

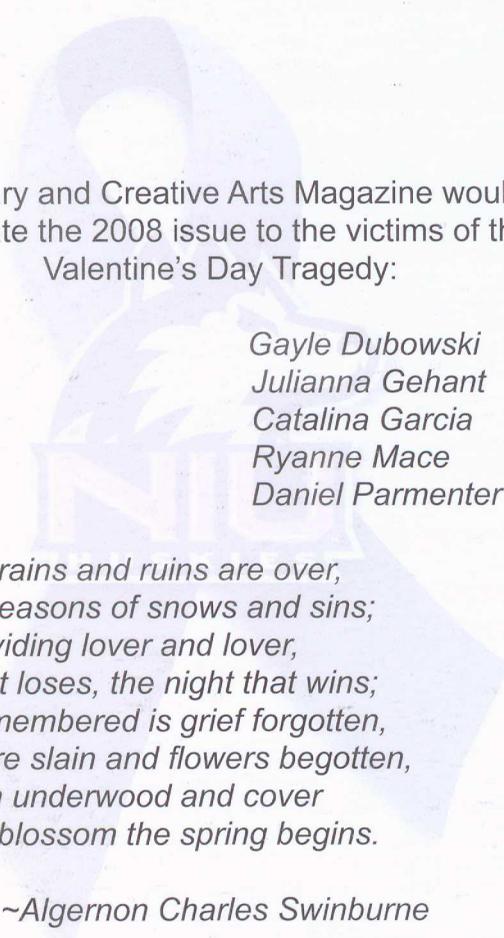
# towers towers towers towers to

literary & creative arts magazine



2008

number 88



Towers Literary and Creative Arts Magazine would like to  
dedicate the 2008 issue to the victims of the  
Valentine's Day Tragedy:

*Gayle Dubowski  
Julianna Gehant  
Catalina Garcia  
Ryenne Mace  
Daniel Parmenter*

*For winter's rains and ruins are over,  
And all the seasons of snows and sins;  
The days dividing lover and lover,  
The light that loses, the night that wins;  
And time remembered is grief forgotten,  
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,  
And in green underwood and cover  
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.*

*~Algernon Charles Swinburne*

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literary & creative arts magazine

# 88

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*Wannabe* 1,2,3

Kellen Scott

# acknowledgments

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the people who made this year's Towers possible: Linda Watson, Steve and Paul Barnaby and the staff at Barnaby Printing.

*Congratulations to the winners of the Editor's Choice awards:*

**fiction**

Zach Sands for "Epitaph"

**nonfiction**

Lionel Newman for  
"Letters from Thailand"

**poetry**

David Rauch for "Ramadan"

**art**

Kellen Scott  
for "Wanna Be 1,2,3"

All entries printed with permission.

Towers is funded by the Student Association.

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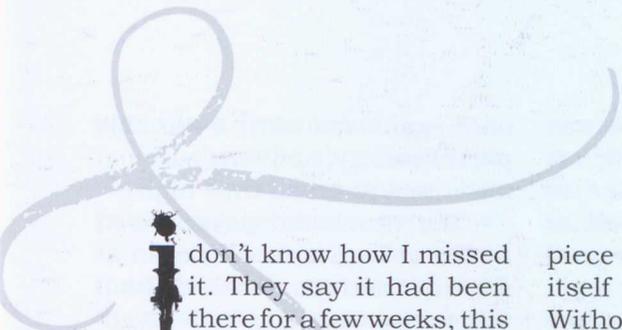
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# epitaph

*Zach Sands*

I don't know how I missed it. They say it had been there for a few weeks, this land mass the size of Nebraska, slowly inching its way toward Earth through a vast expanse of nothing. Of course, this suggests an epic drama that the truth in the matter fails to afford. The people on the news used words like imminent and apocalyptic and stay tuned, but based on what I know about Nebraska and the speed of land masses, we weren't missing anything. It would still be there tomorrow.

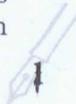
I first noticed it when I went outside to check the mail. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. When I looked around, though, the only person I saw outside of a moving car was the old man who lives across the street and whose name I can never remember. He was getting the newspaper, still wearing his bathrobe, and for some reason, he had stopped to look up. Curiosity drew my eyes to the focal point of his stare.

With only the sky in my periphery, the world stood still, and when the significance of this vision settled to a sobering clarity, it felt at that moment like I was looking down the barrel of a loaded gun. There was nothing but empty air between me and the asshole end of everything. Frankly, humbling as it was, it didn't look like much - just a

piece of rock that had attached itself to the morning sky. Without even realizing it, I had already wadded up my bills and opened a credit card offer for which I was supposedly pre-approved.

This wasn't the apocalypse that I was expecting. No burning cars. Nobody running naked through the streets. No Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome. For the most part, it had all the markings of an ordinary day. People drove to work, impatient as usual, drinking coffee, talking on cell phones and listening to morning radio. It was as if the world had no intention of changing just because of some planetoidal mass that had wandered aimlessly into Earth's gravitational field. It was only Wednesday.

When I got inside, I called in to work and told the manager on duty that I wouldn't be coming in. He seemed genuinely surprised and lectured me about my work ethic and why I won't be able to use him for a reference when I go to look for another job. Somewhere in the middle of this bold exercise in denial, I hung up and turned the television back on. Everything was on sale. A mattress store was offering apocalyptic savings on all bedroom sets. A used car dealership had abandoned their no payments for ninety days promotion in favor of a cash



only policy. Everything else was a rerun. A few of the religious channels had already gone to static, probably as a result of some kind of rapture clause in their contracts. On other channels, though, it seemed like religion was all that anybody wanted to talk about. God this and Jesus H. that. We had never been formally introduced. Now all I had to do was look up, and there was God, up in the sky, as a solid piece of the universe, coming down, indifferent to all of our plans which were rendered meaningless by circumstance. Simplicity may never have been so complicated.

It wasn't the first time I had ever consciously asked myself what I wanted to do that day, but it was the first time that the options seemed almost without limit. People had already started looting, and Detroit had been reduced to ashes after the last Pistons game. Meanwhile, travel agencies were reporting record sales and the airlines were making unprecedented profits. The price of gas had also gone up considerably, at least where it was still being sold. Just in the past two weeks, most of the country had reverted to a barter system where goods and services were exchanged without having a dead president to serve as the middleman. The rest of the planet was already on board, and oddly, the wealth of the world was more evenly distributed than it had ever been in the past. Farmers were

once again treated as a valuable part of society, and international trade was at an all time high.

The numbered days offered by the collective media began at fifty-nine and counted down from there. It was already forty-seven, and I had barely left the couch. The only significant change in my lifestyle was that I had once again taken up smoking. I traded a six pack of beer and five cans of Spaghetti-O's for a carton of cigarettes. This offered me a relative semblance of control over my impending mortality.

As the days passed, though, I started thinking about everything that I had accomplished in my life, the places I'd been and the people I'd loved. I wondered what was next and what I may miss the most. I thought about last words and how I'd like to have something profound to say, even if nobody would hear it. I had decided long ago that I didn't want the last thing I say to include the words "Spring break" or "What the hell is that thing?"

I also started attempting to play the guitar that had been reduced to furniture by years of neglect. The strings were like barbed wire, but I finally got the hang of a G major and was able to keep it in tune despite a missing string. I had a goal of learning at least one song before the end of the world. I heard that they were having a grand finale downtown, where thousands of people were set to hold hands in the final moments of humanity. It cost five bucks, but they give

you a free drink ticket.

By the time the countdown reached seven days, though, the panic had become a pandemic. The thing in the sky was bigger than the moon and hotter than the sun, and ready to punch the earth square in the face. Various nations had taken attempts at shooting it out of the sky with their stockpiled nuclear arsenals. One of the missiles misfired, and rumor has it that most of Central America now suffers from radiation poisoning. World leaders were surprised to learn that Nicaragua even had nuclear capabilities, albeit in an adolescent state of development.

The leaders themselves were now miles underground in bunkers designed to maintain and perpetuate the human race. Other important people, like talk show hosts and basketball players, joined them in their secret locations. Apparently, if there's one thing that humanity needs in the years that follow, it's somebody who can throw a ball through a hoop really well. I don't mean to be cynical, though. Most people are predicting that even the underground bunkers won't survive the impact. Even Letterman said all that will be left are cockroaches and Velveeta.

It's amazing that all these thousands of years of evolution and intellectual progress brought us here to this moment, with nothing to do but wait. I'm twenty-three and I'll never be twenty-four. I can't help but feel a little cheated by that. Just

like everyone else, life has led me here, with nothing to do but solemnly look up into the unblinking eye of God. For the first time, I think I know what it means to love my fellow man, and it comes from a place of sympathy. We all share the same fate, and these last days are all we have. This is life, in all of its beauty and horror, and that thing up in the sky is the finish line of the human race. There are no winners, and all we really did was run around in a big circle, but when time is limited, there are better things to do than regret. Perhaps there always have been.

As the numbered days were reduced to hours and the hours were reduced to minutes, the radiated heat began to raise the temperature in the stratosphere and everything grew still and silent. Animals seemed to disappear, and then everything around me was steadily consumed by this immense shadow. From a lawn chair on an empty street in the midst of quiet chaos, I watched the tops of trees catch fire while I held my guitar with a broken string and played my song. In that moment, which was both a blink of an eye and a lifetime, I finally understood what it means to be alive. As for the last words I said—the words I struggled for weeks to come up with, to speak for myself and for the rest of us—it turned out that it wasn't words that escaped my mouth.

It was laughter.

The day they brought Walt Disney back, a door-to-door knife sales man in California was found dead. Joseph Brody's face rested in the steering wheel of his hunter green Saturn. No forced entry, no signs of heart failure, no sudden brain aneurysm. He didn't even make it out of his parking spot. He sat there dead while doctors in Arizona spent thirty-nine hours trying to convince old Walt he was the man responsible for three theme parks, thirty movie masterpieces, a slew of character memorabilia, and emotional scars for any skinny, big-headed kid with a widow's peak and ears the size of coasters. Papers said Walt cried like an old grandmother, spitting out questions like "What happened to me?"

What am I doing here?

The obituary described Joseph Brody as a man with a vision. With the help of his father's military pension, he was going to muster enough money to make a TV pilot about animal sock puppets stuck on a deserted island.

Down in Scottsdale, Arizona, the people responsible for the highlights of human history were being stored until science caught up with nature. Einstein, Teddy Roosevelt, Elvis, and

Princess Diana were all waiting for science to defend their lives, even in death. The mastering of nanotechnology forced the Cypress Life Revival Foundation to make their business public. Beginning in the nineteen sixties, the study of Cryonics brought about the idea of extending life. And ever since then, the Cypress Life Revival Foundation has been placing people in suspended animation to further life. Death is a means, not an end.

