

# **FIRETHORNE**

The Gustavus Journal of Literary and Graphic Arts

---

**SPRING 2012**

**GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE**

# FIRETHORNE SUBMISSION POLICY

*Firethorne* is Gustavus Adolphus College's journal of literary and graphic arts, comprised solely of student work. *Firethorne* is published twice a year, with a supplemental in the fall and a full-length publication in the spring.

Students may submit their work by emailing [firethorne@gustavus.edu](mailto:firethorne@gustavus.edu) with "Firethorne Submission" in the subject line and the student's name, year, and major included in the body of the email. Emails must attach prose and poetry in Microsoft Word format in a standard font without color (Times New Roman, 12 pt). Attachment file names should reflect the titles of the work being submitted and the student's name should not be included anywhere in the document itself. Artwork and photography must be sent as a JPEG file with reasonable file compression (300-600 dpi) with the file name(s) reflecting the title(s) of the work. Multiple submissions should be sent as separate attachments. Drawings, paintings, etc. that are being submitted may either be scanned and then emailed or a high quality physical copy. *Firethorne* encourages collaboration between artists and photographers; pictures of sculpture and other multimedia works can be credited to both their creators and photographers. *Firethorne* will not publish anonymous work or materials submitted from a non-Gustavus email address.

The Managing Editor will systematically code all submitted work and turn over the submitted work, without attribution, for the editors' scrutiny. *Firethorne* staff will admit submissions for creativity, originality, and artistic value.

For prose, submissions should be 3000 words or less. Artwork and photography can be color and up to any size, however please take note that color may be cost prohibitive depending on available funds. In this event, *Firethorne* staff will convert artwork to grayscale with the submitter's consent.

Submissions marked for publication will appear in their original submitted form except for technical aspects such as font, size, page placement, and corrections of obvious grammatical errors. Stylistic changes recommended by the editors will be made only with the submitter's consent. If recommended changes are not approved by the submitter, they will not be made; however the publication of the work will then be determined by *Firethorne* staff as it reflects our artistic mission for the publication as a whole. It is against *Firethorne* policy to publish works that do not reflect the submitter's artistic integrity.

*Firethorne* staff members are encouraged to submit their work to the magazine, although no more than three submissions from any one staff member may be published in each issue. Staff members' works will undergo the editing process like all other submissions. The views and opinions expressed in the publication are not to be taken as those of *Firethorne* staff or its associated bodies. Materials deemed to place the publication at risk for liability with regard to obscenity or profanity in connection with hate speech, slander or other illegal forms of speech will be removed at the staff's discretion. Work found to be fraudulent in nature or plagiarized will be disqualified upon confirmation.

Inquiries into *Firethorne* can be made by contacting:  
Baker Lawley, Assistant Professor of English, *Firethorne* Advisor  
[blawley@gustavus.edu](mailto:blawley@gustavus.edu) or (507)-933-7402

This policy was revised December 2010. *Firethorne*, MMVI all rights reserved.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to those who have contributed their time, support, and talents to create this issue, especially—

Amy Quale of Beaver's Pond Press and to Versa Press in East Peoria, Illinois, for their help preparing this publication for print;

the Gustavus Department of English and the Gustavus Student Senate, for their generous support;

Jennifer Tollefson, for her administrative guidance and letting us into our office when we lock ourselves out;

Phil Bryant, our faculty advisor, for his support and enthusiasm (we hope you enjoy your poem, Phil);

our section editors for their leadership and innovation, and to our editors for their enthusiasm and dedication to this publication;

Grandma Joan, for the cheesecake that nourished and energized us through the poetry section meeting;

Cassie Napoli, for all the work she did to make sure we displayed our submitters' artwork to the best of our ability;

Krystal Bundy, for transcribing and editing our interview, and for proofing the entire manuscript;

the hundred-plus creative minds who submitted their work for consideration;

and our readers. This is for you.

The Spring 2012 *Firethorne* Staff

# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

---

Dear reader,

With more experience under our belts and a growing awareness of publishing in the professional world, we have begun to see Firethorne as having the ability to bridge budding writers and artists to the wider creative community. We have had the privilege of looking at incredible work by our community's very own writers and artists, work that clearly reflects a dedication to their craft and a passion for art that speaks. It was our goal as editors to match this skill and enthusiasm in presenting the following works.

We are proud that our magazine serves as a springboard, a place for creators to get their sea legs, and we look forward to seeing the names in this issue go on to appear in publications in addition to our own.

Until then, it is with great enthusiasm that we present you with the Spring 2012 issue of the Firethorne.

—*Patrick Perish & Erin Simon*



# **FIRETHORNE STAFF**

---

## **MANAGING EDITOR**

Patrick Perish

## **ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGER**

Erin Simon

## **LAYOUT EDITOR**

Jenna Chapman

## **COPY EDITOR**

Ethan Marxhausen

---

## **PROSE SECTION EDITOR**

Amanda Fink

### **PROSE EDITORS**

Paige Andrle	Ethan Marxhausen
Tram Bui	Paige Rasmussen
Anne Casey	Jill Smith
Jenna Chapman	Anne Thielman
Elisabeth Krane	Wade Underwood
Christina Leaf	Kenton Watson

---

## **POETRY SECTION EDITOR**

Katie Asfeld

### **POETRY EDITORS**

Aaron Albani	Ian Ingersoll
Darcy Coulter	Benjamin Kolis
Kristina Ericksen	Zoe May
Jennifer Hanson	Tristan Richards
Julie Hayes	Laura Schroeder

---

## **ART SECTION EDITOR**

Catherine Keith

### **ART EDITORS**

Kristina Fosse	Cassie Napoli
Emily Hamberg	Heather Pallas
Rebecca Hare	
Abby Huff	David Pedersen

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

## PROSE

---

Ben Batz	106	Show Boy
Jenna Chapman	56	Three Letters
Amanda Fink	44	Heart
Riley Lass	22	Fable
Christina Leaf	17	Metro
	110	Slip
Trevor Oestenstad	11	Half-Smoked Cigarettes
Lareesa Sandretsky	96	Breathing Hard

## ART

---

Karl Brudvig	94	Bird's Eye Self-Portrait
Leif Estenson	77	Ass Plates
	80	My Imagination is a Beach
	104	There's Something in the Water
Amanda Fink	79	Chaos & Creation
Abby Huff	68	Envious
Catherine Keith	16	The El
	70	The Studio
Cassie Napoli	73	Eternity
	75	Skeptics & True Believers
Heather Pallas	78	Lines
David Pedersen	65	Apprehension
	72	Bahia
Katie Schroeder	66	Maasai Children
Erin Simon	30	Battleship
Evan Taylor	69	Living in a City
	74	Levitation #1
	76	Escape to Home
Nick Thiesen	71	Where to noW?
Beatrice Winter	67	Emphatic Exclamation

## INTERVIEW

---

Joyce Sutphen	60	March 26 <sup>th</sup> , 2012
---------------	----	-------------------------------

## POETRY

---

Katie Asfeld	10	Home
	87	I Went to the Barn Today
Krystal Bundy	59	Our Poems
Bree Ceranske	9	Phil Says
	43	Bar-bar-barbie
Victoria Clark	20	Around the Yard Poems
Amanda Fink	19	"I don't want to be Forgotten-"
Jennifer Hanson	82	an inventory of cursive
Rebecca Hare	97	Sepia
Robert Holder	15	In the darkness (translation)
Benjamin Kolis	54	Two Ways to Consider a Lost Pen
	86	Memo 18
Eric Larson	31	Echo
Ethan Marxhausen	112	A Reoccurring Nightmare
Chloe Radcliffe	23	In Case You Wanted to Know
	55	Post-Birthday Balloons
	99	It's Not Supposed to Taste...
Beth Schmidt	98	Longevity
Caitlin Skvorc	88	surreptitious...
	105	Expectations
Wade Underwood	60	Bats
	109	TV Girl
Jessica Van Kempen	95	Member of a Murder

## DRAMA

---

Ethan Bjelland	100	Livsløgnen
Jenna Chapman	89	Forty-Two
Ethan Marxhausen	32	Phoning Home
Julia Tindell	24	Getting to the Ball
	83	Dirty Little Bedroom Secrets

### Cover Art:

"Moss" by Heather Pallas, Senior Art Studio major



**PHIL SAYS**

Phil Says:

“Life puts a whoopin’ on you.

Then you die.

That’s the Blues.”

Phil Says:

“When I hit pubit-tree

I noticed I wasn’t built like a quarterback

So I decided to be a musician and play the git-tar

Because they got girls too.

Now that’s Rock.”

Phil Says:

“I was, yah-no, no rock star,

So I became an English teacher

Because I could write,

And that’s my life.”

**HOME**

I know I've been away  
far too long  
when the steady bellow  
of the cow outside  
drifts in through the window

as the sun sends golden ribbons  
through the leafless trees  
black against the sunset

and I think I've heard instead  
my cell phone vibrating  
on the wooden table

### HALF-SMOKED CIGARETTES

My first cigarette was a half-smoked butt I found on the ground. It was in the back of our local K-mart, where my best friend Will and I used to prowl during the summer, after we had purchased things like Milk Duds, Sour Patch Kids, Sugar Daddies, store-brand pop. Always candy and pop in the back of K-mart. And now cigarette butts. We were desperate. We were eleven. We knew a kid whose brother gave him packs of Marlboro Golds every once in a while, but we had no eighteen-year-old brothers, and so we saw a half-smoked cigarette butt on the ground and considered it a go.

