—Luke Strosnider

wooden teeth
The Chase

Before it was over, we rode
the cold car off the pavement
behind the old school. We trailed
the moon onto the grass,
its thin crescent blade slung
low behind the leafless trees.

I raised one arm, fingers outstretched,
the other coiled in your hair. Two stars
disappeared, the first to go.

Next was the old post and beam
fence. We would not be held.
The asphalt merely shook our
skin loose as we pushed into it,
and I heard your cries fade softly
in the stiff pull of the wind.

Pine needles were falling about our bodies,
our bodies were falling apart. The
moon sank lower, landing on the dark
faces of the steep hills crouched behind
the skeletal trees. The night was dressed
like a thief. The wind was a hallucy.

Shadows played on our lips and
between our thighs. We stood alone
with the wind, our tongues shaking.

Before it was over, I became the echo
of a bullet's bark between your knees.
Now, I am not even an animal.

—Eli Cohen
I looked for you in the restaurant, Angela

but any trace of you has been
wiped away, swept into the
waitress’ quick palm, her soapy
hand lifting up the last of your
crumbs, spills, a piece of hair,
the fingerprint on the dimes
you left as tip. You walked out,
the mask of coconut milk soup
lingering on your tongue, an invisible
spray of dried skin cells radiating
from you, the kind that collect under
beds and make moon balls. I suppose
I could have breathed a piece of you,
but then, the door always opening
and closing, sipping out
the perfume of your hot breath
that fogged the back of a spoon
in a nose-balancing trick, this
alone would have scattered what
was left. You walked into the unending
streets, your steps curried with
wine and laughter, and leaned into the
surprise joke of his wandering old lecher
fingers sampling your tit. So you threw
back your head in a screeching burst of mirth,
you had expected the indiscretions of men
in families and had planned for it, the dyed
red hair and loose blouses, no bra, the slits up your
skirts that showed the varicose veins,
your legs folding and unfolding like the Jacob’s
Ladders you brought me and my sisters
when you came to visit one August. You showed
us how to whistle with a single blade of grass,
rolled reels of old filmstrips of your mother,
young and smiling in the sun (who would have
guessed they did to her what they did to Sylvia
Plath?) with a baby you said was my father.
And then, your fondness for blood—you took pills
that made you fertile at fifty, and took liberty
to tell us girls all the birth control you knew
but didn’t use back in college.

When your belly was too large for any other clothes,
did you wear the same pink silk kimono
that hung in your closet at home
far away in Milwaukee,
where your old cat waited for you?
I wish they were still waiting, the cat and
the kitchen with uncoordinated teacups
and a quiet table, a room for you to write
and chuckle and tell stories about the night
your old cousin in Alexandria met you
to share dinner and family genealogy,
then groped you across the coffee
table, his wive pouring him more brandy in the
other room. But I never heard you tell that story.
Like the scribblings you sent on postcards,
we all took a turn at figuring out what you
meant—was it “leave” or “love”?
Maybe you just grew sick of wearing your faded
kimono and cheap blouses. I wonder, too, if you lost
the feeling of mystery on a dark cobblestone street
in a far city, the way it lost you. The idea of new
places, of living in the world as long as you could,
as long as you could pinch back and laugh....
You went down to the basement and didn’t
come back. What wasn’t worth staying for?
The crab soup, the shrimp with hot sauce? A walk
with a niece who still looks for you, Angela,
who finishes the stories you didn’t tell—
the spicy ones left unsaid on your tongue.

—Taylor Johnson
Underwater

Anna is learning that living in New York City in the summer means not seeing any of it at all. Had she known the urban equivalent of an inferno that she was going to endure, perhaps she would have spent another summer flocking to lazy, crystalline, turquoise poolsides in New Jersey suburbia. Instead she's sitting in an apartment like an aging condiment on a forgotten shelf of a refrigerator. Not that air conditioning is something she feels particularly justified in complaining about.

Then again, another summer at home and she'd have spent a few more months bolstering her close relationship with compact mirrors, toilet seat covers, CD cases and framed high school diplomas. The bills in her wallet have been flat for a while now.

"You say you wan' a pretzel?" a dark man with an upper lip reminiscent of a mascara brush leans out from behind a collage of advertisements boasting plastic-looking street corner delicacies.

"Yeah- with mustard. Thanks."

She has exactly twelve minutes until her next class. In the meantime she finds a familiar spot next to the mouth of the subway and watches the swallowing and regurgitation of transit travelers. They remind her to send a couple of her own prescription pilgrims down her throat along with her pretzel. Halfway through her meal she spots one of her classmates, some just-out-of-high-school kid from Bensonhurst. She never has much to say to him, but he's always good for a cigarette.