"We gather here today to lay rest the body of Alondra Sanchez." Raindrops the size of silver dollar coins fall on my mother's maroon-finished casket. There's Tia Patricia holding an umbrella over Padre Rivera's head as he reads my mother's favorite psalm. Monotonous words fumble out of his mouth, the same way luggage tumbles down the conveyor belt in an airline terminal. The Bible pages are rolling paper-thin and starting to come apart in the rain. We're all here. The whole family. Even my mother's second cousin is here, Sylvia, who my mother rescued from a burning shack when they were both eight. Everyone is decked out in black, except Tio Vicente who's wearing white slacks. Since it's so close to Labor Day,

he said, this would be the last time he could wear them.

The science of freezing people has always been around, and once the dead began to rise, schools were forced to teach their students about Gregory Fahy, the man responsible for vitrification. Cypress just isn't in the people freezing business, stacking cold bodies one on top of the other like chocolate-covered bananas forgotten in the back of the freezer; they use vitrification to alter organic tissue into low temperature "glass." Protective chemicals replace sixty percent of the water contained in the cells that make up a human body. The body doesn't freeze like an ice cube. The molecules a body is composed of begin to move slower and slower until all chemistry stops at negative one hundred and twenty-four degrees Celsius. Why do I know all this? My biology final is tomorrow and seventy percent of it is on Cryonics.

\* \* \*

The day they brought back Marilyn Monroe, somewhere down in Atlanta, a stripper named Desire dropped dead on the main stage of a gentleman's club. The MC and security were useless in offering a coherent story as to what exactly happened, but there were a lot of witnesses. Every one of them chose to remain anonymous, but each said she was propped upside down. Her legs interlocked around the pole, her arms reaching for

damp dollar bills between cold male fingers, her breasts still in place from when her top was on, when suddenly her eyes rolled to the back of her head. Desire's arms went limp and her legs separated from one another. Her neck broke her fall.

Thawing out Marilyn...

Thawing Marilyn was a little more difficult than any other person. Her hands clasped the white collar of any doctor near her, demanding to know what happened to the rest of her ass. She cried and cried, begging for the hair extensions she swore were stolen from her. They were genuine Indian hair. Didn't that mean anything to anyone?

Day after day people were dying for no apparent reason, and every morning the paper had a new headline of a recently thawed celebrity.

AIDS. Cancer. All are treatable now, but people still die. How much is your life worth? According to the FDA, more corporations than Cypress are charging to get you off the hook from dying. People started signing up as Cypress customers not because cures weren't available, but because their families couldn't afford to pay for the necessary prescriptions or surgeries. You became a registered Cypress member because your family couldn't pay to have hordes of microscopic robots whoosh through your body, delivering medicine or repairing dead cells.

You can't go a day without learning about the Cypress procedure. When they began this campaign, it was supposed to dispel stereotypes of them using witchcraft to re-circulate the dead with the living. What it did was make people realize how much of a vehicle we are for things greater than us. Cypress flooded the airways. Special presentations were held on TV to discuss what Cypress could do for you. Representatives would come to classrooms. Dad got a day off work, with pay, as long as he attended a brunch sponsored by the Cypress Life Revival Foundation.

\* \* \*

"Alondra was a woman who loved nature," preaches Padre Rivera, "and it was not uncommon to see her spend hours basking in her garden." Dad is detached from the circle of overlapping umbrellas surrounding Mom's coffin. His broad shoulders taking the brunt of the rain, Dad and Tio Bobby pass a prayer book between one another, concealing the flask of whiskey I filled for them. Padre Rivera adjusts his glasses. His note cards are beginning to fall apart; the highlights of my mother's life are dissolving in the rain.

"Alondra," Padre continues, trying to recall whatever big words he wrote down to describe my mother's personality, "Alondra's precociousness as a young child often led her away from the larger groups her age. But the

force that fueled her individual identity would become the defining quality about her and would make her a staple in the community."

When it became public that people were being unfrozen, the papers produced clever headlines like "The Grim Reaper Has Left The Building."

"The Day Taxes Became The One Constant."

A customer had to sign up with Cypress to be frozen. Even then, Cypress could only step in once you were diagnosed as clinically dead. If a member was terminally ill, he or she was encouraged to relocate to Arizona. If not, Cypress sent a transfer squad to their location, waiting for the member to die. There was only one transfer squad in the beginning, but now they have a transfer squad in every state. The member's heart has to stop beating for over five minutes, and a doctor has to pronounce the member legally dead before the transfer squad can jump into action. This means, along with your sobbing family, a group of workers in white uniforms click their tongues against their teeth as they wait for you to take your last breath. If you end up dying outside of a hospital, no problem. Each member is fitted with a bracelet or necklace, stating that if the member's body is found dead, Cypress needs to be notified ASAP so they can fetch the body before the brain decomposes. That's really the

main concern. The body is only a system of replaceable pumps and pulleys, but damage to the brain is damage to the soul.

Once the hospital is done with the member, the squad transports him or her to their station, where the body is placed in an ice bath. Blood flow and breathing are artificially restored with a "thumper." That's the gadget used for CPR, only Cypress doesn't use the term CPR. They refer to it as CPS: Cardiopulmonary Support. They need to keep the brain alive, not resuscitate a person back to life. The member is fixed with IV lines filled with protective medications to maintain the body. Excitotoxicity inhibitors. Anticoagulants. Pressors and pH buffers.

Big words. Strange words.

Cypress representatives could go on about the whole process. About how the femoral arteries and veins are surgically rooted so the member's blood is distributed through a heart-lung machine that lives for him or her. The heart-lung machine reduces temperature to one or two degrees above the freezing point of water. Blood is replaced with a safeguarding solution. It's what hospitals use to transport organs. The transfer squad then packs the body in ice and ships it to Cypress headquarters.

It's a Cypress surgeon that connects major blood vessels to a perfusion circuit. That's how they're able to completely

clean out any remaining blood. Ah, the homestretch when they start pumping the body with a cryoprotectant concentration. This is what prevents ice crystals from forming. Arctic frogs produce the same concentration in their liver. Doctors cover the body in silicone oil, place it in a stainless steel Thermos, and drop the temperature. Once the target temperature is met, the Cypress member is stored for as long as possible in liquid nitrogen at negative one hundred and ninety-six degrees. Any questions?

To die no longer means forever. Death is more of a human lay-away until your family can afford to bring you back. Already The Doors and Jimmy Hendrix are scheduling comeback tours, while garage bands in Orange County and Boston are breaking up from the deaths of their lead singers. The day they brought back Gianni Versace, a construction worker in Portland closed his eyes while eating a hoagie and let his body slide off a steel beam on a four-story high rise. The more stiffs they bring back, the easier it gets. From Secretariat to average CEOs, old family members are coming back and the rate of miscarriages all around the world has jumped twenty percent. You know the saying, how for every door that closes another one opens; well, it works both ways now.

Death is a means, not an

end. Once Cryonics was covered by life insurance, Cypress stock went through the roof, and the idea of "The Death of Death" was the topic for everyone. The Cypress Life Revival Foundation came out like gangbusters once critics attacked the organization for playing God. They responded with all types of media outlets, but the most effective was the commercial. It's a two-minute clip of "real" people lashing out against conservative thought. Scripted words are churned out by the farmer riding his tractor through the Nebraska plains. The screen cuts to an interracial couple sharing ice cream. Cut to a four year-old girl prancing in her red flower dress, picking daisies along the family pond. And finally the commercial ends with the words of a recently thawed celebrity. The camera cuts to each stereotype throughout the commercial, each building on the other's words.

"Death ensues only when no steps are taken after the heart stops..."

"Cypress believes you're never really dead until your brain is past the point of no return..."

"If wanting to live is so wrong, then why does anyone put up a fight against disease and illness..."

"When those fascist critics claim someone or something to be 'dead,' it's simply medicine's way of relieving itself from problems it is too lazy to solve.

Reasoning like this makes those Fat Cats feel better about abandoning patients and making half-assed lies that the problem can never be fixed. The Cypress Life Revival Foundation understands the truth: the line that separates life and death is distorted. Cypress is composed of innovators looking the Unknown right in the face. Cypress is the only logical thing to do. It is the American thing to do..."

There is no heaven anymore. There is no hell. A person's soul remains on Earth, and now it's on permanent rewind. People started to realize a problem when they brought back Tupac Shakur. A week later Che Guevara's brain was re-animated, and that night Tupac was found lying lifeless with his eyes crusted over, waiting in the green room to give a speech on his musical tactics at the NAACP. Humans make the same mistakes throughout history not because it's our first time here, but because we struggle to learn from our past. We die and come back to smooth out our souls, but bringing dead people back is ruining their second chances. The debate on CNN is whether Hitler should be thawed to be put on trial for his crimes, but it doesn't matter. Hitler is paying for his sins somewhere as a middle-aged grocery clerk, arguing with elderly women wearing only their dress slips about why they can't use two coupons for the same item.

How and why was Hitler frozen anyway?

The point is controlling death isn't the solution. What people need to worry about is what these new events say about us. What can be taken away from us is never really ours in the first place. Now our soul is included. Every day a person wakes up he or she risks his or her soul being repossessed by someone else's life insurance. The day they bring back Desi Arnez or Frida Kahlo, that could be it for me. And these are big name people coming back. If their lives weren't enough to end their cycles of life and death, what does that say about me?

I think about these things while I walk the hallways at school on my way to the bathroom. I try to catch my reflection in the sweating chrome of the urinal handle. Leaning my face closer, I see an overblown version of my father's nose. I see my mother's eyes spread far apart. The dimple in my chin belongs to my great uncle. I have to wipe away tears from the handle to see the meaty cheeks I've inherited from my

grandmother. I have someone else's sense of humor, some stranger's lack of responsibility. I've stolen my smile from another person in time. I've hoarded all the traits once considered desirable to people I've never met. Maybe this is God testing us. He's letting the human race recycle itself so we can think maybe he doesn't exist. If there were no God, no afterlife, no consequences, would I really be living the way I do now?

Dad refuses to set up a fund to bring Mom back because he is convinced these second-coming humans will turn out to be zombies.

He's simple, but he's on the right path.

Grandma Sanchez feels Dad is just pissed because his signed Babe Ruth baseball has dropped in value. We gather here today to lay the body of Alondra Sanchez to rest, and I have no clue who my mother was. The day my mother collapsed onto the stove while cooking our Sunday breakfast, two celebrities were brought back:

Katharine Hepburn and Lassie.

Rows of booths lined the airy show floor, each one a window displaying the innermost secrets of the hundreds of artists at the enormous expo. He waded through a sea of art lovers, wondering if they felt the same way he did. He felt voyeuristic just being there, and he almost blushed to recall how wonderful that feeling was. It was like walking a suburban street at night with houses whose occupants had all left the inside lights on and the curtains pulled aside, inviting onlookers to gawk blamelessly. Illuminated against the darkness, he could see so clearly the inner lives of the artists. Most were beautiful, not realistic, a myriad of colors and sensual exaggerations, paintings and photographs of impossible worlds, escapism at its finest. The artists themselves hung their smiles like picture frames, and most looked crooked to him.