It was recreation, looking for these cigarettes. Just like on Easter Sunday, when my brother and I searched for the jellybeans that my parents had hid around the house. Only this search was sinful. We could end up inhaling something and even getting a buzz—this higher state of pleasure, of mind, that we kept hearing our friends talk about.

“Oh, see a woman smoked this cig,” Will said once, crouching down and picking up the morsel of a cigarette.

I asked him why.

“This red stuff on the filter,” he said. This was the new lingo we had been trying out, prideful of its use—words like cig, filter, cherry, butt, ash. He said, “Know what it is?”

“Oh yeah, on the filter. It’s lipstick, right?”

“Yeah. Lipstick.”

We forwent the cig with the lipstick on its filter—that much we did.

By the end of our forage in the back of K-mart, we had a handful of broken cigarettes, of half-smoked cigarettes, cigarettes thrown to the gravel in haste as workers finished up their break, cigarettes nobody but eleven-year-olds and environmentalists would care to pick up. We put our prizes in our plastic K-mart bags. Later, in order to hide them from my parents, I put the scraps into an empty Skittles wrapper.

\* \* \*

I come from a long line of non-smokers. My mother, I don't think, has held one of the cellulose cylinders between her fingers in her life. Perhaps she has, but the person she is right now—and the person I've known my entire life—hasn't taken a puff of anything. Not that I can picture, at least.

My dad, on the other hand, smokes a stogie every once in a while. He sits in the plastic lawn chairs in the front yard (our wooden ones have long deteriorated) and looks past his sailboat in the driveway, past the lilac bushes, and off toward the swamp across the cul-de-sac. He sits there with his cigar, leaning back heavily in the chair, blowing high whiffs of smoke that float toward the house.

"Is Dad smoking that nasty stuff again?" my mom says.

"I think so," I say.

She turns and heads back to the computer room.

Aside from that, I have an aunt who is a smoker, but nobody ever talked about this. It was merely accepted with a shrug of the shoulders. Besides, that aunt has been smudged out of our particular familiar life. As much as she was my favorite aunt, I haven't talked to her in years.

\* \* \*

The thing I hate about smokers is their disregard for life. Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death in America—how can someone smoke in the face of this? How can someone smoke knowing that it will curtail their life?

But then again, I love that about them. They are so reckless. From their stoops and building entrances they all blow smoke in the face of death.

Eventually, I turned eighteen. I could buy cigarettes. Eventually I turned twenty-one. I could buy booze. Sometimes now, I smoke cigarettes, and sometimes now, I drink booze. Sometimes, I think about being a kid, searching in the back of K-mart for a minimally tainted cigarette butt, searching for that buzz. "Oh, a woman smoked this one," Will says. "Know why?"

"Yes," I say, "I do."

On the other hand, what I value about smokers is this sense of reflection they have. They look so pensive, don't they? Congregating on their exit steps, their doors, their porches. If every American could



take the time out of their day to sit and look out at the gravel, the birds in the sky, hear the wind blow through the trees five to ten times a day, don't you think that would matter?

\* \* \*

I have a friend who started smoking recently. He had a long battle in accepting this. He's still battling.

"Trevor," he used to say, "if I start smoking, what will you do?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'll stop talking to you."

"Seriously. If I start smoking, will you hate me?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, "I'll hate you."

"Come on, be serious," he said. "That's the problem with you, whenever we get into a serious discussion you put on this façade like, like you're trying to avoid things. Answer me this right now: If I start smoking, will you hate me?"

The inquiries go on and on. My friend began smoking, and then he stopped. He chewed sunflower seeds to combat the urge. He caved. He felt horrible. Now he smokes. Now he is a smoker.

Sometimes I think that I'm not so much avoiding things, I'm looking for them: looking for beat-up cigarette butts in the back of K-mart, looking for this buzz they all tell me about, looking at how much of a pea-brained kid I was, looking for solace in the non-smokers of my family.

\* \* \*

I ask my friend if he still gets buzzes when he smokes—that is the question I'm really curious about.

"Not really," he says. "Maybe for a minute, but that's all. It's short-lasting."

"How about your first buzz?" I ask.

"What about it?"

"How was it?"

"It was—God, it was amazing."

He takes a drag and taps the cherry off.

"You should stop smoking," I say.

"Trevor," he says, "I'm a smoker, just deal with it. That's just how it is, just deal with it. Besides, you know my family."

He inhales deeply, his shoulders rising, and then he puffs out the smoke. We watch it carry up in the wind and form a thin veil, disperse into nothing.

“Still, you should stop smoking,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “Then you couldn’t smoke with me.”

“I know,” I say.

He hands me a cigarette from his pack and I light it, inhale it. I have a cigarette whenever I see him, which encourages him to smoke, and yet I tell him, verbally, You shouldn’t do it.

We are near the benches in the park, and we watch the cars go by. We watch the yellow lights of the parking ramp begin to strengthen as the sun falls down below the trees behind us. The wind blows. Our smoke drifts up sideways in the wind. We both have things to say to each other, but neither of us says anything, and I guess that is some sort of communication. The wind pauses for a minute, and then resumes.

I decide to speak up. I decide to tell him about the first cigarette I ever had, in the back of K-mart, but he says something first. I forget what he says.

**I MÖRKRET** *by Karin Boye*

I mörkret ligger jag och hör,  
hur klockor dånar utanför  
med långa, tunga, jämna slag,  
som mörkrets djupa andetag.

De dövar allt och söver allt  
och löser tingens dimgestalt  
i långa, tunga, jämna dân,  
som tanken aldrig lossnar från.

Jag är bland dem som knappast finns  
och bara vet och bara minns  
det gamla mörkrets hjärteslag,  
som väntar ingen morgondag.

som fruktar ingen morgondag.

**IN THE DARKNESS**

In the darkness I lie and hear,  
rumbling clocks which are drawing near  
with long, heavy, and even strokes.  
Darkness' breath, a pervasive smoke.

They deafen all, send all to sleep  
Silhouettes fade; they cannot keep.  
The long, heavy, and even booms  
grasp at my thoughts like nearing doom.

Now I'm among those who barely exist.  
I know, I recall, but hardly persist.  
The ageless heartbeat of darkness goes on.  
It never expects the morning to dawn,

It never fears that the morning will dawn.

*CATHERINE KEITH*  
*SENIOR JUSTICE & PEACE STUDIES MAJOR*

---



THE EL

**METRO**

We're in a constant state of rain, from the sky, from the big gray clouds, the constant cover over our heads, over our umbrellas, over our rain-soaked fashionable black suede boots (though they say it never rains in Barcelona, there's always sun, always beautiful blue skies though all I've seen is the rain, the constant drops thud thud thudding onto my butterflyed umbrella—I never see butterflies at anytime other than the rain though they are never real, just the purples and greens and blues and yellows against the black backdrop of my umbrella with a scratched black wooden handle) as we hurry underground down the slippery mud-splashed steps past the others standing, floating down the escalator, moving but not moving, into the shelter that is the subway—and the man is there, the saxophonist, in his shabby brown overcoat and his knockoff Ray Ban sunglasses though there is no sun in the underground, or in the sky for that matter, in the same corner that he always is, against the tan tiles of the metro station, illegally, playing whatever happens to come to his mind, rhythm, blues, jazz-tinged Beatles for the pleasure of the tourists; all of the musicians seem to like “Imagine” whether it be syncopated on the saxophone or the keyboard in the jazz style with riffs where there aren't any on the recording, or whether it is sung in poor English, the artist just imitating the sounds that he knows are the song, not an English speaker so he just makes sounds, imitates whatever he hears, and then in a flash the saxophonist scrapes the euros out from the red fur-like interior of his case and shuts it, still holding the brass saxophone in his hand as he scoots, hurriedly but not in too much of a rush towards the trains, following the twisting, turning hallway, looking behind him for police and slips through the glass turnstile after a kid with a backpack, just another unsuspecting tourist who pauses to stare at the map ahead, his eyes flicking back

and forth on the big yellow line in front of him, wondering which stop is his, and which stop he's at when a shorter man knocks into him—the kid mumbles his apologies in something that sounds like it's supposed to be Spanish but doesn't quite make the connection—he fails to notice the small black piece of leather that the shorter man has just slipped into his own pocket—the rush of wind and noise, whooshing and clacking, the crowds of people nudge and push and cramp onto the train in the direction of Trinitat Nova, squeezed so tight we can't move, turn, find our friends but the saxophonist, still holding his instrument, wedges into the corner and begins to belt out a fast tune, the beats falling at the same time as the click of the subway car, between the quiet chatter of *la gente*, a sharp turn and we all tilt, step on toes, smash into one another, but the sounds of the subway song continue, rushing through the tunnels, keeping the time.

**“I DON’T WANT TO BE FORGOTTEN-”**

I don’t want to be Forgotten-  
the tongue of you will  
never speak of me-  
floating down a Sea of ink-  
soft as down-

AROUND THE YARD POEMS

*Water Pump*

Before the patio  
was poured  
and the recycled  
plastic porches invaded,  
a Lost Boys backyard  
reigned supreme.

A retired water pump  
rose out of the ground.  
And whispered of  
long ago hands  
who carried the buckets  
and cupped their palms  
for a drink.

An expansive lawn  
swam around it  
like an impossibly green ocean.  
The pump was a lighthouse then  
for wayward beetles and ants  
who became lost amongst the waves.  
And in the distance, a citadel of tulips  
perched upon mountains of warm earth.

Honeysuckles and hollyhocks  
were pirates of that age.  
Looting their neighbors,  
the phloxes and Shasta daisies.