"Hey John. You're here early again. Hey, you wouldn't happen to have a cigarette would you?" she asks, hoping her plan of attack isn't as obvious as she thinks.

"Yeah, sure- did you get that reading done by that chick... what's her name again?"

John hasn't really figured it out yet that his popularity or rather lack of, in their Multicultural Women Writers course is due largely to his careless use of words like "chick" in a class that's about ninety percent female.

She pulls her tank top away from her chest where it had tried to take hold in its dampness. It falls back into its soft clinging once again.

"Cineoros. Sandra Cineoros. Woman Hollering Creek," she lifts the book up in her hand, "It's actually really good. You should try and get a few of the stories read."

"Nah, I started it, it was alright but I had to get out with my friends and go to this party. Yo, it was crazy."

He says crazy with emphasis on the "a," real drawn out as if to signify how nuts it really was. He goes on about getting high and drinking beers and some sort of fight over something but Anna's mind is walking the cracks in the sidewalk like a tightrope. This task she imagines is a little easier though because it's a groove and as long as she moves with one foot in front of the other she'll be safe. Or relatively so. That gray cement might bring her dangerously close to those gray areas in her mind where tangibility stared in a disappearing act and the notion of "permanent" didn't actualize itself beyond something old ladies had done to their hair. It was usually a clear-gray, and then foggy when the dew point was right in her head. It was full of footprints and chewed, discarded bubble gum. Michael was there.

"...So then I was working for my uncle at this meat packing factory with my buddies. We used to take the stuff that had fallen on the floor and make 'em into patties and throw that shit at each other..."

John is the kind of kid who likes to wear a wallet chain and whenever possible, a black eye.
After his infatuation with Punk he doesn’t talk about much except driving upstate and tripping on acid with his fifteen-year-old girlfriend. But he’s nice. And niceness always goes a long way with Anna, because, well, so many people aren’t. And he’s always good for a cigarette.

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The changing of the medals around her neck mirrors the rhythm of their bodies. She has become familiar with its pendulum-like motion that swings with uncertain ubiquity in front of the face below hers. It isn’t necessarily distracting unless they’re somewhere trying not to make any noise. But here in the bedroom they’ve shared for the past few months, his bedroom really, the sound works in the fashion of an aphrodisiac, its accelerated frequency inducing her final collapse onto the slippery rise of his chest. Anna is sure that summer sex was much less intimate than any other, if you wanted to think of sex in terms of seasons, which she imagines most people didn’t. There is no romanticizing the friction of sweaty bodies moving through viscous air—nothing that could entice her to stay even remotely close to his body once she was finished.

She moves off of him and onto the farthest corner of the bed. They listen to one another’s breath settle into regularity.

“I love you, sweets.”

“Love you too.”

Anna never lies. Not even when it’s important that she should. Mark can. Especially when it’s important. She leans over to the air conditioner and turns the fan on full-blown, moves the vent so that a direct path of icy air scrapes their glistening prickling skin. She picks up one of the medals around her neck, Saint Michael, Pray For Us; the one her mother had given her to remind her of a conviction that had slipped from her like a lost thought never to be recalled. She feels Mark’s eyes and returns his look.

“Hey. What are you thinking about?”

That she can answer. But she wants him to ask her if she’s all right and then she can lie. She wonders if he sees the gray trying to release her grip on the sheets. She must remind herself not to let go or she’ll find herself sliding away and then it takes more than a few small yellow friends to bring her back.

She lets him have her eyes for a while. Today, she thinks, he has classified her as Pensive, Sad. He goes to row Pensive, column Sad, and puts her in a box. Ties her up with a ribbon. All set. Organized. Classified. Tomorrow, perhaps he will find her in row Pensive, column Happy. He will then pack her up and put her away. She can’t wait until he opens the boxes, wonders what he’ll say when he sees that they’re all empty.

“What’s on your mind sweets?” he asks again.

“Oh, just a whole lot of nothing,” she answers.

Which is true.

******

The next day she only sends three round, yellow warriors down her throat and twelve lines up her nose. When she’s back in New Jersey her bills seem to somehow roll themselves in the climate. She’s back in New Jersey. And she can feel Michael in the climate like a dampness in her bones. He creeps out of his grassy bed and walks next to her barefoot along the warm tar streets winding through the cool stellar night. Looks up with her at the moon, a feather caught mid-sky in a web of constellations.

