night drives through
the suburbs of Baltimore,
I stopped for Oreo McFlurries,
laughing as we smeared ice cream on each other's noses
and she brought another girl home for dinner.

Hypocrite

by Savannah Brown

I am fearless, yet fearful
I am guarded, yet wear my heart on my sleeve
I am impulsive, yet intelligent
I am confident, yet insecure
I am strong, yet weak
I am tough, yet fragile
I am thankful, yet burdened
I am home, yet I am lost
I am together, yet I am falling apart
I am unscathed, yet I am scarred
I am happy, yet unfulfilled
I am helpful, but need help
I am getting there, yet unsure if it's where I want to be
I am stubborn, yet bend
I am hopeful, yet hopeless
I am calculated, yet chaotic
I am full of answers, yet can't accept them
I am trusting, yet cynical
I am willing, yet unable
I am full of life, yet can't leave my bed
I am following my heart, yet I don't know where it leads
I am reliable, yet I falter
I am myself, yet I am trying to find her
I am trying, yet failing
I am radiant, yet hide in the darkness
I am energetic, yet tired
I am living, yet merely going through the motions
But mostly, I am unsure of exactly who I am anymore

The Palmist Tells Me Our Lives Were Only Meant to Intersect Once

by Val Casola

You go to the grocery store and
buy steak and mashed potatoes.

I order Chinese take-out

You do your laundry and put
your clothes in the dryer.

I do my laundry and hang
the delicates in my room.

You forget to take out the trash
the night before garbage day.

I replace the air freshener—
mists of lilac—in the kitchen.

You run from one end of town
to the other.

I lift weights on the carpeted
living room floor to a DVD.

You kissed me once in a crowd
of sweaty, dancing people.

I kissed you once during a
night of dancing with friends.

You put your number in my
phone.

I text it three days later.

You don't answer.

I eventually delete it.

You get in your car.

I get on the bus.

You smoke a cigarette.

I crush my grandmother's in
her ash tray.

You fall asleep next to someone
you don't feel anything for.

I fall asleep with myself
who I'm learning to feel
everything for.

You breathe oxygen.

I breathe oxygen.

You love.

I love.

But not each other.

Proof

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