The trellis stood in the foreground  
symbolic of the end.  
With wanton morning glories  
yawning from between the slats.

Now, the only tangible remnant  
of that lost time  
are the tulips  
and the earth  
who accounts for everything  
given and taken away.

### *Shovel*

There is an old, wise shovel  
behind the garage  
with a splintered handle  
and worn blade.

This great tool of industry  
and rugged promise  
now shovels  
dog shit  
out of the yard.

**FABLE**

On the banks of a small river, a boy sat and studied a difficult text. Fed up with the arduousness of his studies, the boy stood and was about to cast the text into the stream. As the boy prepared to send the book, the river looked up and smiled at the boy.

“Do not let the difficulty of your troubles keep you from achieving greatness,” it said. “Though tribulation seems overwhelming, it should not keep you from your goals. I who was once but a single teardrop from the heavens have worked dawn to dusk moving the silt in the bank. Each day I grow with the effort I give.”

The boy meditated on the words of the meager creek. Finally, he raised his arm and cast the book away.

Years later, a paltry man returns to the bank where he once roamed. The withered and dull man pales in comparison to the might of the now roaring river. After years of procrastination and lax attitude, he decides to cast himself into the quick waters to end his empty life. As the man prepares to send himself, the river looks up and booms:

“Old friend, what are you doing? If you fall in, you will not survive my great waters. I, unlike you, have become strong in my tenacity. Surely with your look of penitence you see the erroneous ways of your past? Is it not so that, though many years have been squandered, you can still take on a sense of being for which it is worth living?”

The man meditates on the words of the coursing river. Finally, he raises his foot and casts himself away.

**IN CASE YOU WANTED TO KNOW**

Yeah, she said, in response to some unasked question,  
I'm pretty happy.

GETTING TO THE BALL

**SETTING:** Northern Minnesota. State park off of I-35E N. A picnic area near the parking lot.

*Upstage, a wooded area with the sun peeking out through the trees and a gravel path running through the middle, offstage. A nearby sign depicts map of path and surrounding area. A wooden gazebo with a long, silver, metal bench on a smallish rectangle of concrete. Grass around the concrete is brown and muddy, likely recently rained on.*

*The sound of wildlife, birds, nearby running water, and the other things one expects to hear in a park. A sunny, spring Wednesday early afternoon in April. A half-finished lunch of PB&J, potato chips, and canned fruit is spread out across the metal table.*

CLARA, 6, sits in the middle of the table, legs swinging, playing with her food, maybe humming. A sweet little girl with rosy cheeks and a pale complexion. She's wearing a very pink princess dress and a tiny silver tiara. Other various princess materials accompany her. When CLARA speaks, her hands sometimes automatically sign what she's saying. When she speaks to BERTRAND, she signs everything and probably says most of her lines out loud simultaneously.

BERTRAND, 27, is turned away from the table, looking at a spot in the grass downstage. He's in a pair of ripped jeans and a faded blue sweater. Tired eyes and a frown that travels just about as far down his body as possible. BERTRAND is deaf and signs all of his lines.

JACK, 53, comes in from the path in the woods, carrying a backpack. A large man, a few work wrinkles, with a great beard and a rough demeanor. He wears hiking clothes. He puts his backpack down when he gets to the edge of the path and begins rifling through it. CLARA notices JACK when he comes in. She throws a piece of food at BERTRAND to get his attention.

CLARA: Dad.

BERTRAND: Don't waste that! You have to clean it up.

CLARA: There's a man over there. See?

BERTRAND: Thank heavens. Finally! Will you ask him to come over here?

CLARA *approaches* JACK.

CLARA: Excuse me, sir.

JACK: Hi there!

CLARA: Would you be ever so kind as to come speak to my father  
(*Deciding she's going to play a game with the hiker.*) -riend  
and me. We need someone to help us find directions to the  
grand royal ball!

JACK: Yes, Miss...

CLARA: My name is Princess Clara, and this is my servant... Bert!

CLARA and JACK *come to the tables*. BERTRAND *stands to meet them, smiling*.

JACK (*Extending a hand to shake BERT's*): Bert.

*The men shake hands.*

BERTRAND: Will you tell him that I'm deaf?

JACK (*Interrupting*): What, are you deaf?

CLARA (*Not hearing JACK's question*): Sir, my servant is deaf.

JACK: Is that so?

BERTRAND *nods*.

JACK: Glad to meet you.

BERTRAND: Can you talk for me, Clara, and tell me what he says?

CLARA *nods*.

CLARA: I am going to speak for my servant, Bert, while he explains who we are. As the princess, I am too tired to think too hard. Bert carried me in a beautiful pumpkin carriage while I went to sleep so I would be awake for the ball tonight. I want to look like a pretty snowflake so I have to sleep lots.

JACK: A ball?

CLARA: Yes, a ball! I am a princess! (*To* BERTRAND) What should I say?

BERTRAND: What's his name?

CLARA (*To* JACK): Who dares to speak to the Princess Clara and her trusty servant, Bert?

JACK: My name, Miss Clara-

CLARA: Your Majesty, please!

JACK: My name, Your Majesty, is Jack.

CLARA(*To* BERTRAND): Jack.

BERTRAND: Will you ask him if he knows where Carlton is? Near Duluth?

CLARA: Me and Bert have been traveling for days, alone, with nobody to help us or keep us safe. We have been eating peanut butter and jelly and chips and fruits.

CLARA

Also, Bert has battled lots of dragons and killed them, like a very brave lion or a cat that catches mice and kills them and eats them, except we don't eat the dragons because that doesn't taste very good.

BERTRAND

Clara, what are you telling him?

Stay focused.

Ask him where Carlton is, please, Clara!

CLARA: We're at the end of our trip now, though, and we're looking for the ball, and we need to find a place called Carlton. Do you know where it is?

JACK: Carlton? Of course I know where that is!

CLARA (*Pretending to be faint*): Bless the soul! My hero!

*She nods to BERTRAND. BERTRAND is pleased.*

JACK: But you just wait a sec. Why are you folks out for Carlton? Is it a ball? Any balls around here would be in Duluth, if anywhere!

CLARA (*To BERTRAND*): He wants to know why we're going to Carlton. He says the balls are in Duluth.

BERTRAND *is confused, and then realizes that CLARA has been lying to JACK. Sadly, he tries to cut CLARA out of the conversation. He motions to JACK, asking if he has a piece of paper.*

JACK (*Chuckling, shaking his head no*): I'm just out here for a hike.

*After a few seconds of disappointment, BERTRAND realizes he may have something and begins shuffling through the lunch bags. He finds a napkin and a pen and writes a message on the napkin, which reads: "We're going to a funeral in Carlton. She doesn't know yet." He hands the note to JACK and watches him silently.*

JACK *reads the napkin.*

CLARA (*Whispering, to JACK*): He hasn't told me where we're going yet. It's a surprise. He let me wear my favorite dress though, and he knows it's my princess dress, and he told me there's another pretty dress waiting for me in Carlton. I'm a princess, Jack! We're going to a ball. I just know it. It's like when you're dressing a doll and you just know her pink shoes will match her blue dress. Or it's like eating macaroni in shapes instead of noodles. You just know...

JACK: Well, Your Majesty, we'll have to get this sorted out then, so you won't be late.

*JACK turns over the napkin to begin writing, changes his mind, opens it and turns it inside out so BERTRAND's note is not visible. He draws a small map and gives it to BERTRAND. The men share a moment.*

JACK: Good luck, brother. (*Bending down, to speak to CLARA directly*) Your Majesty, little princess Clara, I am so glad to have met you. You sure are a sweet girl. But there's just one problem. Princesses don't lie, and I've got the feeling you haven't told me the whole story! Is this man really a servant?

CLARA (*Ashamed, but happy JACK is calling her a princess*): No, he's my dad.

JACK: Aha! Well, Your Majesty, if I may be so bold, I will make a suggestion: you must be kind to your old dad. You've come a long way and he's been fighting dragons, and don't forget: there would not be a Princess Clara if there had not first been a king to buy her dress!

Now, listen. The road to the ball is not easy. I can tell you this much: I don't think the ball is in Carlton. I'm afraid it will take you a long while to find the path that takes you and the king to the ball, but that's a good king you got there with you. Just remember, Clara, the path will be long, and the journey will be hard, and a little sad sometimes, but that doesn't mean you can't still be a great little princess.



CLARA (*A little confused*): Thank you, sir!

CLARA *runs to the table and fishes around for a butter knife. She comes back and motions for JACK to get down on one knee.*

CLARA (*Motions as though knighting JACK*): I now pronounce you the great knight Jack! Thank you for the directions.

*She puts the knife down and looks back at BERTRAND.*

CLARA (*To BERTRAND*): Jack says the ball isn't in Carlton, but we'll find it if we keep looking. Can we go now?

BERTRAND (*Directly to JACK*): Thank you.

JACK (*Smiling and nodding*): My pleasure.

BERTRAND *and CLARA clean up the table and exit the stage.*

JACK *stands for a few seconds, sighs heavily, shakes his head in their direction.*

JACK: Good luck, brother.

*He picks up his backpack, and exits after them.*

*ERIN SIMON*  
*SENIOR ENGLISH MAJOR*

---



**BATTLESHIP**

**ECHO**

An echo yells—  
piercing dense invisible air,  
shaking hollow cavern walls,  
creating vibrant colors  
filtered over a plethora of  
tiny particles, bouncing  
in rhythm—breathing air  
into your ears,  
firing neurons to synapses,  
saying back to you,  
“Hello.”