In a faraway corner between a booth of washed-out nature stills and an emergency exit sign, he glimpsed through a window so familiar that he swore he had lived in that home all his life. It was a rare gallery of softer tones, darker lighting, smoother lines, and longing so palpable that he could feel it on his skin like a lover's breath. His

skin tingled as he scanned the walls of painted figures locked permanently in good fortune's embrace. There were at least two pictures of lovers who were inches away from joining lips, forever reveling in that moment of anxious anticipation, that intoxicating eternity of breathlessness and erratic heartbeats. Without a doubt, he had found her booth.

She didn't recognize him. They had only exchanged e-mails in the past. But he knew her image from the likeness she created of herself, a non-flattering caricature with wild curly hair, eyes large and cheerless, and expressions drearier than an entire gallery of dark art that he had passed earlier. He stepped up to the table she sat behind, her eyes studying him curiously, her smile real at the sight of someone interested in her art. Her hair wasn't so wild tied back into a ponytail.

He leaned over the table, laying his hands down on it for support, pretending to look over the gallery he had seen hundreds of times during his frequent visits to her online gallery. "I see why they separated you from the others." In the corner of his eye, she looked curious, not offended. "Do you?" "Oh yes." He said, finally looking directly at her, studying her

closely. Her face was slightly drawn, he imagined from the sheer tedium of sitting there all day, and her eyes looked for a moment expectant. "You would take all the sales if they put you anywhere else! They have to be fair to those less talented."

Her smile became more of a cautious smirk and her gaze broke free of his. "I bet you say that to all the girl artists."

"Not so!" He tilted his head to follow her blue eyes. Her thick eyeliner reminded him of her caricature and made her eyes impossible to ignore. "I say the same to all the boy artists, too!" She rolled her eyes, but he managed a single laugh out of her. She turned her head to hide her smile. He swayed rhythmically to get her attention and gestured with his chin over her right shoulder. "That picture." She turned to look at it. "Tell me about that one." "That?" She pointed, and he nodded. It was a small square painting, an aerial view of a beach washed in orange light from a fading sunset. A boy lounged alone, barely more than a sketch, on a towel with a vacant spot next to him marked by darker tones and rougher textures. She studied it for a moment, her face hidden as she mused. She didn't turn to him, "Someone commissioned me to draw this years ago."

"Was he happy with it?"

"How do you know it was a he?" She turned back to him, that same sort of bated hope in

her eyes from earlier. "But yes, very. He said it was absolutely perfect. He was a bad liar, just like you."

He turned his head from her, grinning to veil his anxiety. As much as he had rehearsed and imagined meeting her, he could do little to quell his inhibitions. "Well," he paused, "last time I checked, I was still a he."

Immediately she knew, and she looked ready to burst from her chair to greet him properly, but she remembered the table between them. She looked overcome with joy and then with doubt and then with surprise. "You came all the way—from another country!—and didn't even tell me beforehand!" Then she looked frazzled, more and more like her caricature by the minute, and she hid her face again and pulled her arms over her. "I must look terrifying! I had no idea you were coming or I would've—"

"You look beautiful." She looked thoroughly unconvinced, but she was calmed. Smiling, he found a black binder in front of her and opened it. Inside were more prints of that familiar art he had admired for years, dozens of pages from a thinly veiled memoir detailing a life of longing. As he flipped through the chapters, she looked up at him curiously, surely wondering why he was suddenly so silent. He could never admit to her how frightened he was of embarrassing himself, of saying

anything stupid to the woman he had admired and commissioned for years.

He stumbled upon a picture unknown to him. A curly-haired young woman, obviously the artist, lay in a garden surrounded entirely in a sea of colors. She reclined in a classical pose with one hand rested on her hip, the other's fingertips tenderly caressing the long thin petals of a deep blue flower, a kind he had never seen before. Its dozens of pedals splayed from its white center like streams of water falling in a fountain. Her eyes were hidden in the painting, but her slightly parted lips clearly showed that she was admiring the beatific flower. The top half of the painting portrayed a sky full of white stars. At first he didn't notice the blue star directly above the mysterious flower. Unable to look away from the brilliant lines and coloring that all expertly drew his eye back to the flower, he asked, "Why is such a wonderful work of art not part of your online gallery?"

She frowned, a strange reaction to a compliment, and said, "My roommate must have put that in my binder without me knowing." She pulled the binder away from him and contemplated the picture. "This is a very personal picture to me. It wasn't meant to be shared." "Ooh," he smiled encouragingly, "sounds like there's a good story behind it." She half-looked up over the binder, smiling weakly.

"Then you'll be disappointed if I tell you." Her eyes studied the picture again, tracing the patterns slowly back to the blue focal point. "It's nothing."

"No way!" He protested with a laugh. "If it's personal, then it must be something. Please share—I promise I won't laugh!" How absurd that must have sounded as he laughed. She rolled her eyes but wore a peculiar grin. "Fine, I'll share—but only because begging is so unbecoming of you." With one last look at the painting, she took a deep breath and told him of her grandmother.

This admirable woman had spent her life as a volunteer worker, aiding impoverished nations with her seamstress abilities, selflessly dedicating her life to those less fortunate. When she was diagnosed in the incurably late stages with breast cancer, she decided to return home to spend her final days with the eight-year-old granddaughter she had never known, to whom she passed down the saint-like empathy that inspired her granddaughter to become an artist.

When asked about the grandfather she had never met, her grandmother had also passed down a fantastic tale of love in which a young foreign man appeared before a drought-stricken village and fell in love with a local girl. A jealous wizard of the area also had feelings for this girl and devised a curse to turn the foreigner

into a nameless blue flower. The young woman mourned the loss of her admirer, never falling for the wizard. She stood the flower up in the ground in the middle of the barren fields, and the flower took root, and though it was not the wizard's intent, the spirit within the flower shared its love with the land and leant its energy slowly into reviving the once dead crops and various plants of the area. The wizard took credit for the miracle and became drunk with fame, eventually forgetting about the girl and her cursed lover entirely. The girl visited the flower every night, sad for a lover she had never truly known, but thankful for his undying benevolence, until it wilted and died one year after it took root, the land fully restored.

She explained to him how much the story had touched her, its magic an important part of her even in her mid-twenties. Every year on the anniversary of her grandmother's passing, she repainted the same scene from the story, each time making the image evermore magical.

"Wait," he said, "what's the significance of the blue star?" She laughed. "What can I say? I love visual balance.

They found themselves ascending, floating steadily into the night sky, a glass elevator their very own rocket ship. She lived in the city's center in one of the taller apartment buildings. They had decided it would be criminal for them

not to spend the remainder of the day together, and she had decided they should spend their final hours atop the world.

On the rooftop, two lounge chairs awaited them. They lay down and poured themselves glasses of merlot, thanking the comfortable air but cursing the light pollution—or had they laughed at that? He'd always confused the two. Either way, he was sure there was some significance to them being so close to the stars and yet unable to see them. But they pretended to see them as if they were interpreting clouds, certain that the animals had camouflage that only they could see through. "I think I see it! Yes—I see it!"

"Oh yeah?" He said. "You really see an elephant?" She laughed. "How could you miss it?"

"Aha! I tricked you!" He nudged her with his free hand and pointed upward. "That's not an elephant at all! That's clearly a blue star of questionable significance."

Again she laughed. "No, I definitely see an elephant."

"You would say that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means have another drink!" He topped off her glass and poured the rest of the bottle's contents into his own. There was a long silence except for their occasional giggling and the faint echo of the cars far below them. He turned himself fully to her, careful not to spill his drink, and said, "I want to

buy that picture.”

She was silent, her eyes fixed on the hazy sky, painting new worlds to escape to. She took another drink.

“Do you?”

The question took him by surprise. “Yes.” He said. “Yeah.”

She grinned, “You’re awfully cruel—you know that, right?” Her grin quickly melted away as she contemplated the matter. She seemed distraught. “I don’t think I can part with it. It means too much to me.”

He was a terrible businessman after so quickly drinking a half bottle of wine. “I’ll give you 600, and that’s my final offer!”

“Cruel!” She exclaimed, bristling and clearly flustered. “It’s so good!” he insisted. “It should at least be shared. What if I wrote a story about it, too?”

No. I don’t know. It’s too personal!” He didn’t argue with her. There was something about her expression, about those silhouetted blue eyes that showed so clearly what she was feeling, that filled him with such guilt but also with such adoration. He felt heavy. “I’m sorry,” he said, lying back down and trying to see what she saw. “Forget I ever mentioned it.” Her breathing became heavier and her lips parted in a way that was immediately familiar to him. The world slowed, and they drank the silence for a long while.

She already seemed to be dreaming when she finally spoke again, barely above a whisper, “Maybe if you brought me a name-

less blue flower.”

He turned his head to her, struggling to read her expression with her eyes now closed. “Too easy. They’re all nameless to me.” Almost imperceptibly, her lips slowly curled into a smile and stayed that way well into her sleep. His gaze never strayed from her lips, the muffled echo of the street cars far below steadily faded, and he was certain he could hear her heart beating.

Unsure of how much time had passed, his eyes opened after a long blink to a field of stars. The city lights had vanished and so too had the city sounds. Amid the countless white specks in the sky, a single blue star hung low in the east. He turned to the angel sleeping next to him to be sure he wasn’t dreaming. Except for the soft light her body emitted, she was exactly as beautiful as he remembered her. He watched her stomach slowly rise and fall. He watched her hair sway in the warm breeze. He watched her lips, still open, and waited for them to move. He was convinced that she had never been more real than when she rested next to him.

He sat up, the distant blue light catching his eye again. If this lone star were a matter of visual balance, then he reasoned that a nameless blue flower awaited him beneath it. Abandoning reason, he stood and faced the east and was amazed at what he saw. As high as the rooftop, calm waters had filled the city, the stars reflect-

ing off the glassy surface to create such balance.

He moved cautiously to the roof's edge and peered out over the water, his view blocked in all directions by taller buildings. Just over the edge of the building was an orange wooden boat, two oars crossed in the center. His heart racing, he turned back to take a long look at her, sad for her that she couldn't see this immaculate scene.

He climbed into the boat, steadying himself as it swayed, and the boat immediately moved away from the building before his second foot came down. He dropped to the seat and picked up the oars, quickly placing them over the sides to position the boat eastward. With measured calm, he rowed.

The windows in the buildings he passed reflected him and reflected that perfect symmetry that could only be dreamed up by an artist. The buildings seemed to drift away as he neared them, clearing a path for him. The star moved steadily overhead. He felt lost chasing what may not have been, but the feeling was so natural. He went on.

Finally, he spotted a building straight ahead that grew larger as he neared it, and there were no others in sight. The walls were just high enough that he could not clearly see over them, although the nearer he drew, the more he surely saw faint colors rising up from the square island against the otherwise dark sky.

He angled the boat to the side

of the building and pulled the oars in. Careful not to lose his balance, he stood and grabbed hold of the concrete ledge, struggling to pull himself up over it. He looked over the ledge and was drowned in colors. Covering every inch of the large metal island was a lush garden with flowers and shrubberies and small trees of all colors and sizes.