She returns from her walk and wants to say something to everyone but they’re all engaged with dollar bills. Then they send reinforcements with a bottle of Scotch and a few beers. Anna imagines there have to be a lot of reinforcements during a battle like this.

“Everyone’s trying to remember but somehow they can forget it and it all gets a little dizzying…” Anna hands Jamie the bill. Jamie sees conversation as an unnecessary means of communication. He looks at her and smiles and she knows he understands but thinks or rather will claim to know that there’s no need to say that he does. She’s sure this is what he’s thinking. She lets herself fly past the drop ceiling, which looks like a map of a speckled egg.

She thinks, everything is good if you let yourself think it—if you can hear yourself think it, over the pounding of your own heart.

******

“The thing is,” he says, looking over at the crowd that has assembled at the corner in front of the Academic Center, “that if none of them stood around listening, they wouldn’t have an audience.”

John seems to have joined her in her own boredom with his talk about the new band he’s been listening to. She usually lets him feed her his music, one earphone in, the other dangling onto her shoulder, shrugging when he asks what she thinks. She turns the Walkman off with a snap.

“Yeah, but that’s their whole game with religion, playing off of anger. It’s so ironic,” she says with an exhalation of smoke.

“What’s ironic is that those guys look like a fuckin’ failed circus act. Look at them, it’s god-damned Spartacus meets Saturday Night Fever.”

A large group had gathered, some angrily addressing the men on the corner, others just shaking their heads, content in their own understanding of it all. Everyone feeling saner than usual as spectators of these street corner, self-proclaimed prophets, dressed in purple robes cinched with studied leather belts, foreheads wrapped in matching headbands and feet clad in similar sandals.

One man picks a woman out of the crowd. Tells her that one day the black man will rape her and take all of her Jewish gold. That he’ll never go back to a white man again because everyone knows the brothers are well endowed. He speaks of his relationship with God as if he knew him on a personal basis, salvation as impossible for anyone but the black man.

Anna thinks about getting up and explaining that God is on vacation so there’s no need for anyone to be worried about salvation. In fact, she’s sure he’s floating around in a suburban pool somewhere. He’s on a blue raft with a built-in pillow and drink holder sipping opaque pastel liquid out of tall glasses, Michael and her down below, drowned a puffy green, hair moving like seaweed. Clogging up the filters.

“You want an iced tea from the deli?” John asks.

“Sure,” she says, back on the street corner again, although the smell of chlorine still lingers somewhere. They’re a quarter closer there, and she likes that he thinks the same way that she does about these kinds of things.

******

John doesn’t show up to class for a few weeks. One day she buys him an iced tea and keeps it in her bag where it sits and gets warm by the end of the day. It runs against the front of her notebook and wilt the cover with its dampness. It wears through the glossiness and exposes the recycled paper, weak and a yellowish-gray. Anna notices that her emotional limint seems to have dried up—he doesn’t slide off of her with the rest of the world. She feels fear like a taste in her mouth. She imagines him smelling faintly of chlorine.
The air-conditioning is sending a piece of her hair in spiraling loops. She feels it tickling the side of her face. With her eye, she's begging Mark to ask her.

"Ask me if I'm still in love with him."

But he doesn't. He asks her about classes. About how much she loves him. Asks her how she's feeling. Does she want the air conditioning on? Does she want the TV off? Does she want to go out for Cuban-Chinese? Does she know how much he loves her?

She only knows that he knows how much she needs to be loved. That he might be the only gravity that keeps her from feeling like a balloon on a helium highway. She only knows how easy it is for him to say it as he watches her slip into gray.

"Hey sweets, do you want to go away somewhere? Like on a vacation? I could take you to Florida, or we could go north to the Cape. I think maybe it would be a good thing don't you?...Anna, do you want to go away somewhere?"

She holds the medal between her thumb and pointer finger. The medal she keeps on always, between she and him. The one she lets hang in front of him while she tries to make a love that's lost.

"Yeah. I do," she says. Which is true.

Anna is reminded of rainbows in gasoline puddles as she watches the colorful twisting of people along the perimeter of the steaming city streets. She is beginning her tightrope routine on the cement when she hears the rattling of a wallet chain as a figure sits down next to her along the window ledge she's been occupying.

"Know, I know," John starts, "don't even tell me how much shit I have to make up for this damn class."

"Where've you been?" Anna asks.

"I don't know, I just didn't feel like goin' to class. Then my mom decided to send me to go visit my dad out in Chicago."

"Are your parents split up?"

"Yeah, since I was young. I hadn't seen my dad in like five years."