PHONING HOME

**TIME:** Summer.

**PLACE:** A suburb.

**CHARACTERS:**

Marshall Hedwin: 14

Orlando Aligheri: 8

Alien: Unknown. When it speaks it is with clicks and sharp out-breaths. Clicks look like this on the page: \*. A quick, sharp out-breath looks like this: -. A longer out-breath punctuated with clicks looks like this: --\*--\*\*-----\*

MARSHALL *enters first, from stage left. He is wearing night-vision goggles and is dressed, more or less, in black. It is impossible to tell who he is trying to hide from, whether someone is chasing him or whether it is the audience itself, but he seems to be doing an okay job. He sidles up against the house, just under the window, and motions offstage.*

ORLANDO *and the ALIEN rush to catch up. The ALIEN, probably still unused to that whole “gravity” thing, overshoots and runs smack into MARSHALL’s back leg.*

MARSHALL: Jesus! get this—(*Catches himself. Hissing:*) Get this fucking thing *away* from me, man.

ORLANDO: Sorry.

MARSHALL: Don’t apologize, it’s just—god, it’s hard enough, you know, I mean *running* this whole operation, and he’s not helping.

ORLANDO: I don’t think it’s a he.

MARSHALL: You—wait, really?

ORLANDO: He kind of feels like a she.

MARSHALL: You haven't even bothered finding out?

ORLANDO: I don't know how to ask.

MARSHALL: Kee-reist. That's just. That's, you're just so fucked up man.

ORLANDO: Sorry.

MARSHALL: Don't—

*He pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes his head, sighs. He removes a flat-head screwdriver from his field kit and busies himself with removing the bottom edge of the screen from the window. He can barely reach it from tiptoe, which means he is struggling a bit. ORLANDO and the ALIEN look on, unsure of how to help.*

ORLANDO: Thank you.

MARSHALL: Yeah, well. Don't thank me yet. Do you know this is the most dangerous operation I've ever organized?

ORLANDO (*Honestly impressed*): No way.

MARSHALL: And I've been doing this for a while, so, you know, you're lucky I was around tonight. Also, you owe me batteries.

*ORLANDO looks blank. MARSHALL taps his night-vision goggles in a "duh" kind of way. ORLANDO nods.*

ALIEN: \*\*-\*--

*A short pause. MARSHALL throws up his hands, still holding the screwdriver in one, his night-vision goggles slightly askew.*

MARSHALL: Well?

ORLANDO: She's kind of scared.

MARSHALL (*Going back to work*): She's got nothing to worry about—

*A branch cracks from offstage, followed by an alleycat yeowl. All three of them freeze. The ALIEN begins to noticeably shiver and cowers behind ORLANDO's leg. It's pitiful. ORLANDO pats its back tenderly. Ten seconds pass. MARSHALL lowers his goggles and turns them on with a high-pitched "wheeeee". He motions for them all to hit the deck and begins to army crawl forward. The heavy goggles shift crazily. He goes several feet out towards stage right, then turns around and does the same back.*

MARSHALL: Clear.

*He takes on a new intensity as he returns to the work. ORLANDO and the ALIEN remain sitting next to each other, backs propped against the house.*

ALIEN: ---\*--\*\*

ORLANDO (*Patting its hand*): It's okay.

MARSHALL: You shouldn't touch that thing.

ORLANDO: Why not?

MARSHALL: Because, like, have you seen "War of the Worlds"? (*ORLANDO shakes his head*) Kee-reist. It's like, alien germs are different from human germs. So what they've got could kill you, even if it doesn't do anything to them. Our immune system functions differently, and your skin gets eaten away or, like from the inside out, and all that's left is bones and cartilage.

ORLANDO: What's cartilage?

MARSHALL: Whaddya think your ears are made of? Kee-reist. You don't think, you know that? You're lucky I'm here.

*The bottom part of the screen snaps free.*

MARSHALL: Damn. Got it. Are you sure your mom is gone?

ORLANDO: She's with Dennis tonight.

MARSHALL: Den—who the fuck is Dennis?

ALIEN: \*.-\*\*

ORLANDO: Dennis is new.

MARSHALL (*Chuckles*): Lando, you're too young to understand these things. But this much should suffice for now. (*Clears throat. Announces:*) Your mother's a whore.

ORLANDO: My mother's a whore.

MARSHALL: That's right.

ALIEN: \*\*\_--\*\_\*\*

MARSHALL: Shut up.

ORLANDO (*Confused*): Does she *have* to be a whore?

MARSHALL: Well Lando, some people have no choice in these matters.

ORLANDO: They don't?

MARSHALL: Nope. Lando, remember Kaitlyn?

ORLANDO: No. Oh wait. Yeah. Yeah.

MARSHALL *shrugs*.

ORLANDO (*Aghast*): Was she a whore?

MARSHALL: Through and through.

ORLANDO: Wow.

MARSHALL: Your mother's a whore, and Kaitlyn's a whore. There, now even if we don't get anything else out of tonight at least you can say you learned something.

ORLANDO *regards the ALIEN*.

ORLANDO: Do you think she's a whore?

MARSHALL: Fuck's sake, Lando. Aliens don't have sex.

ORLANDO: They don't?

MARSHALL: Fuck no. They reproduce asexually.

ORLANDO: Asexually.

MARSHALL: Like sponges and anemones and stuff.

ORLANDO: Wow.

ALIEN: \*-\*

MARSHALL: You know, Lando, I wasn't always this smart.

ORLANDO: Really?

MARSHALL: You even know what Wikipedia is?

ORLANDO *shakes his head*.

MARSHALL: The *internet*?

ORLANDO: Mom doesn't let me.

MARSHALL (*Sighs heavily. Matter-of-factly*): That's because your



mother is a *whore*. Of the highest *caliber*. Fuck.

ORLANDO: You shouldn't say that.

MARSHALL: Say what. That your mother's a *whore*?

ORLANDO: You shouldn't say fuck.

MARSHALL: Fuckin' why not?

ORLANDO: My mom says only people who can't think of smart things to say say fuck.

MARSHALL: I'm through talking about your mom. Do you *mind*?

ALIEN: \*

ORLANDO: See?

MARSHALL: What?

ORLANDO: She's repeating.

MARSHALL: You've got to be fucking kidding me.

ORLANDO: Nope.

ALIEN: \*

ORLANDO: See?

MARSHALL: That thing can't even understand us. Hey! (*Waves the screwdriver in front of the ALIEN's face*) Can. You. Under. Stand. Me?

ALIEN: \*

ORLANDO: She says yes.

MARSHALL: How do you know it wasn't "fuck" again?

ORLANDO *shrugs*.

MARSHALL: Kee-reist. I knew this was a bad operation. I knew this was a bad operation to begin with. (*Beat*) And then what, how is it ever going to get on the bus, and stay there, huh?

ORLANDO: I don't know.

MARSHALL: —all the way to Chicago. And then what, it's Chicago's problem? They're gonna flip and we're gonna see this walking raisin again, only this time it'll be on the news and they'll be interviewing the bus driver and he's gonna know who we are I mean keeeeeee-reist. (*Long beat. ORLANDO and the ALIEN look at each other. MARSHALL tugs furiously at the edge of the screen*) Never ends. Just never ends. You're lucky I'm here.

ORLANDO: Thank you.

MARSHALL: Whatever. So we put it on a bus and now it's in Chicago. Well that's good, just never go to Chicago again. But, the, shi—do you even know where this thing is from?

ALIEN: \*\_\*\*

ORLANDO: Mars.

MARSHALL: Bullshit. There's no life on Mars.

ALIEN: --\*----\*\_\*--\*\*\*\_\*

ORLANDO: She says it's a different Mars.

MARSHALL: Different—(*To ALIEN*) You're real talkative now, aren't you?

ALIEN: \*

MARSHALL *rolls his eyes and, with a great tug, pulls the screen halfway off.*

MARSHALL: Now we're cooking! (*He begins poking furiously with the screwdriver so as to avoid tearing*) You know what, Lando? It's not your fault your mom is a Luddite.

ORLANDO: It isn't?

MARSHALL: That she doesn't let you check Wikipedia. You know why? It's because she's afraid. Because knowledge is power. Say that: knowledge is power.

ORLANDO (*Simultaneous*): Knowledge is power.

ALIEN (*Simultaneous*): \*\*\*-\*\*\*

MARSHALL: I'm going to teach you something, Lando. Because you're giving me half of your mom's money, I want to teach you something.

ORLANDO: Okay.

MARSHALL: Because, you know, what good is knowing everything if you don't use it. If you don't spread your knowledge. Cuz that's what makes you immortal, Lando.

ORLANDO: Oh.

MARSHALL: That's why I'm helping you out, man.

ORLANDO: Thank you.

MARSHALL: Because I can. It's not just the goggles, Lando. (*He taps them*) It's not just the goggles. These goggles. (*Takes them off. Regards them like they are Horatio's skull*) These goggles, my friend. Help me see in the dark. But knowledge, Lando. Knowledge. (*Long beat. Tension builds*) The knowledge that I've got. Lets me see into the *future*.

ORLANDO *shares his astonishment with the ALIEN.*

ORLANDO: Whoa.

MARSHALL: But it's no good without *application*, you know? We live in an age, Lando, where we can learn just about *anything* in next to *no time at all*.

*Beat.*

ORLANDO: Wow. (*Beat*) How?

MARSHALL: Kee-reist. Are you even listening?