He hoisted himself fully over the ledge and stood tall, rapt with every colorful detail, until he looked straight up and saw that blue star almost directly overhead. He followed a winding path of round stones and was so determined to find the blue flower that he ignored the hundreds of others he passed.

The path emerged into a spacious grotto; at the center of which was a single blue flower with petals that bloomed like a majestic firework exploding and lighting the sky. He rushed to it, his heart pounding, and he hesitated to go to his knees.

"Hullo!" The voice of a man startled him. He turned around to see an elderly man sitting on a stone bench, sunglasses covering his eyes, a cane in hand. "Who's there?"

"I—" He had the impulse to take the flower and run, but that impulse was quickly crushed by doubt. He said sadly, "I just came to look at the flowers."

"Oh!" The old man looked delighted. He pointed towards the blue flower with his cane. "Lovely, ain't she?"

"Yeah." He took a step back

from the flower. "She's great."

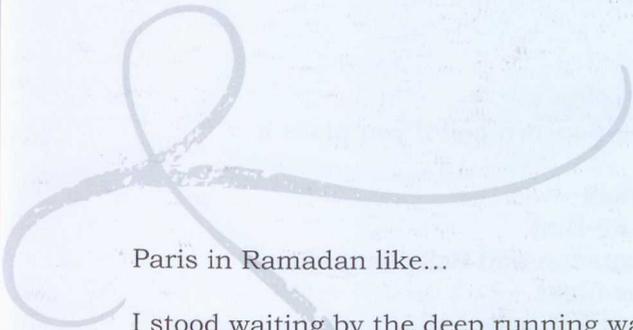
"Oh, don't be modest now! Prettiest flower I ever saw, if I recall right!" The old man scratched his beard and grinned. "Eight short petals sticking out like little bow ties from a, uh, yellow center, am I right, boy?"

He looked closely at it, remarking at how wrong the old man's memory of the flower was. Should he tell the truth? How could he tell a blind man that something he holds so dear is a lie? He sighed, "Yeah, that's exactly right." The old man laughed. "If you want her, I guess I can't stop you from taking her." He thought again about taking the flower, and again the thought crushed him—not from guilt, but from doubt. "I bet a flower like that would win a girl's heart easily!" After a pause, the old man stood slowly and worked his way to the edge of the grotto.

"Well, it's gettin' late. It's off to bed with me. Enjoy the flowers!"

Alone, he closed his eyes and mulled whether to take the flower. And when his reason finally returned to him, he knew with utmost certainty that she wasn't worth it, that not even in a dream did she deserve to be loved. When he opened his eyes again, he was on the same rooftop he started on. He reclined on the lounge chair and closed his eyes to sleep, but not before looking at her one last time, disappointed in everything he saw.

She awoke on the rooftop with the sun peeking its rays over the skyline, and her eyes burned with shame as the dream from the night before played itself again and again in her mind. In crippling self-defeat, she turned herself away from him, cursing him for having come at all.



**ramadan**  
*David Rauch*

Paris in Ramadan like...

I stood waiting by the deep running water with two  
coins in my hand  
One was smaller than the other  
The electric lights of cars passing lit up the flowing  
water all the way... to the uneven brick gutter  
Cigarette butts floated by and the smell of orange  
blossoms still wafted in the air  
the man who sold flowers stepped inside the shop to  
sell and talk  
I wanted one of those flowers  
I wanted to be in the restaurant right now to buy the  
flowers just then  
But I had to wait

He emerged with a bright light carrying his white  
flowers on a thick wooden plate  
And I looked up from the water  
The plate was smooth and he carried it...like a waiter  
I stopped him on the street, over the running water  
and below the lighted windows of Ramadan  
He sold me a string of tiny flowers and walked down  
the alley and away

What I held in my hand was not unlike a string of  
popcorn  
Though popcorn had never seeseen so many kernels in  
all its life

I stood for a moment and pressed the flowers to my  
face  
And it was sweet but I had to be so so so careful  
Such small flowers must not be mishandled

I held them to my nose and breathed in like it was the  
air around me  
And I wanted to put them back where I could see them

“good” I thought and played with the bulbs like a

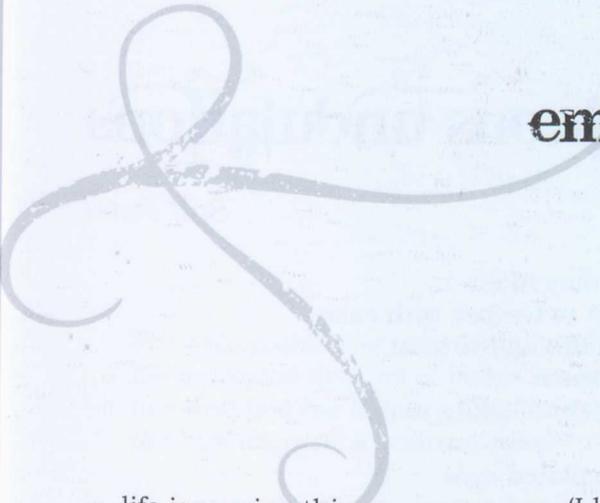
kitten

Small and white like a popcorn ball if you place it  
just like so  
Or maybe it's a snowball  
Though it's too early for that  
It's the last day of Ramadan and Bellville is closed  
up like Christmas Eve night  
Everyone out looks sad not to be inside and warm with  
large tables pushed together

The blossoms are tart and lively and I can't believe  
it's already so late in October  
The flowers so sad and lonely, even on the big wooden  
plate

I turn the corner to china town and I want to smell  
the flowers again

I do and they're so different from everything now in  
the heart of china town  
not like anyone was out in the Muslim part  
Everyone two three four five stories up, not a lit  
storefront in sight  
But each blossom is blessed like a prayer bead by my  
long fingers  
I'm gentle but I want to crush the ball of tiny  
flowers  
Take the clear liquid and boil it down  
till it's so pure  
It can run through street gutters and clean them  
And it'll be so pure it won't make the handrails wet  
And no one will have to stand in line  
Or lean in doorways alone  
And everyone will feel p-p-pious  
And we'll all be able to fast all day if we want  
And if we don't, we'll still feel good  
I smell the flowers and they smell like candy



# emerson's eye

Nathan Schroll

life is moving things

(I had come to decide)

life is movng

things  
afterwards)

(I had come to ask

the lifings is moving

(I have come to adjust to)

the moving lif is ings

(I have begun to embrace)

i move . n thingsg lif is

(I have already forgotten)

l i f thgis mvng i se in . . . o

*(For Dr. Van Cromphout)*

# ambiguous undulations

Saif Patel

They cry so much, but they must  
laugh and sing—enough to temper with ease  
the difficulty of flight, undoing the knot  
weighing as heavily on them  
as on us, this binding debt of being real.

Mark the albatross: the plated eyes  
of steel, marble wings—splendid  
purpose and the spread of a self-established  
span, brooding, peering, hovering. Watch her  
gliding and swooping, constant rhapsode, finding  
food; forager, who owns the world  
not as a prison, but as a treasure-hold  
of deep secrets, alive and intuited in the long rivers  
of marrow and blood under a shroud  
of feathers, awaiting validation. Follow  
her discursive efforts to the horizons  
of a faultless imagination. Or find  
one of the Folk, whose faces are perfumed  
with the traces of unbending  
prostration, whose yearning reaches through here  
and beyond have left brazen skin and furrowed  
brow as when, in some vast, unimaginable  
canyon of limestone, water figures  
the rock: vivid shapes from a heaven  
only they have known. They live  
there, eating, sitting, swimming, with  
*De Profundis* over-inscribed  
on their hearts, palimpsests encapsulating  
the wide streams of what is otherwise  
imperceptible. They make the miraculous  
possible, touch the Reality that we have defined  
out of existence because Anselm was not a poet.

It must be good that pity, need, or some  
incomprehensible necessity  
for common conversation, they have come  
from reticence to mellifluity.

*For Gulsat and Sheila*

cf. "Sunday  
Morning," Wallace  
Stevens: "And,  
in the isolation  
of the sky,/

At evening,  
casual flocks of  
pigeons make/  
Ambiguous  
undulations  
as they sink,/

Downward to  
darkness, on  
extended wings."

Michael Keller

The naked elm that stands among  
his promised dreams of bland repose  
has dropped his leaves to float along  
the bushes near a crimson rose.

He knows the spring, whose breezes bring  
his leaves to virile green, has known  
the fall's advance---a fire tearing  
his flame-kissed youth toward winter stone.

For screaming winds in winter nights  
leave branches naked, trembling for  
a sun whose weak and trembling light  
provides but little warmth to store

Or snow-laced dust that showers him  
in soft decor will change its form  
when sunlight melts and soon grows dim  
to leave a coat of heavy ice

By some artificial twilight  
that glows in crimson, yellow, green---  
the house converts the darkened night  
to hide the growth of frozen sheets

No elm tree draped in shining wires  
or softly lighted store-bought wreaths  
will quell the dreams, the old desires  
in passing cars that grind his leaves

The naked elm that stands among  
his faded dreams of bland repose  
has dropped his leaves to float along  
the bushes near a crimson rose

*For Derek Walcott*

# house of mirrors

*Zach Sands*

Two left  
turns will  
take you there  
like a bookmark  
in a photo album  
these moments  
are the measure  
of a life  
where everything  
is as it was  
or might have been  
in infinite reflection  
the weight of time  
and the fluidity of glass  
in spite of everything  
you think  
you know  
casting doubts  
in the backward  
image of regret  
remembrance of another time  
another life  
where you could have been  
everything  
you could have been  
if only for a moment  
to personify your ideals  
without the burden  
of misplaced apologies  
and all the beautiful mistakes  
that render you complete  
your eyes like tiny mirrors  
within this tiny room  
if only you could see  
this is the universe  
forever in all directions  
you are here  
and everywhere  
and nowhere else  
this time is just  
a moment

# I would tell you I sleep brutally

*Emily Kingery*

I would tell you I sleep brutally

without knowing it. I'm not talking  
twisted sheets, waking with my feet  
at the headboard. I mean bruises.  
I mean raking my nails across my back,  
thighs to hips, thin red furrows

I cultivate. I think I am careful.

But you are no gardener.  
You would unzip my boots, maybe,  
slip the sweater over my head.  
You know nothing of land

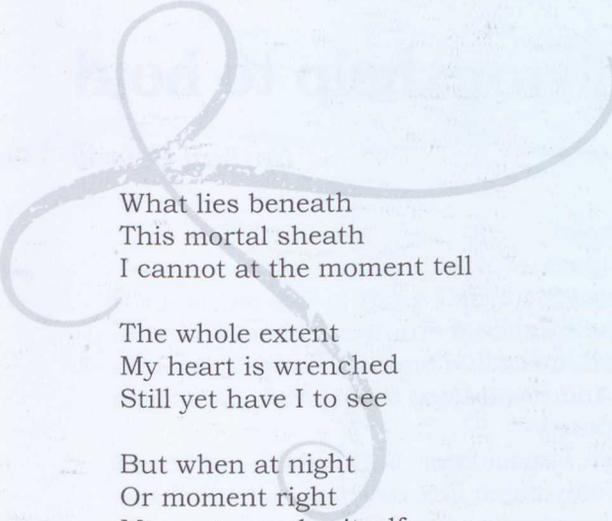
besides staking claims, to say nothing  
of quick healing, to say nothing of  
scars well-hidden. There is hard  
work here, work a romantic heart  
will not allow.  
I will tell you it's a shame  
the heart does not yellow  
the way bruises do,

the fruit of the land gone soft,  
rotten, those dull blue centers  
as ordinary as my fists,  
as unremarkable as  
your opinion.