"You don't ever miss him?" Anna asks through tight lips as she lights her cigarette.

"Nah. I mean, I don't know. My mom wrote him off real easily so I just thought that I should too. All of a sudden now she thinks we should be buddies or something."

He laughs, pauses for a while and looks down. Fiddles with his headphones. Anna contemplates her tightrope. She's interrupted by his voice.

"Do you ever feel like—I don't know, like you think you're done with someone, or you definitely should be done with someone, but then one day you realize you're not?"

"Yeah," she says, "I do."

"So yeah, maybe I'll actually go visit the old man again sometime. Whatever... Anyway, you gotta hear this new album I got...."

Anna lets his crooked smile pull one of her feet out of the crack below her—lets it pull her own mouth out of it's unwavering pose. She listens to the sound of his voice as she leans her head back against the wall behind her and exhales. She hands him a cigarette.

—Jennifer Lynn Headley

—Ryan Broglia
The Profligate Manifesto

The pen in my breast pocket is rubbing against my nipple and I find that to be far less titillating than if it were a wletcher, my dear. Let me bid you tidings of conceptual hell. Next time you find it prudent to push me to second please remember that the first’s existence is dependent on me. Proven. Myself, being two, will always be one to afflict you first and spit at your spits. I am the awaited one—the next great profligate and some groveling would be appreciated. Won’t you drive those knee-caps squarely into the artificial turf rug of love. Feel the burn? You feel those pounds drooping fast? I know I feel a tremendous weight being lifted. I feel the fat of excessive depreciation floating off and dying just short of the grand sunset. I wonder? Who would appreciate my newfound go-fuck a cucumber attitude to propriety more—Woody Allen or my mother? Your condescending burn through the front of my pants is duly noted. I suppose you and Hoover get along more splendidly than we. But maybe someday, you and me darling, we can chew bamboo shoots together and reminisce the times when I was captivated by the gentle undulations of your lower back. And you thought I just wanted sex. Well, for a small monetary investment I can appease your delicate capacities and accept that black knee high leather boots with stainless steel zippers can turn me on in a pinch—when I really need someone to listen.

—Brian Flatley

chalk circus dogs

syntax and semantics, says the smug-suited man
and in spite of myself, I agree they’re amazing

chalk structure circus dogs meaning
and gray trashcan structure kennel meaning

as I story down
through a glass structure window meaning

chimney, cigarette butts are scooped
off the cement structure sidewalk meaning

by a crumpled piece
of pale human structure garbage meaning

who spends little time
pondering predicate analyses.

—Kathy Rooney
Meeteetsee, Wyoming 9 PM

Three hundred and nineteen pairs of eyelids clapped shut in my rear view mirror as I hit ninety-five and cursed whoever had taken a tire-iron to the rear passenger window leaving only a sheet of plastic to keep the wind out and a small wound in the dashboard where red and blue wires spilled out of the bowels of my eighty-six Bronco.

Speeding away from the soft little pocket of dirty fingernails and cowboy boots it came to me that the moon was like a belly-button burning above my face and I was sliding my gaze along the dark smooth curve of the night into the brush riding the hills which curled around the spine-like road when three ridges out of town I lit upon the old barn.

Planks had fallen and had been nailed back up, not back into place but sort of helter-skelter, looking like and eye-ball sewn shut, and half of it must have caved in; it had the shape of a covered wagon, or a cattle truck left to rot in the shadow of one of the nearby oil wells, but the whole thing reminded me of an aged flower, dried and pressed and colorless.

Cody was a long ways off yet and on a whim I pulled off the pavement onto the gravel, and then onto the grass, and turned my headlights to the dilapidated house which seemed to hunker down into the dark and tighten up at the seams, wining it looked to me as I slammed the door to my truck and struck at the dirt with the toes of my boots, knocking loose little bits of quartzite.

The wood was soiled and its drab stain had bleached the ground, choking the grass off as the earth cracked in desperation at the river slowly bleeding south past the stench of meat gone bad in the sun; but sheep and cattle weren't the only ones dying in systematic fashion, the land was balding and coughing up black blood; men found themselves alone and stirring at their ranches, empty and worn.

—Eli Cohen
Record Collection

The end of a record sounding
like you loving me
that summer night
moon stuck mid-sky
a feather caught mid fall
in a web of constellations.

The static clicking rhythm
and soft thumping
of a needle
out of breath.
A song ended,
an album unattended
spinning
the way I was left.

Such comfort
in an old favorite song.
I wish now
I could dust you off
and play you,
turn you over,
and play you again,
put you back on my shelf.