ORLANDO: I—

MARSHALL: The internet. I wasn't born like this, you know. Wikipedia, Lando. Wikipedia. Not school. Not my *parents*. (*Intoning*) Wikipedia.

ORLANDO: Wikipedia.

ALIEN: --\*-\*

MARSHALL: You know what makes me happy, Lando? (ORLANDO *opens his mouth to speak*. MARSHALL *interrupts*.) *Learning* things makes me happy. About everything. You know what the happiest day of my life was? (ORLANDO *opens his mouth*.) The day that I *learned* the most stuff. And do you know what day that was, Lando? (ORLANDO *opens his mouth*.) It was the day I looked up “sex” on Wikipedia.

*Something else is going on. ORLANDO stares out, transfixed. He and the ALIEN hold hands. Perhaps the ALIEN is quivering, imperceptibly, in anticipation.*

ORLANDO (*In response to a nameless horror*): No way.

MARSHALL: Nobody told me. I had to find it myself. I *sleeked it out*, you know what I'm saying? Because it's a priority for me, it's what makes me happy. (*Beat*) Not sex. Still knowledge. (*Notices ORLANDO*) Eh, you don't even know. I'd tell you everything, but you wouldn't even know what I was talking about. *Urethra*. Does that mean anything to you? I probably know more about sex than most adults. Not your mom though, am I right? (*Long beat*) You're not even fun to make fun of, you know that? And that's a terrible thing. You don't get it. (*Waves the screwdriver at them*) You know, you two go well together. Don't have much to say? Not your fault. Wikipedia. Good thing you know me. *Aaaalmost* got us in here. (*Jiggles the screwdriver*) I was dumb when I was your age, too, you know? Not your fault. Mom's a Luddite whore. Tell you what, I don't have to, but I'll help. Come over, you can use my mom's desktop. She's got a site-blocker on there, but I've got the password. She thinks she's smart, but she left it on a post-it. Like I wouldn't *see* it. Boom. *Child's* play.

*There has been a low hum, subconscious almost, for a while now, and now it picks up.*

MARSHALL: On the other hand, I envy you, Lando. I do. Eight years old. Sometimes I think it's better to just be dumb and happy. Not for me though. It's a curse. I always have to *challenge* myself, find new *things*. Sometimes I think I'll have learned everything by the time I'm thirty and then what? I guess I'll have nothing to live for.

*The screen is just hanging on by a thread. MARSHALL props his leg against the house and pulls.*

MARSHALL (*Each word punctuated with a tug*): Nothing. New. Under. The. Sun.

*It comes off. MARSHALL falls back, clutching it, sprawls on his back holding it aloft.*

MARSHALL: Got it!



**BAR-BAR-BARBIE**

Our favorite Barbies, we little girls came to find, were not the perfect packaged beauties. No. They were the morbid, mutilated ones. The ones with butchered butchy bangs, marker-covered faces, and missing limbs. The awkward ones that had their heads popped off and shoved back on, making their necks obsolete, yet allowing for repeated decapitation and backwards placement. The ones with broken speakers on a string that stut-stut-stuttered, “Hi, I’m Bar-bar-barbie! Hi, I’m Bar-bar-barbie! Hi, I’m Bar-bar-barbie!” over and over when we ripped out their cords. The naked, bald freaks and the macabre midgets with disfigured limbs, fucked up faces, and horridly hacked up hair. Oh, yes. These were our favorites.

## HEART

It was quiet, save for the birds. She heard them, just over the fragrant lilacs, twittering and flitting through the branches. Chickadees, probably. They didn't have a care in the world, just as she didn't. Not at this moment at least. She allowed herself to close her eyes, focusing on the warm earth enveloping her in its arms, just like Mother would. She missed her mother. Missed pruning the rose bushes in the garden and eradicating the sneaking weeds, curling and choking the slender stalks of newly grown flowers. The grass tickled the backs of her arms, the sun warmed her face.

Ophelia was happy. She imagined that the earth was breathing with her; she was becoming one with the earth, her fingers becoming roots, her hair and eyelashes, grass. She took another deep breath, the perfume of the lilacs and musky smell of dirt mingling with—poison: dark, lingering, crushing, filling filling filling her nose, smothering—

Her own gasp woke her up. It took a moment for her to remember where she was. The scratchy sheets were not the gentle tickle of viridian grass, and the sun was not warming her face. Ophelia struggled with the sheets, pulling out her legs, wincing as the joints popped.

"Oofh," she murmured, stretching into a sitting position and glancing at the digital clock. The purple numbers glowed softly back at her, 5:45, and she supposed that there was no harm in starting early today. Slipping into soft flannel and grey corduroys, Ophelia braided her grey-streaked hair swiftly as she slipped from her room into the greenhouse. Toby and Verrat wouldn't be here until 6:30, and a grin slid on her face as she thought of their expressions when they saw how much was already done. They'd be able to head home early today.

Talking softly to the plants, she willed them to grow healthy and strong. As she measured out food and water, mixing them in one-third and two-third parts, she asked the plants how they were, how they slept. They were, after all, the most important aspect of living in the System. Without the oxygen they gave off floating in the tubes, the System would die. Thoreau had been right, Ophelia thought, when



he said that nature and humans must coexist to survive. Realizing that almost came too late, and the rapid growth of the System was the only way they had survived. They didn't take care of the land, so now the land doesn't take care of us, Ophelia thought, laying the hose in the water trough leading to the young saplings. There was still no way of knowing why the Earth had turned against them, the life-giving oxygen turned to poison.

Time passed quickly in the large greenhouse, and even when Toby and Verrat arrived, there was still a vast amount of green space to take care of.

"Ophelia, ma'am!" Toby greeted her excitedly, his blond hair scattering into his eyes as he bounced on his heels.

"Good morning, Toby," Ophelia smiled at him, turning to the bench where a stack of wood chips waited. "You'll be working on the orchids today—make sure they have enough chips and give them their watering, okay?"

Toby nodded ecstatically, scampering off like a squirrel to the bench and over to the corner that held the orchid population.

"Hello, Verrat," she said, turning now to the red-haired boy, his long hair tied back in a ponytail.

He nodded, saying "Morning," back to her.

"Your grandfather doing alright?" Wilhelm Ezkareot had been the head of the main greenhouse before her, before arthritis had forced him into an early retirement. She was lucky that her joint pain was still far from that of arthritis. Ophelia wouldn't know what to do with herself if she couldn't work in the greenhouse.

Wilhelm, along with other environmentalists, had realized that the Earth was quickly turning into a place where oxygen breathers wouldn't survive. System One was built by them, followed soon after by other countries building their own as well. Looking out from the outer greenhouses, one could see the rusting ruins of System One. It had long been cut off from System Two.

The early days had been hard, trying to save as many species as they could, and no one knew that more than Ophelia. Many hadn't believed. Many had perished.

"Mm."

"Not very talkative today, are we?" Ophelia laughed. "You'll just be working with me today. There's lots of watering and pruning that needs to be done. I'm sure I'll be able to get you to open up before

long!" She was surprisingly in a good mood this morning.

Soon, their hands were caked with dirt, their normally white skin dusted sepia. "So, Wilhelm is working on the council now?" Ophelia pulled up a particularly stubborn weed, its roots holding tight to the earth.

"Mm." Verrat took the bottle of weed killer and sprayed a little bit of it into the hole previously occupied by the weed. "He's really liking it. He gets to order people around, so he's pretty content."

"Tch, figures." Ophelia laughed. "He liked ordering the greenhouse hands around when he was here too."

"Sometimes I feel like that's the only thing Grandpa is good at," Verrat laughed.

Although he laughed, Ophelia saw him look down for longer than was needed to spray weed killer. There was a pause as Ophelia juggled what to say.

"What's eating you?" She liked to think of herself as a kindly, older aunt-figure to her greenhouse hands.

"W-what?"

"You sound a little down."

Verrat scratched at his cheek, stubble scraping against his finger. "Yeah, I'm worried about the System, I guess."

She nodded in agreement. "Not pleasant business."

"Do they know anything yet?" As head of the main greenhouse, the heads of the other smaller greenhouses met with her on a weekly basis and told her how the greenhouses were doing.

Ophelia sighed. "Nothing. It's been small acts of vandalism throughout the system of greenhouses; a bunch of pots were broken in House G the other night, and we have absolutely no leads."

"Nothing here yet?"

"Nope, thank goodness." Ophelia continued pulling weeds, Verrat followed with the weed killer.

"What would happen if this one was vandalized?" His eyes were searching her face, worry reflected deep within dark pools.

Ophelia stopped for a moment, pausing in her vendetta against the troublesome weeds. "Verrat, you've been working here for a couple of years. You need to know something. I'm trusting you with information that not many are privy to, do you understand?" She knew that she could trust him. The Ezkareot family had been involved with the greenhouse system for years. It hadn't been a surprise when

Verrat had come looking for a job. He'd told her that he wanted to work in the same greenhouse his grandfather had, which had made her smile.

He stopped too, looking down at the ground. When his hazel eyes met hers, he told her that he understood.

"We, as a system, can handle the attacks on the smaller greenhouses. In all honesty, we'd be able to survive if ten—even fifteen—of the twenty-six were completely out of commission."

"Not if this one was attacked—is that what you're saying?" Verrat was perceptive, and Ophelia looked at him approvingly.

"Yes. This is the Heart of the greenhouses. The others wouldn't be able to survive if this one went down."

"Another reason you don't want this information known," Verrat commented.

"I trust you will keep it to yourself."

"Of course."