I swear I saw you covered all with green—  
in avid, motley splotches: olive, pine,  
like effervescing drops of faux champagne  
fermented from a stitch of yarn, not grain  
or fruit or fiber. Oh, how we have grown!  
From mild to dark, from neutral things to pain:  
your moral thread and needle, and the pin  
the Singer held between his thin-lipped grin  
(the singer that I am). Your eyes command  
a graft of steady sinews—you, a queen  
who knits and darns a knotted heart and mind  
into a flowing pour whose sour can  
imbue and dye my gone and my remained.  
But smile: unfold your sleeves; are we not kin?

*For Tatiana*

\* cf. "Greensleeves," attrib. to  
Henry VIII



# the silence

*Josh Ortloff*

What lies beneath  
This mortal sheath  
I cannot at the moment tell

The whole extent  
My heart is wrenched  
Still yet have I to see

But when at night  
Or moment right  
My past parades itself

In contrast stark  
To present dark  
Alone --- has found this body wondering

All that has chanced  
From thence to now  
And "why," I cry, "to me?"

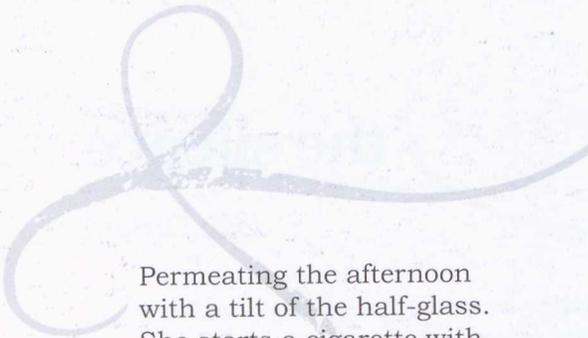
For by my side  
Few now I find  
On earth to stand by me, yea all

The friendships fine  
I thought were mine  
Have vanished quick, conveniently

Or, by and by  
To give their due --- to some,  
But sputtered out; I am left to sigh

What then of all  
That we have shared  
Does that now then count as nothing?

I listen by  
And by and by  
The silence still . . .  
Is my reply



# help to hold

*Nathan Schroll*

Permeating the afternoon  
with a tilt of the half-glass.  
She starts a cigarette with  
another burning in the tray  
walking back and forth, away  
from Italian sausage and toward  
devilled eggs. Never bored  
in watching this dance, I speculate  
under guise of the sweaty can,  
breathing in her smoky gestures,  
the wisdom of a smoky language  
spoken through tender abuse,  
appropriated by husband, children,  
and kin. Tie knot undone,  
shirt untucked and wet from  
walking and wiping to minstrels  
and prayer makers, wrinkles  
and joints loose from walking  
in my second new suit --- aching  
from shiny black shoes.  
I sit in an old kitchen  
never seen before. She is  
the last of two mystics,  
and I fallout in the mantra  
of a cooking kitchen, with a  
loving aunt on Sunday  
after the funeral.

# extraordinary proof

*Emily Kingery*

It's just the sort of thing I used to pray for,  
like the time he went into a restaurant  
and wasn't shot. Not one bullet, not even  
a gunman. Providence that day,

I used to tell him. God won't let you die  
suddenly, because you still have a life  
of bad screenplays, whores, whiskey and pills  
ahead of you, He'll give you enough time

to choose. I meant, of course, to choose me,  
in love with the eventual, and images of him  
unfastening my clothes in the sanctuary, pouring me  
another glass, handing me a cigarette.

He coughs up blood most mornings now,  
before breakfast, of course. In the afternoon,  
he lets the dog out, mows the wet backyard  
between storms, before dinner.

I prayed for exactly this—grass clippings  
clumped on his shoes, toast crumbs on the table  
after slow, gray mornings—his life overcome  
with quiet. That's God, you see. That's proof

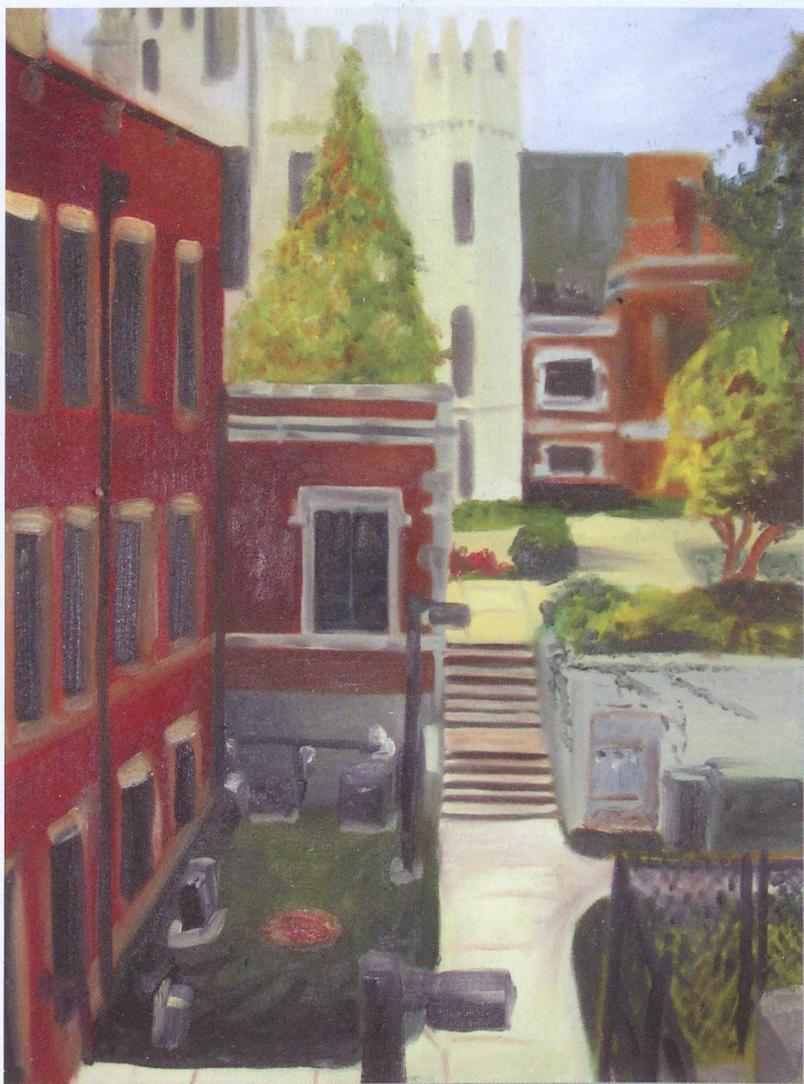
that there is still time enough, rain enough  
to soak us, church enough to let the clothes fall.  
We only have to provide the cigarettes,  
and, for His sake, not cough so loud.



Digital Photo

**untitled**

*Megan Gray*

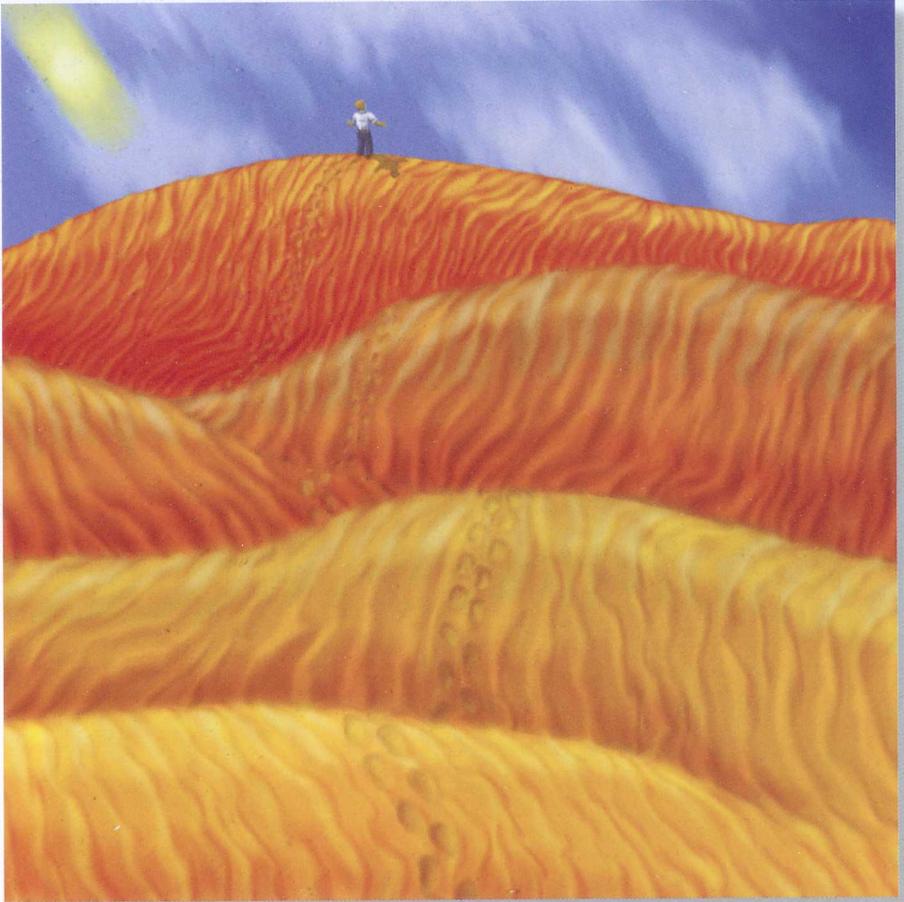


32 x 24 inches

Oil Paint on Canvas

# landscape study

*Kellen Scott*

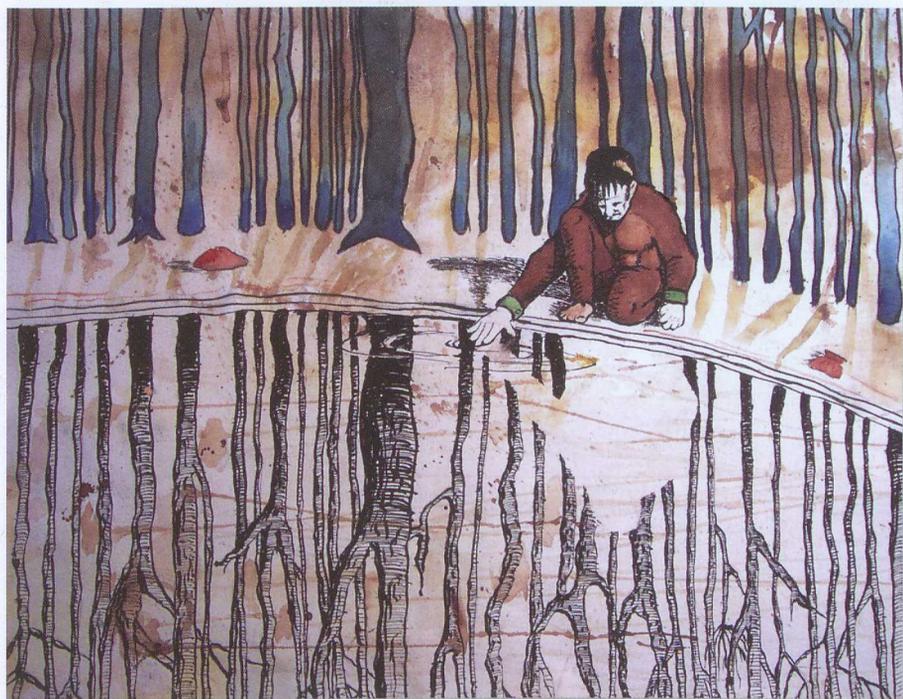


800 x 800 pixels

Photoshop

# world spins madly on

*Matt Albrecht*



22" x 30"