I can still hum you
with the end of a record sounding
like that summer night
when sleep came
like a good dream.

—Ryan Broglio

—Ariana Markoe
Crazy Love

I wonder should I buy her this? Bop magazine, the brightest on the shell, for a dollar ninety-nine. A host of pin-up boys, shiniest smiles leaning in for a close-up or bedroom eyes and a full-mouth pout staring the camera down. All framed in almost-bursting heart-shaped bubbles, neon, reflecting the light in the arcs of pink gloams.

Underneath, the captions, each sentence ridden with qualifiers like "really" or "so" with too many o's. "Johnny Lightning is sooo cute, but around girls he's really shy!" Sometimes there is a dossier: fave color, fave car, fave song, star sign, what he looks for in a girl. Red. Porsche. "Crazy Love." Libra. Nice hair and a pretty smile.

Tomorrow I'll find her in front of the bathroom mirror, mound of heated curlers bending the thin stem of her neck. Vaseline on her teeth for a beauty queen smile.

It is her money. Two dollars in small coins push against the seams of my change purse. She makes good tips because she bags the news in plastic when it rains, sets the paper inside the screen door of the landing, and never cuts across a manicured lawn.

After work before school, I called to remind her to lock up and she reminded me, "Don't forget to pick up Bop on your way home."

The clerk is fingering his moustache and leaning back against the register. He straightens when he notices me. He runs it over the scanner once, twice no beep. He takes it close to his face, flips it, then examines the spine.

"One ninety-nine," he says, quartering breathingnick in my fist.

His fingers find the numerals contained in the cerulean bubble exploding on the edge of the "P" and punch them in slowly, deliberately. The magazine flops open, revealing Johnny Lightning, a bare-chested Romeo.

"A little light reading?" he asks too eagerly, cupping his hands delicately. He receives my payload of change as if it were delicate, a chick or a Eucharist.

"For my daughter, she's thirteen," I shrug, eyes focusing on a display of pyramid-stacked volumes: How to Do Your Own Taxes, How to Fix Your Own Toilet, How to Be Your Own Doctor, How to Raise Your Child Like a Pro.

"Hey, you don't look old enough to have a teenager," he says to my back as I pass through the automatic doors.

"I'm not," I say almost silently as I emerge from the stale chill of the supermarket into the muggy still of late August.

I toss the magazine beside me on the passenger seat and again it splays open, again his chest, nipples second searing eyes, stars at me from the centerfold. What will this do for her? She has already made a stack of the National Geographic outside my door, already claimed that summer reading is for bozos. Already I can only shower at night, and only tripping over strawberry lotions, pineapple hair freeze, pink cherry love potions, aqua blue Sea Breeze, lipstick, brushes, sparkle mousse, blushes. Will she be paralyzed by her mirror? Suffocated by scents?

I was swayed by much less.

A crude flyer, torn weather worn from a telephone pole, a greasy staple-gutted Xerox of his profile, quarter-folded in my pocket, patted for assurance as though it were a hundred dollar bill or a ticket to salvation, sent me flying over the pavement of five states, humming to the sounds of his whispers, warped by the churning cassette deck seated next to me, his subliminal siren song pulling me inland to beach myself in fields of soy, corn, wheat. I threw obligations like wax soda cups and foil sandwich wrappers through the half-open window, laughed as they twisted in the headlong wind, skittered along the glass panes, tumbled over concrete and died on the gravel shoulder.

So years later, I sit crow-footed in the company of gum-cracking freshmen, squeezing bits of Nietzsche between bites of microwave lunches, conjugating irregular French verbs aloud at stoplights. Je suis, tu es, il est, elle est, nous sommes ... .

An impatient honk sends me hurrying forward, sending an apologetic wave in the rearview mirror.

We are fine without him. The questions prime-time taught me to anticipate never came. Who was he? Did you love him? Did he want me? Did you? Her birth certificate lay unprinted by jelly fingers in my bottom drawer, she never trumped bureaucrats or sought the help of mail-polished talk show hosts to find him. But the fear of these things prompted me to a squirming explanation, set to the tune of a toothpaste jingle, our eyes fixed on an animated mouth full of winterfresh snow.

His new name, she'll never know. What I never counted on was his fame. His name spilled in a series of lead-ringed perforations in the marble green skin of the bus seat stared at us when I rode with Juna to her first open house. I quickly expanded the hole which gaping underneath by pulling the underbelly of white cross-hatched strings and let the corrimal foam fall out in chunks, swallowing his traces. A few years younger, a few more pounds of muscle and he might have been one of her pinups. Her friends would circle me like the Maypole, asking me pointed questions about habits I had never bothered to document and berating me for leaving him sleeping in a roadside motel.