Ophelia pulled at the last stubborn weeds, sticking her hand behind a raspberry bush. Gasping, she pulled out her hand as a sharp pain coursed through her finger.

"What is it?" Verrat peered behind the plant, his hand closing on something. As he pulled it out, Ophelia saw a small garden snake wriggling between his fingers. "Nasty bite, for such a little thing," Verrat said, nodding at her bloodied finger. Despite having bitten her, it seemed to be quite fine with Verrat's hand, but when she reached out toward it, the snake opened its mouth, exposing its tiny fangs. She withdrew her hand.

"It must have snuck in," she said, watching the small creature struggling. "Well, let it go then. No harm in a little snake, besides my finger."

\* \* \*

She was in House R teaching the small group of equally small children about the plants housed there. Most were flowers, so House R was informally known as the Flower House.

"Ma'am." One of the hands came jogging up to her and whispered in her ear.

"Excuse me, children," she said and calmly walked away. When she was out of sight of their innocent eyes, she ran to the glass wall, hoping—praying—that it wasn't—

The Heart was burning.

The moments that followed were chaotic.

The one thing that she told herself was that she couldn't worry the children. She apologized to Maggie, the young teacher of the 1<sup>st</sup> grade class, excusing herself from her previous engagement. The moment the huge oak doors engraved with carvings of intricate flowers closed behind her, she started walking briskly. The chaos hadn't reached the R tunnel. Because House R was mostly flowers, not many greenhouse hands were needed this far out. The main tunnel was busier. Busier being an understatement. The only word really to describe it was chaos, thought Ophelia in an offhand way. She joined the many running toward the Heart, her breathing coming harder as the smoke filled the main tunnel. Seeing the huge yellow button to call maintenance, she slowed down to press it.

The crackle of the speaker let her know that it was online.

"We need to shut off all airways going to the Heart," she ordered. "We need to cut it off from air to stop the burning, and we need to stop the contamination of the smaller greenhouses!"

"Aye!"

That meant that only the main thoroughfare to the Heart would be open. The red warning lights were flashing erratically, warning the people behind her that the doors were going to be sealed. It would take about thirty seconds, and Ophelia started running again, ignoring the ache in her side and the slap of her feet on the gravel as she continued toward the burning Heart.

"Ma'am!" Toby ran toward her, covered in soot.

Ophelia was filled with alarm. "Toby, were you in the greenhouse when it started burning? Where is everyone else?"

Her hands on his shoulders felt the slight trembling. "We all got out," he said. Ophelia could see that he was white underneath all the soot.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Everyone is safe then."

"They can't find Verrat, ma'am."

Ophelia swore silently. She'd taken Verrat in as a favor to Wilhelm. "Toby, think. Are you absolutely certain that Verrat came in today?" She herself hadn't been back since leaving in the morning.

Tears were leaving track marks down his blackened face. "I—I think so."

"It's okay, it's okay." Ophelia looked around for one of the hands that had been scheduled to work in the Heart today. "Nora, take him

for me will you? I think he's in shock."

"Aren't we all," murmured Nora as she pulled Toby away.

The carved wooden doors of the Heart were thrown open like a gaping wound, smoke pouring out. Inside, Kadaj had taken control of the small amount of ground that hadn't been engulfed in flames, directing the hands to put out the flames with dirt, water, or both.

"Kadaj!" Ophelia called over the roar, her brow immediately breaking a sweat from the heat.

"Ophelia!" The relief was evident in his tone, but he didn't lose his authoritative voice as he directed another hand over to the saplings. "I wasn't sure if we'd be able to reach you."

"What happened?" she asked in horror. No wonder the System had been lit up by the Heart. It looked as though nearly every surface was burning.

"It started up in the fruit grove, and before we knew it, the fire had spread everywhere," he explained quickly as he continued to direct people around.

Ophelia was filled with nausea. "We have the wrong person in custody."

"Yeah, no—" Kadaj remembered himself quickly. "We need every hand we can over here, but the intercom system is down because of the fire and I can't send someone out to call somewhere—"

"I will be right back," Ophelia interrupted, turning from the flames.

Ophelia located the emergency button quickly. Never in the history of the System had the emergency button for the Heart been pushed before. She pushed it, and a high, keening noise burst out of the speakers along the paths and in every greenhouse. Ophelia could only imagine the terror it brought for the children in House R.

When she returned to the Heart, she discovered that Kadaj had been right. It was quiet, except for the roar of the flames. Quickly, she joined the fire fighting team on the fruit grove. All of their promise was gone in the flames and smoke. If her tears hadn't been dried up, she would have cried. But there was no time for tears, thought Ophelia mutely as she threw more dirt on the flames and with her other hand threw water on the smaller flames, trying to stop the inferno that was raging in the Heart.

It was eerily quiet. The roar of the flames was gone, in its place was this quiet. If death had a sound, it would be this. The varying levels of foliage were gone, replaced by the grey and black one of devastated plant life. Ophelia's mouth was set in a permanent line as she surveyed the damage, Kadaj next to her. They looked like twin wraiths, covered in ash and smelling of smoke. It had taken several hours and almost all of the workers of the greenhouse system to put out the flames. Many had gone home to clean up and breathe fresh air while they still could.

"What are we going to do?" Kadaj asked desperately.

Ophelia was glad he had said it, because it was the same question running through her mind.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "When I was younger, and we weren't living in the System, a fire meant devastation but new growth. I don't know what it will mean in the System."

"Someone did this," Kadaj said again. "It came on too fast for it to be an accident."

"I know." Ophelia felt stunned. She had misjudged someone, put him in jail, and the Heart had still suffered. Not only that, but Verrat was still missing. She didn't know how she would explain his death to Wilhelm, if it came to that.

"Ophelia, since your quarters were destroyed, you're welcome to bunk with my wife and I," Kadaj said suddenly.

For a moment, she'd been able to forget. Earlier, she had mourned her copy of *Walden*, the one she'd had since her sophomore year of college. It was one of the main reasons why she'd become a horticulturist. And now, it was gone. Along with all her other possessions, save the smoke permeated ones on her back. The small comfort of a bed was greatly appreciated.

The next morning dawned, and Ophelia trudged to the greenhouse. Any amount of sleeping on it couldn't make the situation in the Heart any better. The Council had decided to start recycling the air immediately—to get the fresh mixed with the old—before there were problems. They, like Ophelia, knew it was only a short term fix.

Late last night, Ophelia had discussed the merits of transplanting plants and trees from other greenhouses into the Heart as a quick fix with Kadaj. The soil would be rich with the ash, and Ophelia hoped that would help with the plants getting accustomed to the move and speed up their growth. Already, the greenhouse hands were working

away, and Ophelia joined them. Against the back wall, wooden trellises had been hastily constructed, and Ophelia pulled one of the few grapevines over to where Kady was coaxing the thin tendrils of one plant around the frame. Rapidly and with the precision of having done it multiple times in her life, Ophelia wrapped the plant's vines around the frame to the envious look of Kady, who was able to get a vine around the frame only to have another bounce out of line.

As Ophelia worked, helping to lug over the orange, apple, and pear trees that had been unearthed from their homes in other greenhouses, the Heart was being rebuilt in front of her eyes. It would take months, if not years, to regain its former splendor, but it was being built. It had seemed hopeless, thought Ophelia, but with everyone working together...We should be fine. For now, the Heart would have to function as a normal greenhouse, losing its previous importance. Unfortunately, that meant they couldn't afford to lose any more.

Over in the corner, the burned remnants of her quarters had been removed. The bare bones of the structure were up already, and Ophelia could see where her rooms would lie. A smile was on her lips as she returned to her work, helping now with berry bushes. With the help of everyone, the traces of the devastating fire would be gone, covered up by new life. She smiled again.

The tension left her body her first night back in the greenhouse. The skeletal structure had been covered with padding and boards, but it still had a long way to go. She didn't care, as it was habitable. The rich, sharp smell of new wood filled her nose as she breathed deep, covering up the usually strong smell of earth. Her sink into sleep was broken by a sudden crack that ripped through the silence. Ophelia recognized it as the snap of a twig, and the tension flooded her body again. She only told a few people that she was staying here tonight, and few would have reason to come this late. Swiftly and silently, she slid out of her bed, her bare feet padding across the chilly floor. Out in the Heart, a slim shaft of light traveled further in, toward the new orchard. Quickly, her heart hammering out a rhythm behind her ribs, she tiptoed faster, praying that her joints wouldn't crack and give away her location.

She couldn't however, stop the gasp that flew from her mouth.

"Verrat?"

He spun on his heel, hiding something behind his back.

"What are you doing here?" She asked suspiciously, realizing in a flash of intuition that there was something off with him, something had been off for a while. It was a surprise she hadn't noticed it before now.

He didn't answer at first, cocking his head to the side as a cat would if a mouse crossed its path. "I think you know why I'm here, Ophelia," he said, drawing out every word, causing a chill to scamper down her spine. Although she had years on him, she could see that it wouldn't be an advantage in this case.

Ophelia decided that playing dumb won't get her anywhere, not now. "I suppose I do." Calm, calm, she repeated to herself.

"You really are an idiot, you know that?"

Calm. "I generally believe in the good of people, especially grandsons of friends." Careful with the jabs, she advised herself.

A flush appeared on Verrat's cheekbones. "You know nothing about me."

"I tried."

"You never would've got in. This is the only reason why I wanted to work here." He indicated the scorched and buckling glass, not yet replaced. "You and the rest of the System are fools. There's nothing wrong with the world out there."