Charcoal, Watercolor, Pen and Ink

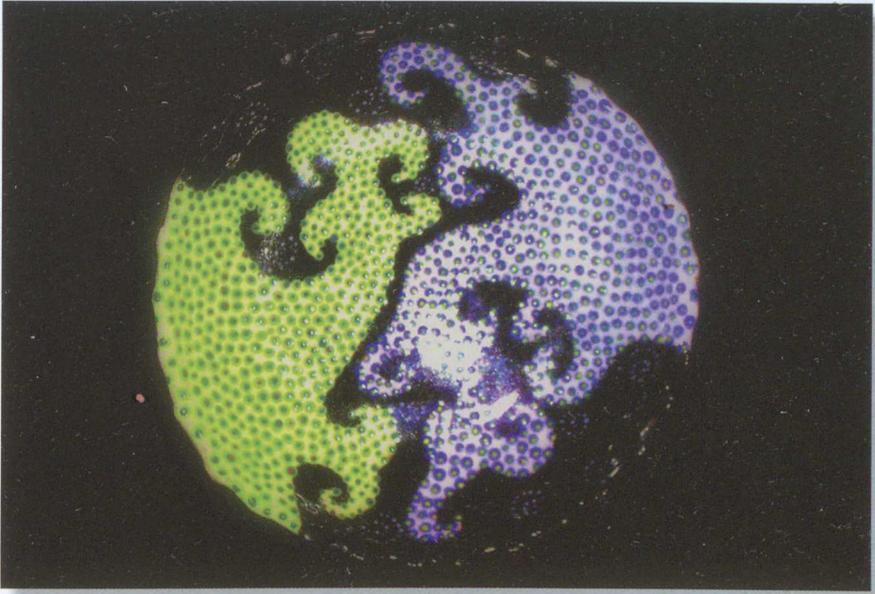
**pitdown reflecting**  
*Alex Vietti*



Digital Photo

**untitled**

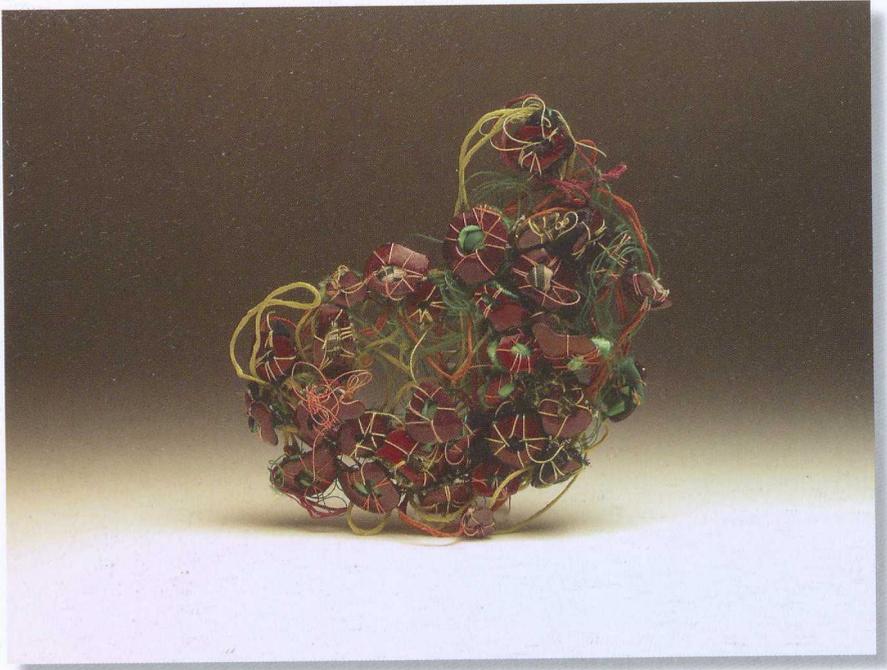
*Megan Gray*



12 inches in diameter  
Terracotta Clay

**curis**

*Ashley Schnabl*



4.75 x 3.75 x .25

Copper, enamel, fabric, embroidery floss, sugar starch  
and thread

**samuel**

*Lindsay Schranz*



30" x 22"

Charcoal, Bic Pen, India Ink, Napkins and Dirt

*the center of being*

*Alex Vietti*

# double consciousness

Lucy Sosa

I got my way: I pressured my mother so in turn she would pressure my father to move our entire family to the United States. The year was 1981, and I was beyond happiness and hope. I was twenty-one years old and eager to soar. What could go wrong? To begin with, we moved into my married sister's apartment; a couple of weeks later we moved into our own apartment. I was about to be introduced into a new ambiance. It was in this Chicago suburb where I first sensed something strange, something never experienced before. I felt it in the way some people did not acknowledge my presence. I felt it in the way they did not include me. I felt it the things they did not want to talk about. I felt it in the way they scorned when my foreign lips attempted to speak English. I did not think when I was back on the island yearning to come to the United States that it would be such an elusive mystery to blend with everyone else. I've taken the inclusiveness I was privileged with in my homeland for granted. Eventually, I moved in with my uncle and his three beautiful daughters, my cousins. They looked white and spoke English fluently. I did not look white and spoke only a few

words of English. I was learning that these were significant differences.

With a disgusted look on his young face one of my cousin's friends (my other two cousins preferred to not hang out with me) said, "Can't she speak English?!" My cousin responded angrily, "She's been in the states for only two months!" This would not be the first nor the last time that someone would become expressively angry towards me for reasons related to those details that identified me as *other*. In the consciousness of the locals I was unequivocally not one of them. My cousins lived in an upper class neighborhood where almost everyone was white or looked white. On one occasion my cousin was invited to a very nice restaurant --- one I could not afford. She offered to pay my way. A rich white girl could not stop criticizing --- in front of all the people at the table, my attempts to speak English. I felt confused. If I did not speak the language I was criticized, but when I tried I was criticized *and* ridiculed. I still could not quite understand exactly what it was about me that inspired such mean-spirited behaviors. Hearing conversations regarding individuals or groups outside of this young group of people's

circle began to unveil for me – slowly, the reason why I was being rejected by people that did not know me at all. The situation was becoming increasingly unsettling to me.

During this time I was working as a waitress at a Mexican restaurant far from my uncle's house. Since I did not own a car, I would walk the long and tedious distance. I remember that particular summer being hot and humid. I would wait on tables for 11 hours a day, six days a week. It was the only job I could get due to my extremely limited knowledge of English. Working as a waitress for pennies would have to do until I learned to speak the predominant language. In the meantime I had to tolerate some insensitive patrons. One day, a regular customer and his buddies came into the restaurant intoxicated --- I had a crush on the tall, good looking blonde. The guy who held my interest yelled my name from his table and began to make jokes about how he was sure my real name was not Lucy but Luz Maria or Luz del Carmen on my birth certificate. He insisted that I had changed it when I came to the states. He continued yelling the same comments with different Spanish names; his buddies looked on and laughed loudly for the entire restaurant to hear. I felt weak all over and confused. This harassment based on my identity as a non-white was hurtful. Eventually, I built up the courage to tell

him that my mother gave me my name: *Lucy* – I had not changed it. I told him that if I had the birth certificate I would show it to him. He continued joking about it and laughing along with his buddies. When he was done eating he stumbled towards the cash register where I was standing and tossed me a \$10 dollar bill, smirking an apology.

On another occasion, Raz, Eddie and I went outside after closing Raz's family restaurant. (Raz and Eddie are Mexican; I am Puerto Rican.) We were close friends and after closing the restaurant we continued our lively and happy chatting on the side walk. Next to the restaurant was a bar. A tall white man stumbled our way, looked at us and yelled, "I hate all Mexicans!" Without hesitation, I screamed at his contemptuous face with an old, built-up anger, "And I hate all white people!" My accented words blurted as an extension of his. He was shocked and surprised. My anger, framed in my petite and foreign body, stood glaring at him and daring him to say anything, anything at all. I was livid. He shut up.

I came to the States thinking of myself simply as *Lucy*, but that was taken away from me. I thought coming to the States would give me a positive new start. Instead, I became *things*, things I never saw myself as: brown, spic, dumb, disgusting, ugly, inferior, thief, gang banger ... *other*. These were burdensome stereotypes. After so many

debasement experiences, I refused to call myself an American for many years and hid my potential for beautiful expressions in the shadows of my overtly angered self. Time went by and I learned to keep an emotional distance from what I knew was going on around me. There were after all a whole lot of good people, too, and I learned to elevate their goodness above the mire directed at me by the ignorant and fearful. Eventually, I ended up attending college. I am currently completing two degrees at the university with a 4.0 GPA. I will definitely pursue my master's degree and Ph.D. And yes, I speak and write both English and Spanish fluently.

I've been doing a lot of thinking about what happened to me when I arrived to the states and how it related to what happened to my dear friend Edwin when he moved with his family to my beautiful and beloved island: When I lived in Puerto Rico and was a teenager, Edwin, who was both Puerto Rican and African-American, became my neighbor. We grew to be close friends. But it was only after my experiences in the United States that I came to understand the profound

pain and humiliation my friend Edwin felt as a newcomer on the island. My newly gained level of consciousness compelled me to understand and feel his pain from a different perspective. Edwin was constantly and cruelly harassed in our neighborhood and our school because he was not a "true" Puerto Rican but a foreigner. After my own experiences in the United States, I came to understand and then regret my inability to grasp what those acts of racism were doing to Edwin when we were both adolescents: the turmoil, the sadness, the anger, the humiliation that grows inside of a good person because of it. I regret that the protection granted to me in my homeland simply because I was a native resident and had lighter skin than him veiled my own understanding from the depth of his pain and from his need for insightful comfort. I regret that only when I found my very own self the focus of the vileness of racism, rejected in a strange land by a strange people I wanted to be friends with, did I come to understand the haunting, rotting and corrupting power racism has on good people.