Three keys to open the door, awkward but safe.

In the nightlight glow her room is like a shrine. They stare down from every corner. Miniature wall dolls, life-size posters on the closet doors, others cut along contours and tacked to the ceiling. Johnny Rocker, Soap Star Joe, Hockey Jaques —brandishing sticks, smiles, two-toned guitars.

I set the magazine on the dresser, take a seat at her vanity and watch her from the tiny stool. He is wrapped around her, one hand curved around the crown of her head holds her hair back. His lips are pressed, soft foam against her ears, whispering. He makes a thin arc around her back, spoonstyle, his arm tucked around hers, his hand holding her hand that holds the humming box.

She hears me and presses stop, trying not to show that I have interrupted her dream. "Hey ma," she says, reaching to turn on the lamp above her bed. "Didja get my mag?"

"It's on the dresser," I say, rising to switch the lamp off. "But you've got school tomorrow." I say goodbye as I pass through her door; but there is no answer.

Through the hollow plaster of our walls I can hear her as I undress, the pages, of the magazine sliding against one another frantically, one after the next until she finds him. I can picture her, bickering under the sheets with her flashlight, discovering him in the safety of this transparent womb. Tracing her fingers across the page, she lends texture to his hair, a soul to his smile, ripples to the contours of his arms and a future to his face.

She might scramble for a lost pen under the cover, draw it up by her toes and fill in the
margins of a subscription card with the draft of a letter beginning, "Dear Johnny," and ending, "Wait for me." Switching off her flashlight and holding her open palm against his face, she will place his head on the pillow next to hers, rewrap him around her ears and fall asleep to his whispers.

"Girl," he answers. "Girl, I've been waiting for so long."

How do I tell her there is more than this?

I kick off the too-high-heels, smelling of Pick & Pay plastic, into the corner, push back the hours of staring through the round perfect circle of the Plexiglass teller's window like a fishing hole in ice, giving my smiles and nods and yes ma'ams and no sirs to bent heads which look only at my hands as I lay out their bills for counting, hands chafed from passing money under the window's serrated edge. I want then to toss a hook into the world, catch a tie, a lapel, a floral scarf and pull someone from the current through the hole, sit them down in the break room and hand them a cup of stale coffee with Cremora and ask them for answers.

Trying not to step on the seams of my Nightgown I retrieve the pile of magazines from outside my door. She brushes past me on the way to the bathroom and I look up to see Johnny's face staring at me, blazing across the back of her nighthirt.

I set the magazine on my dresser next to my schoolbooks, take one to bed with me. The pebbled beaches of the Cote d'Azur rest in my lap. The ocean is propped up on my knees, the blue horizon brushes my knees. I imagine the rows of bulls-eyed striped umbrellas reaching beyond the pages which curve against my thighs. I sigh and let the yellow-framed dream slip closed between them and come to lie face down on the bed.

III.

I found the note on the kitchen table. I was not surprised because I had seen them twisting in the mirror, shirt hems pulled through collars, buttons depressed and propelling spray over their not-yet curves, covering themselves in chemical flowers which promised to solict real bouquets from strangers on the street.

"Just like on the commercial," Juna said. Just like on the commercial Juna and company had body sprayed the girl's bathroom, prompting two allergy fits and an asthma attack, earning her a three day suspension and me a summons to the principal's office Monday to discuss concerns over Juna's "disturbing behavior and unusually poor academic performance."

A pink note, carboned to all her teachers, like a receipt for my daughter.

On command she hands me the bottle and lets me bury it in the trash. "Would you like to explain this Juna Noelle?"

"I didn't do nothing. We were just playing. Daag. You act like I'm some kinda drug addict or something."