Part of that extremist group, No Freedom in the System, her mind rationally told her. If only she'd pressed the security button. Ophelia knew she needed to talk him down from where he was. She could see the light sheen of sweat building on his forehead, and she could only imagine the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

"Verrat, if you go out there, you'll die. Nothing can live out there."

"See, you're under the influence! It's a conspiracy to keep us all in these tubes like lab rats. It's their little experiment."

"Who? You're not making any—"

He continued on, ignoring—or not even hearing—her.

"I'm going out there. I'm going out there, and you can't stop me." She realized then that she wouldn't be able to stop him. He was fevered, and as he lunged for the glass, she turned and ran for the table where she knew the masks were. They'd placed them there as a precaution because the fire had weakened the glass. Behind her, the glass windows shattered in a crystalline explosion as Verrat threw his body against it.



Ophelia pressed the mask to her face. She didn't think about her bare feet being cut by the tiny jaws of broken bits of glass as she approached the hole, looking out for Verrat.

She could see the tiny slashes on his arms where the glass had cut him, but soon she could only see his figure as he continued to walk further out. Ophelia stared in shock. She didn't dare yell out for him, afraid it would break the spell of his life out in the air.

He stopped.

Turned.

His triumphant grin faded as he fell to the ground in a heap.

Ophelia knew he was gone.

The repair was rapid, and soon all evidence of the incident was gone. There was no way to trace Verrat's contacts, and soon the fear of another attack fell with the lack of one.

Ophelia let no one know how much the incident had disturbed her. She continued her work in the greenhouse, but looked outside the glass walls more often than she used to. If Verrat had been able to survive those moments outside, maybe the air was clearing. Ophelia searched for that little bit of green every day, not allowing herself to hope for the chance to sink her toes in lush grass.

Her face pressed up against the clear glass, and she saw a bit of viridian. Hope fluttered in her chest like a fragile butterfly.

**TWO WAYS TO CONSIDER A LOST PEN**

There was a brand new pen—  
Barcode still attached, ready to be unwrapped  
Like a bright blue condom  
For your mind as you fuck that delicate idea  
Into realization.

I looked at it lying in the grass  
It belonged to someone who had  
Big plans for the evening—a romantic  
Cup of coffee and candlelit desk,  
And a pale white notebook with  
Rounded curves and quiet blue-lined eyes.

In either case, the least I could do  
Was write this  
For them.

**POST-BIRTHDAY BALLOONS**

Our floor is a rolling lake  
pearlized pastels lazily bump by  
on the way to nowhere

One has made its way to the  
top of the television and is resting  
after its exhausting climb

Stuck between the thin machine and the  
thick, solid wall  
our adventurer waits

A gust of wind could bring its next journey  
or a strong breath could send it  
wafting

Tussling midair with a dilemma  
if it is filled with only air, why is it  
unable to stay aloft

It will puff its way back to rest, landing quietly  
settling itself comfortably  
turning to listen as we breeze past

But for now it sleeps,  
breathing with every small silent draft we make  
bloated, tired, but not yet ready to pop

THREE LETTERS

*Walk in. Sit down. Breathe.*

Dammit.

Gail's birthday was last week. Last week. Never missed a birthday before. Not since I married Dave. Didn't stop when he was gone either. But it's just been—well, who wouldn't be—hell.

*Paper, paper... there we go.* She'd understand, right? Of course. Gail always understood. Can't tell her how this whole thing with Jerry has messed me up. But Gail always understood. *Aha, and a pen.*

*A hotel notepad. How classy. Well, no time for that now. It's been a week. Sure the concierge has an envelope.*

"Dear Gail: I hope you're not terribly upset, but—"

No.

"Dear Gail: Sorry this is late. I'm not sure if you remember my brother Jerry, but he's had an aneurysm in his brain. He's at Saint Bart's in the Twin Cities. I'm staying at a hotel in the area to keep an eye on him. If he makes it, it'll take him more than a month to recover."

*more than a month—*

"I apologize for my distraction. In better news, I'm going to be a grandmother again in two weeks.

I am excited.

Hope you had a great 62<sup>nd</sup>! Can't wait to see you.

Yours truly,  
Lisa

P.S. Doesn't getting old suck?"

\* \* \*

She traipsed into the mediocre sterility of her second-floor motel room, mocking Atlas while the world slowly crushed any fight left in her after her husband's death. Slowly, her feet sanded the beach-colored carpet and found their way to a slightly cushioned chair in the desolate far corner. As she sat, an epiphany seemed to melt its way across her face, a dawn: dark, grey, and slightly chagrined. A hurried and frantic search of the surrounding surfaces yielded a "Fairfield Inn and Suites" notepad. She sighed resignedly, seeing no other options, and produced a pen from her tattered leather travel bag. The scratch of pen-to-paper-on-wood only competed with the ornery radiator by the window for white noise privileges.

*Dearest Sister-in-Law—*

She crossed it out and started again.

*Dear Gail,*

*My sincerest apologies on the belatedness of your card. My dear brother, Jerry, has fallen ill. I am staying close to him (his hospital is in Saint Paul, Minnesota) until there is more conclusive word on his condition and possible treatment. If he manages to survive the ordeal, he will need extensive rehabilitation therapy. I humbly regret the delay in salutations.*

*Perhaps it will bring you joy to know that I will be a grandmother again in two weeks. I only hope I can be there when the baby is born.*

*I do hope your birthday celebrations were an enjoyable success. I would love to see you soon.*

Yours most sincerely,  
Lisa

P.S. Doesn't getting old suck?

Lisa dragged herself into the bare-bones motel room, exhaustion written into every inch of her body. As soon as she made it across the floor (might as well have been the Serengeti for all the effort), everything and Lisa resolutely flopped into one of those awkward hotel chairs. *Like sitting on a rock covered in bubble wrap*, she thought, as most patrons of this establishment probably had at one time or another. As she attempted to salvage even a crumb of comfort, Lisa's hand flew to her forehead with a loud "thwak!"

"Dammit, it was Gail's birthday near a week ago! Oh, Dave would be right mad if he knew...Sorry, honey," she said to the ceiling. Lisa jumped out of her chair like she'd just found the wires and started hunting down something to write on. At last, a sneaky little hotel notepad was found cowering in the corner of a nightstand drawer, and Lisa pounced.

"Dear Gail—"

*Too formal?* she wondered. *Nah.*

"Dear Gail,

I am so so so sorry I missed your birthday! Jerry's sick. He had something in his brain explode or something, I don't know, you know how I am with doctors. Anyway, he's in the hospital here in St. Paul and I've elected to stay with him while the white-coats figure it out. I'm not sure he's gonna make it, Gail. Keep us in your prayers.

Some glad tidings though: I'm gonna be a grandma again in a couple of weeks! Wish I could be more excited, given the circumstances.

Hope your birthday was a smash! Tell me all about it next time I see you. I'd love some pictures.

Your loving sister-in-law,

Lisa

P.S. Doesn't getting old suck?"

**OUR POEMS**

This one's mine. That one's yours.  
We shield our eyes and noses  
in our books.

"I'll show you mine  
if you show me  
yours"

## JOYCE SUTPHEN

### POET LAUREATE OF MINNESOTA

---

*Joyce Sutphen, is a professor at Gustavus Adolphus College. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in Renaissance Studies. Her first collection of poems, Straight Out of View (1995), won the Barnard Women's Poets Prize. Her following collections include Coming Back to the Body (2000), a Minnesota Book Award finalist, Naming the Stars (2004), winner of the Minnesota Book Award, and First Words (2010). She has received a McKnight Artist Fellowship and a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship and was named Minnesota's Poet Laureate in 2011.*

*Firethorne was able to sit down with Joyce to ask her about her work, her writing process, and her recent appointment as Minnesota's poet laureate.*

**Patrick Perish, Managing Editor:** Joyce, you've been the new Poet Laureate of Minnesota since September now?

**Joyce Sutphen:** Yeah, since the end of August.

**Patrick:** What's that been like for you? What kind of things have you done and what do you hope to continue to do?

**Joyce:** Let's see. What's it been like? Interesting. And a challenge for a very shy person. And what kinds of things have I done? Well, recently I judged a number of poetry contests. I've introduced people—I just introduced Ted Kooser, the Poet Laureate of the United States, partly because I'm the Poet of Laureate of Minnesota. That sort of thing happens a lot. I should have brought my list of things. I do have to keep a list. On Friday, I have something that probably would have happened anyway, but there's a beautiful hand-pressed book that's going to be launched at the Loft. It gets highlighted in what I consider a sort of embarrassing way. I'm thinking, "Oh you don't have to mention it," and they say, "And also Poet Laureate Joyce Sutphen will be here." And it's like, "Really?"

**Patrick:** Could you tell us about how you got started writing?

**Joyce:** Well, there are various permutations and ways to answer that question. I mean, the first thing that came to mind was



when I was in the fifth grade, and I wrote a cowboy novel while helping my dad milk the cows in the barn. There was kind of a desk-like thing that you could pull out, and I had a pencil and notebook paper. One time in school (I went to a Catholic school—I had nuns in the traditional garb with the habit and everything), Sister Giles discovered me writing during Math class, and she took whatever I had so far, and she threw it away. That was my first attempt at fiction.