# letters from thailand

Lionel Newman

**m**ay 21, 2007

Dear Universe,

Last night I arrived in Thailand. It was very late on that hot, rainy night when Uncle Anan picked me and my mom up from the airport in his gray truck, and I had to get used to cars driving on the left again. It's been seven years since the last time I came to visit my mother's homeland, and I can't adequately describe how it feels to be back. Imagine going to a strange place as a child, immersed in an exotic world that jolts your mind and pushes it down swift steamy currents that you could never have imagined before, until you drown in baffling bliss. Then the ride is over; you're thrown back to the mundane and common until the memory of that spectacular maelstrom fades. Now that I'm back in mystifying paradise, I've realized that all of my dreams since that childhood summer have been about Thailand. And so, my experience here feels layered and multiplied: the feeling of being immersed in the thickness of Eastern culture—the tropical heat, the shrines with golden teakwood statues of Shiva and Buddha outside fifty-

story malls, the wreaths of flowers hanging from rear-view mirrors of taxis that smell of jasmine, the toothless roadside vendors selling chickens, hairy purple fruits, and fake gold teeth—multiplied by the combined emotion of all my dreams from the last seven years. I feel Thailand.

A time capsule has opened in my mind. I'm flung back into childhood, having no worries, unable to imagine tomorrow's adventure. If the constant ninety-degree heat didn't remind me I was in Thailand, the incomparable smell would. It smells like sewage, jasmine, sweat, and incense. I'm staying for three months, but I seriously want to live here one day (if not after I graduate, then at least after I retire). My personality is definitely much more Thai than American. In the States I'm a shy, boring, wiry short kid whose true nature no one can quite grasp; but in Thailand I'm seen as polite, physically average (maybe even slightly muscular), and exotic. And even though I can't speak much Thai, I know enough to get by on my own in the bustling metropolis of Bangkok, and I'm sure to learn much more as I go out and take rides on the roaring white "sky train" that snakes

over Sukhumvit Road, watch Thai television, and hopefully make some friends. I really want to learn to speak Thai fluently, but when I first arrived and tried following a conversation, I realized that I don't know shit.

I had trouble entering paradise. First, I had to wait in line at Customs among hundreds of people. When it was finally my turn to see the middle-aged brown man at the desk wearing flat glasses filled with a demanding glare, he asked to see my Immigration Card. I hadn't filled it out to be honest, I wasn't quite sure what to do with it. Standing with my back to the line of soon-to-be tourists, I quickly learned that the pace of time's progression is proportionate to the number of people waiting on you. I scribbled my information on it for what seemed like twenty minutes, and when I finished, the man told me to turn it over. There was another side. At that, he told me to step aside, and I was left to walk back to finish the card while waiting in line once more. When I finally arrived at the front again, the man noticed that I didn't fill out my Thai address. I told him I didn't know where my family lived, and he pointed to a small room in the corner. There I was met by a wrinkled man, and followed him to a faded, torn paper hanging by a piece of tape on the wall, listing the names of dozens of hotels in Bangkok.

"Where are you staying?" he asked, looking at the paper.

Confused, I explained that I didn't know, trying my clunky Thai, and even pulling out my cell phone offering to call my mom (who took a different flight), if I had service (I didn't). He calmly and reassuringly said that I didn't need to call her.

"Pick one," he said.

After a moment of confusion, I stuttered, "A-Amari Hotel."

"That's fine, now go." I went.

I've decided that my Thai name is Singto. It's a common Thai name that means "Lion," which has been my nickname in the U.S. among some circles. So, I'm signing off as a young Thai guy living in Bangkok. For once, I really feel my Thai half shining.

Sincerely,  
Singto

\* \* \*

May 25, 2007  
Dear Humanity,

I believe that you began as one mind. There was only thought and emotion. But the mind split into two, and then the branches continued to grow. Here came the need for an absurd activity, insufficient by nature---to express the mental and universal with the physical. That is, using a word to represent a concept. In this inherent subjugation of the infinite to the finite, thoughts and conceptions had to be bound and packaged

into neat sounds and syllables for the reception of other minds. But this diverging was inevitable because everything follows that pattern of splitting, separation, and development into separate things. Thus, different planets form, different species evolve, different languages develop, different civilizations rise and conflict, a boy asks his mother what a word means, a bird in Montgomery sings the same song as his cousin in Tiananmen in a different dialect, and ultimately each mind sprouts a different perception. We're happy with the things that bring us back to singleness: the glimpses of universality. Music, art, literature, the supernatural—they all unify us by breaking down boundaries between ideas, digging back to the roots of a whole that is far greater than the sum of its individual parts.

I will do that very digging. I will find my algorithm to the universe, the common denominator between all things, the uniform ocean that connects every remote emerald island. It probably won't all happen in the next three months. But this is the definitive start, the "bon voyage," the broken champagne bottle. This is the beginning of my adventure in Thailand, my exploration of heritage, my journey of self, my safari of humanity, my expedition of existence. This is my postcard.

Every day feels like a dream. It makes dreaming at night a thousand times more power-

ful; my dreams have become wildly vivid, as if I'm dreaming in a dream. I really don't ever want to leave. Everyone is ridiculously hospitable here. I have absolutely no worries—a maid does most of the housework for my three aunts, two uncles, my cousin, my mom, and me, all living in this seven-story house in a long alley off busy Sukhumvit Road—and my family takes me all over the city to see the sites, eat delicious food, and shop (my least favorite, but I don't tell them that). I especially like my cousin Jasmin. She's a very pretty woman of twenty-eight years—tall, frail, pale and a little too lean, like a shiny silk thread that can tear at any moment. Her English is nearly perfect, since she lived in the U.S. for several years and received her master's degree in English education at the University of Minnesota. She now teaches at a renowned international Catholic university called Assumption. Jas has taken me to lots of places, my favorite being a night club called "Yes, Indeed" where a live band plays requests ranging from Thai pop songs, to "I Will Survive," to "My Humps," on a stage adorned with hanging strobe lights and girls wearing tight clothes dancing in unison. She's by far my best friend here (alright, my only friend).

A couple nights ago Jas took me out to eat with her friends. Friendship is sacred in Thailand. The first time I over Sukhumvit Road, watch Thai

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cal buses, not taking a taxi, the subway, or the sky train? It's admirable, I think. But I can't ignore them when they stare in malls and restaurants, too.

I've been spending an awful lot of time in my room lately. It seems like there's nothing to do. I know, it sounds absurd, but my motivation to go out and explore on my own is dwindling. Everyone's busy with work every day. Where would I go? To another shopping mall? Those are the only kinds of places I can go without family or friends when I can't speak Thai. I have no idea how to get to the Royal Theater, the National Museum, or Suan Pakkad Palace. Not to mention, they'd charge me the foreigner fee to get in (which is about four times the admission price for natives) if I didn't go with family who could convince security that I'm Thai. I mostly just play chess on my laptop and watch British soccer games on television.

When I was with you, I often times chose to spend nights alone in my room smoking cigarettes and playing a computer game that I had already beaten at least fifteen times. There's a strange sense of peace that washes over me when I lose that last shred of dignity. It's nice. But here, a night alone in my fifth-floor bedroom on my laptop feels like dying. Loneliness in paradise is a thousand times worse than loneliness in hell.

Until the Future,  
Singto

\* \* \*

July 23, 2007

Dear Home,

A few days ago, my uncle took me to the ancient capital, Ayuttaya. I went to three temples, bright with that gleam of fascinating culture, the aura you see in postcards of statues and pyramids. I also rode an elephant, which was not only fun, but gave me a great view of roadside ruins (many busy roads are literally built around ancient ruins). I saw the reclining Buddha, a hundred-foot horizontal statue of white marble lying on its side, caged in brown, chipped rubble. I had seen it as a kid, so seeing it again was an experience shaded with mystical nostalgia. I climbed the mountain of worn stairs at a Buddhist monument built hundreds of years ago to commemorate a victory in battle against the Burmese, which gave Thailand its freedom. Hundreds of identical weary gray Buddha statues draped in yellow robes lined the outer courtyard, and at the top of the stairs was a dark room with the same Buddha statues sitting in a small circle. In the middle was a mystifying cage-like structure the size of a fax machine with crossed white bars composed of some material I could not identify, which represented the bones of Buddha.

I think there's a certain edifying effect that ancient places have on the mind, no matter where they are. This city has been internationally recognized as a monument to "world culture," but what does that mean? It means more than simply "This place exemplifies an old civilization." World culture. It sounds unifying, as if hinting that, although there are many cultures, there's perhaps human culture—that is, the culture of being human. Going to the roots of Thailand, I feel a harmony with humanity. It's a reminder that everything has a single origin and branches out. And looking back in towards the trunk from those branches, we see something strangely beautiful, a part of ourselves and a part of everything. I felt like I could see humanity, or the soul, or God. I think that's what this entire trip is all about. Does that make any sense? Maybe not.

Sincerely,  
Singto

\* \* \*

July 28, 2007  
Dear Friend,

Last night I went out for a night on the town by myself. In the early evening I left my house, slid the metal gate shut behind me, and walked down the alley toward Sukhumvit Road past the dark-skinned taxi drivers watching a small television out-

side by their parked taxis, the group of five or six young women standing outside a massage parlor beckoning people passing by, and the dirty outdoor restaurant where I once saw a brown baby elephant giving rides. After walking up the cement stairs on the sidewalk to the elevated train station, I paid for my ticket and boarded the sky train to Siam Square.

Siam Square is a monument to the boom in Southeast Asia. Shopping monstrosities tower over both sides of noisy streets, countless people walk along littered sidewalks holding handkerchiefs to their faces with one hand and cell phones in the other, homeless mothers huddle with their children at the ends of overpasses where smog from the streets huddles with them, trapped under the brown cement of the sky train above. I walked past a couple sitting on the edge of a fountain watching a screen the size of a scoreboard showing the latest pop music videos, and made my way to one of the skyscraper malls called Siam Paragon.

The top floor is a luxurious movie theater with dim red and white lights spotlighting a lounge for couples and friends to eat and talk. I saw many foreigners like me with their families there, chatting and waiting by the bathrooms. I walked to the counter to buy my ticket for Transformers, and was surprised to be greeted by a man who spoke nearly perfect Eng-

lish. He showed me a computer chart of all the available seats in the theater; there were still many available, so I chose one directly in the middle. My ticket was only two hundred baht (about five dollars). I bought a big bag of popcorn and a large Coke from another friendly English-speaking cashier and made my way to the theater.

Transformers was surprisingly entertaining, and afterwards I took an escalator down to the food court. After wandering for thirty minutes around the massive complex of Japanese restaurants; Italian joints; and traditional Thai places with orange-spotted soups and headless, brown bodies of chickens hanging behind windows, I decided on pizza—seafood pizza with tempura, shrimp, and pineapples. I also ordered the Thai staple beer, Singha (it also means “lion”), which I decided I liked. So after my meal I stopped at a 7-11, bought a pack of Mar-

lboro Reds, a lighter, and a four-pack of Singha, all for less than five dollars.