Monday afternoon there is no note on the table, there is no sound in the house. I put my purse down and glance at my watch. Three calls unanswered and I fling open her door to search her out. The room is empty and I rip through her closet and drawers, through piles of old notes and discarded candy wrappers, looking for what's missing, how she might be found. No answer still and I tear at the walls, yell, "Goddamn you, Juna," to the pictures which continue to smile even as I tear them in half and in half again. I sweep off her bed—plush animals, clothes and tapes—pellet them at the wall, sticking the leftover smiles with harmless darts. Defeated, I col-
lapse crying into the lilac froth of her bed.
She arrives seconds later, skin of foil peeled back from the candy bar. She crunches
loudly and stares down at me from the doorway.
What’re you doing in here?” she screams, darts to the pile of scraps on the floor and
flings them at me.
I rise and move toward her, dashing one last pillow to the floor. “Where have you
been?”
“Just went to the store. Why don’t you chill?” Her indifference tears at me with a Perfect
Pink pout and Coral Sea claws.
I bring up my shirt to dry off my face, burying myself from her sight. I grab her by the
wrist, pushing past her and pulling her behind me through the door. “Didn’t I tell you not to
leave the house?”
“Didn’t I tell you we need some food around here?” she asks, jerking her arm away
from mine and leaning back to swipe her purse from the floor.
“We’re late,” I answer, letting the door bang closed behind me. I sit for a moment warm-
ing up the car until she shuffles out, combing her hair and passing every few seconds to inspect
the faint red marks on her wrist.
“Daaang,” she whines, slamming the car door shut. “Look at that.”
“Go ahead, report me,” I tell her.
The principal stares at us across a wide desk, tapping a pencil. The pictures of her chil-
dren are guarded from me by the cardboard backings of the frames. We are splotched from cry-
ing and she is fresh from a day of coffee. She straightens her back and smiles forgiveness and
we slouch and nod, pretending to understand our crimes.
She sends Juna to the detention room to write apologies. I stare at the file cabinets, and
the plain round magnets which affix wallet pictures of students, favorites and those who aspire
to it, against the gunmetal surface. I remember clouded years and clear graphs shown to me,
charting intelligence, performance, disparities. The line of smiling faces and straight backs
which would not listen to what I said. I did not need: following directions, getting along, playing
the recorder, long division, scoring a homerun in kickball.
“Ms. Lane” she begins, settling and straightening again. “Ms.” here isn’t respect, I gather
from the way she stresses it. It’s because with out a Mr. I can’t be a Mrs., and with a kid, to her
I’m not a Miss. “Were you aware,” she continued, “of Juna’s difficulties?”
“Perfectly,” I say, and reach for the frame on her desk. Flipping it, I am disappointed to
find two toothless twin angels staring back at me.
“Very cute,” I tell her, and she reaches for the frame and sets it primly back in position,
sending me a glare that says pay attention.
“Have you taken any steps to remedy the situation?” she asks.
“I wasn’t aware that ‘remedy’ can be properly used as a verb, ma’am.”
“I’m doing all I can,” I tell her.
“I see,” she answers bracing her hands on the desk as she searches for more words. I
rise to leave before she can find them. “I appreciate your concern,” I tell her curtly before clos-
ing the door.
Juna is waiting at the end of a row of chairs, whispering to a boy with stringy blond
hair, reading by invitation the pink slip he holds in his hand. They exchange pyramid-folded

—Beth Trott
notes and she whispers to him, “Good luck, Chad.”

The names are different now, her Chads and Jasons were my Dannys and Bebys. Pretty boys. I lost too much time staring at the back of their heads. The way their hands pushed back their overgrown hair always stirred vague thoughts of things I wanted to do to them, made me jump inside even though I couldn’t picture exactly what those things were. And when they finally got over kickball and four square, they were more than willing to lead me or to fol-

low me to an old basement couch. So many of them rolled on, rolled off and rolled on, but every
time found me surprised to have them in my hands, then equally surprised then to find them
gone.

Years later, I see some of them around. There are a few that hang out on the edges of
things, pretty ravaged but still with charm, who after screwing everything east of the
Mississippi somehow manage to find some eighteen year old down on her luck and up for a
challenge.

But what can you do? What can I tell her when I know just how it is? When I could
sooner convince her to kowtow to a houseplant than to give it up? When at the sight of him I
find myself slightly tempted to congratulate her on the conquest?

“Did you write the notes?” I ask her.
“Yeah, but it’s not my fault, you know.”
“You should have been more careful,” I tell her as she plops into the passenger seat.
“Well how come Stephanie and Dawn don’t get suspended?” she asks.
“I don’t know. Maybe because their mothers are on the PTA board,” I tell her. The
sound of the engine swallows her laughter.
“Does this mean I’m not grounded?” she asks, flipping that note inside her palm over
and over, as if she were trying to read it without her eyes.
“Of course you are,” I tell her. “Especially after today.”
“I’m thirteen, not three, you know,” she retorts, twiddling with the radio dial.
“It’s good you can count,” I tell her, “Mrs. Casey has her doubts.”
“Mrs. Casey is a d**k.”
“Juna, don’t call anyone a d**k.”
She doesn’t respond, but lets Johnny Lightning’s voice fill the vacuum of silence.