The night had bloomed beautifully. Black rain washed over the streets that shimmered against the pulsating string of headlights and streetlights. Cars on the illuminated streets flickered and dazzled in every corner of my eye with the flashing yellow and red lights outside shops and night clubs a couple of blocks down. I wandered around sipping my cans quickly until I found a quiet side-street by the empty fountain, where I sat under a thick tree that the drizzle couldn't penetrate. Aside from the occasional barks of stray dogs and the soothing rush of cars on wet pavement in the distance, no noise disturbed my solitary bliss. At that moment, I loved this place more than ever before.

Truly yours,  
Singto



# tuesdays with melanie

Robert M. Graff

**m**uch of my time in college was spent looking for a job that would support me, while still interesting me enough to show up. Not long after I transferred to a state school and began studying English, both of my parents changed careers and, because things became difficult to pay for, I became an independent student. Every semester, I relied on borrowing more loans than I actually needed to pay the tuition, and receiving the overage in the form of a check signed by the university, which did nothing short of save my life for a few weeks every three months. When I moved out of campus housing, and into an apartment with some of my fraternity brothers, I was then obligated to pay for things like electricity, water, gas, and food, which had all been previously provided for by my choice to stay on campus. A certain freedom to choose what I wanted to eat, and to have my own room was the benefit, but my downfall came when the need to pay bills coupled with the need to pay previous, past-due bills, buy textbooks and still somehow manage to have a fairly normal social life. Smoking as much as I did, and buying as much music as I did, the

twenty dollar bills that fell from the ATM after my tuition refund check cleared became few, then none.

The resident advisor when I lived in the dorm was a friend of mine from high school named Jason, and he told me that, as an English major who focused on literature and composition, I would have an easy time getting a job alongside him in one of the campus tutoring programs. It was really more of an outreach program to students of the university, most of whom came or were from the Chicago public school system, who did not meet the grade point requirement to enroll, but were admitted based on the potential they showed in an interview with their particular department of study. The entire student population is required to take a basic English rhetoric course at some point in their undergraduate studies, but these students were placed, by mandate, in a remedial class. Their remaining in college hinged on the successful completion of this class, and part of that completion was to attend an equally mandatory weekly tutoring session in the classroom where Jason worked.

I had never actually helped anyone with writing before I ap-

plied for the job, short of marking up with red pen the occasional term paper that was slid under my door by a neighbor who was too embarrassed to admit that he did not know the difference between *there*, *their*, and *they're*. Around 4:15 in the afternoon, I might have been on the phone, or writing a paper of my own, and a ten-page stack would glide over the dirty tiles past my mini-fridge with a post-it note on top, tattooed with purple pen: *Rob! Can you look at this and make corrections? I'm stupid and it's due at 5*. I was the only English major on the floor, so I felt obligated to help. I would sigh and find a red pen.

The papers were often abysmal, written in colloquial speech, and my wrist fell numb many times from circling, adding, and crossing out. I rarely made any real constructive criticisms, as I had not yet perfected the art of making something cutting sound like something nice. I could never bring myself to turn *This has to be the stupidest thing I have ever heard* into a simple *Clarify for your reader*. I never said *Tighten these sentences*. It was, and remained, *Don't bullshit*.

The way that Spanish majors hate the sound of an "L" in the word *tortilla*, I hated reading incomplete sentences and complete, sometimes astronomical misuse of vocabulary. More than that, I hated people who assumed that, because I read, I didn't have a whole lot else to do

besides read what they had written. I didn't ask the psychology major to figure out why I was so mad at my father, so I could not see why I couldn't bring a date back to my room without a reading response taped to my door begging to be torn apart by my high school education. No one I lived with would pay me to correct his papers, so I took Jason up on his offer.

It was rare that I had a session scheduled where the student showed up ready to learn, pending they showed up at all. Students who did not want to fail showed up, and the ones who did not care, I never met. The upside was that we still got paid for our time, and I often looked forward to my students ditching me, so I could sit on one of the couches in the room and read a back issue of *Rolling Stone*.

There was something eerily reminiscent of grade school in the classroom that we used for our sessions: The standard carpeting, the encouraging posters on the walls, the round tables that encouraged students to discuss their writing with whom-ever might sit down, and the almost foolish Chinese lamps that hung pendulously from the ceiling just above each one of those tables. My boss, Suzanne, had decorated the room herself, I assume, and wanted to create a welcoming atmosphere. A Southern woman with high ideals for the field of education, she seemed to believe that every-

body deserved a chance, even the ones who had no desire to take it. Everything she said was terribly supportive, even at the cost of remaining an authority figure. She would call the students who had not shown up for their sessions and extend her concern. "Well, hello, Adam. I was just wondering if you would be joining us today in the Writing Lab. It is a part of your English grade, you know. All right, we'll see you when you get here."

And then he'd arrive about forty-five minutes later, with nothing to work on. Often, the students looked to me to make them better writers by simply telling them how to become better writers. They did not want examples, nor did they want to read anything I had written. They just wanted me to tell them, primarily, why they had to show up in the first place, and how to get out of having to show up.

"There's no one way to become a better writer. You just have to work at it."

This was always the wrong answer. If they had any desire to work at improving their writing, they would have already done so, and my job would have been rendered useless. But, because they didn't, week after week would pass, and I would sit face-to-face with someone who had no interest in a single word I said. It is a ridiculous fantasy to assume that people work better under the guidance of their peers. In the real world,

the last thing that people, myself included, want to hear is someone their age telling them how to do something. For one, it's degrading, and it makes a person feel like he or she should be at a level he or she has not yet reached.

That fact was especially obvious in the students I was assigned. A girl named Charlene came in every week with nothing finished. More often than nothing finished, she would enter beneath the Chinese lamps with nothing at all.

"I don't understand why I have to be here. I write fine."

"Well," I told her, "I didn't decide to make it mandatory."

"This is just so fucking stupid."

"Well, sorry. Go ahead and get out the paper your professor assigned."

She told me she didn't bring it, and when I asked her why not, her answer was simple: She knew what she needed to do with it and didn't need to do it here.

I said, "Fine, then. What do you need to do?"

"You know what? You're not my father. I don't get how you get paid to just sit here and act like you can tell me what to do. Plus, you got a bad attitude anyway. Shit, I don't even want to write. I'm not even an English major. Damn."

"Alright. We'll see you next week."

A year and a half went by, three semesters, before I found

anyone who actually respected what I had to say. Her name was Melanie, and while she wasn't an especially good writer, she wanted to be. She came to her sessions early, and often scheduled extra time with me to better her papers further than we could in the fifty minutes we spent together once a week.

She was a small black girl from Chicago who had a new weave every two weeks or so. It was how I knew she had gotten a new assignment in class, because she would walk in proudly, blonde tracks piled on top of her head. I could see her excitement in not only having a new style, but also in having a new reason to see me. I assume she had a crush on me, by the way that she acted, and the way that, if I ran into her on the street I got a hug and a five minute talk about what was going on in my life. If a bill went unpaid, or an assignment was bringing me down, she told me how noble it was that I kept up the fight. She asked me every day we saw each other if she could read something that I had written, and if I brought something, she asked that I read it out loud to her.

Melanie said that I was an amazing writer. I never told her that I disagreed.

It was nice to see Melanie, and it became one of the few highlights of my week. Mostly, the ego boost of watching someone hang on every piece of opinion that I let leave my mouth was the primary reason

I enjoyed seeing her so much. We became friends, for the most part, as much as we could have been while I still remained impartial. She even burned me a CD and informed me, "This is the shit."

"Oh, well, thank you. I've never had anything that was the shit before."

Melanie, I came to find, in the time I was her tutor, was a girl with immense potential. She had a painful back story of hoodlum brothers and an absent father, but with the spark of hope that eventually translates into a good story. She made it to college—which is not to say that people of her background in life don't, but the fact that she was visibly proud made me remember what opportunities I provided myself when I, too, decided to further my education.

I went on to work the third shift at a 24-hour gas station my senior year of college. I took the job mainly because of the good pay, but also because in any college town, the three o'clock am hour frees a certain brand of lunatic from the bars and farms, which only a writer would actually choose employment to meet.

The hot dogs needed to be put on the grill, and as I came out of the storage room, I saw, standing at my register, Melanie, looking very attractive. She had white ribbons sewn into her hair that matched the tight lace blouse she had on. She smiled.

I said, "Hey. I haven't seen you in a long time."

She agreed, and we talked shortly about my still being a writer and her still hating school. I told her, falsely, that the stories I was working on were coming along great. Melanie congratulated me, and she told me why she came in.

"I need three seventy-seven dollar money orders."

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. So, what are you doing out at this hour?" I asked, while printing out her money orders. "Especially dressed like that."

"I'm going to work."

Pause.

"What do you do?" I asked, turning toward her with the money orders in my hand. "Where do you go to work at 3 o'clock in the morning?"

I knew where the conversation was going, but thought back to my previous jobs. There was a spring where I loaded packages for a delivery company, and was often scheduled to begin at 3:00 a.m.

But not dressed like that.

She told me, "I'm a dancer."

"You're a dancer? I don't know about any Joffrey Ballet stuff that starts at 3 a.m."

"I'm a dancer. An exotic dancer."

What I said was, "Oh, okay. I don't care. Get that money, you know?"

I felt let down. Like I had let one of the few people it seemed like I had affected slip through the cracks of society and, in-

stead of becoming a brilliant author, opt to take her clothes off for money. It was the same feeling I would have had if my sister were in some type of danger, where, though I am not legally responsible for her, I still retain a duty to protect her. To know that this "small, beautiful girl was driving to a bar two towns over in the middle of the night, and offering herself to the lonely eccentrics I had taken my job to meet made me apprehensive. If they harassed me about gas prices during a hurricane, what would they say to a young woman who did not dance well enough or take it off quickly enough? I flinched at the thought of a short walk from her car to the door of the bar. She told me where the place was located, and because I had never been to that town, I assumed it was no place for her to be.

She paid for her money orders in cash.

"It's great," she said, "I just got my own place and a new system for my ride."

She pointed outside at a new-looking Rover of some sort. I looked at her worriedly, and she looked back at me proudly, having found herself a way to come from where she did and survive. Melanie looked at the clock behind me, and realizing she had to go, she said her goodbye.

"Wow, Rob. It was really great to see you."

"Yeah, honey, you too. Um... have a good day at work."

"Thanks," she looked at the

rubber gloves I wore to put out hot dogs. I did too, and I saw not only my rubber gloves, but my paychecks all going to landlords, or a faceless corporation in charge of my lights, my water, my heat. I saw job after dead end job, barely keeping me fed throughout college. I saw bounced checks, written in hope that my deposit would go through before my debit cleared.

I saw eleven unfinished stories, printed and stapled, stagnant in a drawer for months, and I saw no publications to my name. "Good luck with your writing."

And she walked out the door. While her Range Rover hummed, and her new system vibrated the windows of the gas station, she waved a goodbye.

I waved back. "Good luck."

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