V.

Juna, beating the mashed potatoes in her curlers and singing to herself, jumps when I
enter, doubled over with cramps, let off early from my Saturday shift at the call center. The
curlers are for the game, the potatoes are for the game. She makes them to please, she makes
them as please. “Please let me go,” she says, imploring me with her hands on her hips, wooden
spoon in her hand.
“You’re grounded, remember?”
“But I cleaned the house, en I did the dishes, en I—”
“You know they won’t let you in if you’re suspended,” I tell her.
“Sober.”
“You haven’t been back yet.”
I imagine that in Menlo Park, Mrs. Hickey is saying, "Don't say butt, Melanie." Or maybe she's smart enough to have figured it out already. That you can show them what you can shove into the thin strip of light under their door, tell them what will fit in the second's space between songs. I will plug the earphones from June's head and whisper and she will look from the corner of her eye and hear nothing, see only my lips moving.

Three keys to open the front door, and the dust is dancing in the last slants of light that divide the living room, keeping time with the tumbling chords—"Oh Girl," the song that runs backwards and forwards through my dreams, that wakes me and puts me to sleep, that interrupts the chant of ten, twenty, twenty-five, thirty at the bank, the one that makes me change the channel only to pick it up halfway through on the next station.

Soon his voice will break in with, "Girl, girl I've been waiting for so long." But it doesn't, and the song stops, starts, stops again. The dust can't dance to the stumbles.

"Juna!" I march back into her room, ready to throw open the door and pick him up by the neck. But the door is open and it is only her.

Her feet dangle from the bed and the one toe touching the floor is keeping time. She slides her fingers up the neck and finds the frets she was looking for. She presses them to the board, fingertips blanching a deliberate white, then strums a perfect chord. "Girl," she sings, but freezes when she catches my eye.

"Hey ma, I just borrowed this from—"

"Nevermind," I say, toss the magazine on her dresser with the box of bandages and close the door behind me.

—Beth Buhot

*This story is a part of a longer piece of fiction and has been shortened for this magazine.*
Until Sleep

a diving flight
of wooden stairs,
finished,
its juts of veins
paralyzed inside—
creaking and plodding
they most resemble
old age.
at the top,
my arms are like
a tree
lost to a breeze—
windswept and drawn
back.

—Brian Flatley
Contributor’s Notes

Beth Buhot is a recent GW graduate and former Wooden Teeth editor. She works at Counterpoint, a small literary press in DC.

Ryan Brogla is a senior and an English major at The GWU. She is not confident in contending with the trend of abstract bios typical of Wooden Teeth.

Eli Cohen is veering recklessly towards graduating with a degree in Anthropology. He recently won the Academy of American Poets College Prize here at GW and he now plans to live off the small monetary award for the duration of his existence by eating red beans and rice.

Brian Flatley spends his summers drinking grape koolaid and his winters watching his testicles shrivel into two small raisins. He also loves his mom, whom he refers to as Bob.

This is Erin Haab’s first time being featured like this. She’s very happy to be here.

Jennifer Lynn Headley is a first year graduate student currently pursuing a MFA in photography. Her goal is to become a highly regarded but slightly off-center art professor somewhere in the Southwest or California.

Taylor Johnson is from Maryland and Arizona. She thanks her dad for reading Dr. Suess’s “Too Many Daves” and other pre-bedtime verse. Thanks to her mom for giving her a new landscape, for invoking the Coyote. Also, thanks to her sisters, Hollis and Lindsey, for indulging her first creative efforts.
Ariana Markoe will endure one more year of starting papers at 11:00pm the night before. It hurts, sure, but who is she to mess with perfection?

Katy McQuilllin is a junior from Signal Mountain, Tenn. She is majoring in Fine Arts and Art History. She is also the captain of the GW women’s soccer team. Her future plans consist of continuing education in either Fine Arts or Architecture.

Kathy Rooney is a freshman. She is trying hard to be a logical individual.

Janna Schoenberger is a freshman planning to double major in Fine Art and Biology. She likes fruit.

Sure, I might offend a few of the blue-noses with my cocky stride and musky odors — oh, I’ll never be the darling of the so-called ‘City Fathers’ who chuff their tongues, stroke their beards, and talk about ‘what is to be done with this Luke Strosnider?’

Sally Tamarkin came in 9th place in the third grade city-wide spelling-bee. She does not own a cell phone and she can’t help but miss the Brenda years.

Beth Trott is a senior Art major concentrating in drawing. She is happy to be graduating this May.

—Erin Haab