**Ethan Marxhausen, Editor:** And that's why you don't write fiction.

[Laughter]

**Joyce:** No, the reason I don't write fiction is possibly because of a wonderful teacher I had, Carol Bly, who was so insistent on all the elements a story should have. I didn't feel like I was really intimidated by that while I was in her class, but...it did [intimidate me]. I loved writing short stories, and I still do sometimes work on a short story, but it doesn't seem like I really found my way in that genre. But in grad school, I only took prose courses for my master's in writing. My professors were Patricia Hampl, Carol Bly, and Alan Burns. For my final project, I used a combination of poetry and prose. Patricia Hampl was the main reader, and she really gravitated toward the poems and talked about them a lot. I mean, I'd always kind of written poems in high school, and in college I wrote poems I gave to one person. He actually has them now, and he kids me and says, "I'm holding on to these. They're going to be valuable." And I say, "Give them to me so I can destroy them right now!"

**Ethan:** Were they love poems?

**Joyce:** Yeah...they probably were.

[Laughter]

**Ethan:** That's wonderful. Now you said your experience in grad school was mostly in prose, do you think that impacted your style?

**Joyce:** Yeah, I think it was good. But I think my style in poetry comes mostly from the literature I love. Oddly enough, probably Shakespeare; Yeats; Emily Dickinson; Robert Frost, lately, especially; and just a sort of community of poets. Although not so much contemporaries at first, I did eventually start really reading contemporary poets. And then I'm lucky enough to

know people like Connie Wanek and Tim Nolan. And, you know, just friends to talk poetry with all the time. I don't think I had the weight of the whole workshop experience. Not to say it couldn't be good. I just think that it's kind of a good thing not to have had that.

**Ethan:** Do you think it's more valuable to have a few close friends to share your work with that are on the same page, so to speak?

**Joyce:** Yeah, and whether you share your work with them or not, you're talking about poetry. Tim Nolan, for instance, he's so opinionated and always thinking about what's good in a poem, what makes a poem reach others, what makes it worthwhile for the poet to write. And Connie, too. Connie and I talked for an hour and a half yesterday on the phone. We talk about everything, but then we get down to poetry—it's really those exchanges.

**Patrick:** Who and what have been the biggest influences in your work? I know you mentioned Shakespeare and Robert Frost, and a lot of your work seems to draw from that experience of growing up on a farm.

**Joyce:** Yeah, I should really mention Michael Dennis Brown, who's the person I had for two poetry classes at the [University of Minnesota] when I was trying to salvage that undergraduate degree that I had left at the end of my senior year in 1970 when I went off to be a hippy in the mountains. There was a graduate meeting one time. Maybe fifteen people around a big table like Confer 124, and the person running the meeting was late, so people were just kind of chatting. Michael said we should do something useful, like, "Why don't each one of us say a favorite poem?" and it's just absolute silence in the room. Then it got revealed that nobody knew a poem by heart of all these great people who were in grad school studying literature. Michael couldn't believe that.

At that time, I was writing my doctorate on Shakespeare and the Art of Memory, so I had an investment in the idea of learning to see if I could memorize poems to see how that would affect things. Some of the advice I got from Michael was that idea of cutting down, honing down: don't load the thing with adjectives, don't use words like fluffy and blossom, some

of those basic groundwork things, don't be afraid to just cut the whole beginning of this poem that you've worked on for the last three hours, be dispassionate, "kill your darlings," that kind of thing. All that practical kind of advice came from Michael, I think, even though we didn't workshop, usually. What was your question again?

**Patrick:** Yeah—influences on your work?

**Joyce:** Yeah. Oh! And I just want to say Bob Dylan. I have to get Bob Dylan in there.

**Ethan:** Have you met him yet?

**Joyce:** No!

[Laughter]

**Joyce:** I have met him in a dream, though. I'd say Shakespeare, Bob Dylan, the Bible [are my inspirations]. That's maybe because I had this period that I hardly ever talk about, and I will only talk about it for one minute here, that I grew up Catholic and went to twelve years of Catholic school and somewhere in those hippie days of mine, I met the whole Jesus people movement and the radical Christian communes, so that is woven [into my writing]. I spent a lot of time reading the Bible, as you might imagine, and the cadences of that.

**Ethan:** Do you feel like you still have a lot to say?

**Joyce:** As a poet laureate?

**Ethan:** In terms of your next collection.

**Joyce:** Oh, my next collection. Who knows what that's going to be? I actually have about three collections worth of poems. Maybe I've even said that in class. I've had a couple new manuscripts for a while. Maybe if I knew they were perfect, I'd beat down the doors to have them published, but I feel maybe they don't quite have their shape yet. On the other hand, I just want to keep writing some really good poems, better poems than I've ever written before. I hope that they're still lined up somewhere waiting to be born.

**Ethan:** What is your favorite poem?

**Joyce:** My favorite poem?

**Ethan:** Of all time.

**Joyce:** That is so hard...Oh! Phil Bryant, too, I've got to say, is definitely so important and John Reznarski, as well. Phil and I are always talking about favorites. Phil tends to say he's got

a top ten or eight, and he's ranking them like the final four in basketball. And I don't really think of them in that way. It's sort of egalitarian. Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass Occasionally Rides" or "Shakespeare's No Time, Thou Shalt Not Boast That I Do Change" or Robert Frost's—I like them all. It's also which one I'm currently memorizing. I just memorized a Merwin poem. And then I try to go back to ones I memorized a long time ago and say them over. And as soon as I've memorized a poem, it's sort of in a pantheon of some sorts. But really, you know, there's so many that there's too many to mention.

**Patrick:** What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

**Joyce:** Well, be yourself completely. It's so important just to find how you sound, find your bone, find the thing that you want to talk about right then and go with that. Read, just read, read, read a lot. Write more than I do sometimes. I feel like I spend a lot of time walking around looking out windows and things. While at certain times I can be really disciplined, I'm not one of those people you hear say, "I get up at 5:30 and then write for an hour." I think that sounds so great and dreamy-good, but, in reality, that's not me. Follow the things you really love. If you fall in love with a poet, read all their books. Go to the library and find out about them. Follow those passions and then just be yourself. And don't be really impatient because it takes a while for things to ferment and build up and work their way.

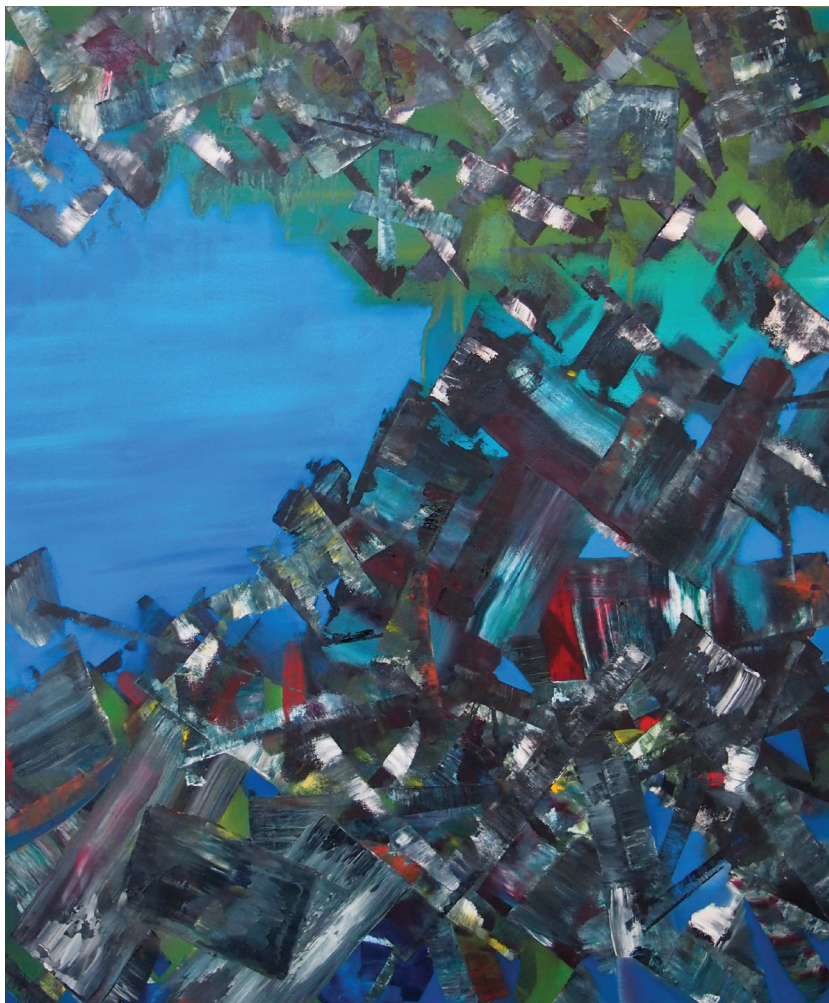
That's the great thing about being a writer: you can just get better and better. I really like the way Wordsworth said poetry was the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and that it should have a worthy purpose, which would just be the result of who you were, the life you were living, and how you were thinking about things. Other advice: pay attention to everything. Be one upon whom nothing is lost. I think that's what Henry James said. Always be observing and interested. It all becomes part of you, and that's the only place you can make anything out of anyway. Plumb those depths.

*The interview has been transcribed, cut, and edited since it took place on March 26, 2012.*

DAVID PEDERSEN

SENIOR ART STUDIO & MANAGEMENT MAJOR

---



APPREHENSION

*oil on canvas*



*KATIE SCHROEDER*  
*SENIOR MATH & SECONDARY EDUCATION MAJOR*

---



**MAASAI CHILDREN**

BEATRICE WINTER  
FIRST-YEAR STUDENT

---



EMPHATIC EXCLAMATION  
*mixed media*



ENVIOUS  
*digital paint, GIMP*



EVAN TAYLOR  
SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR

---

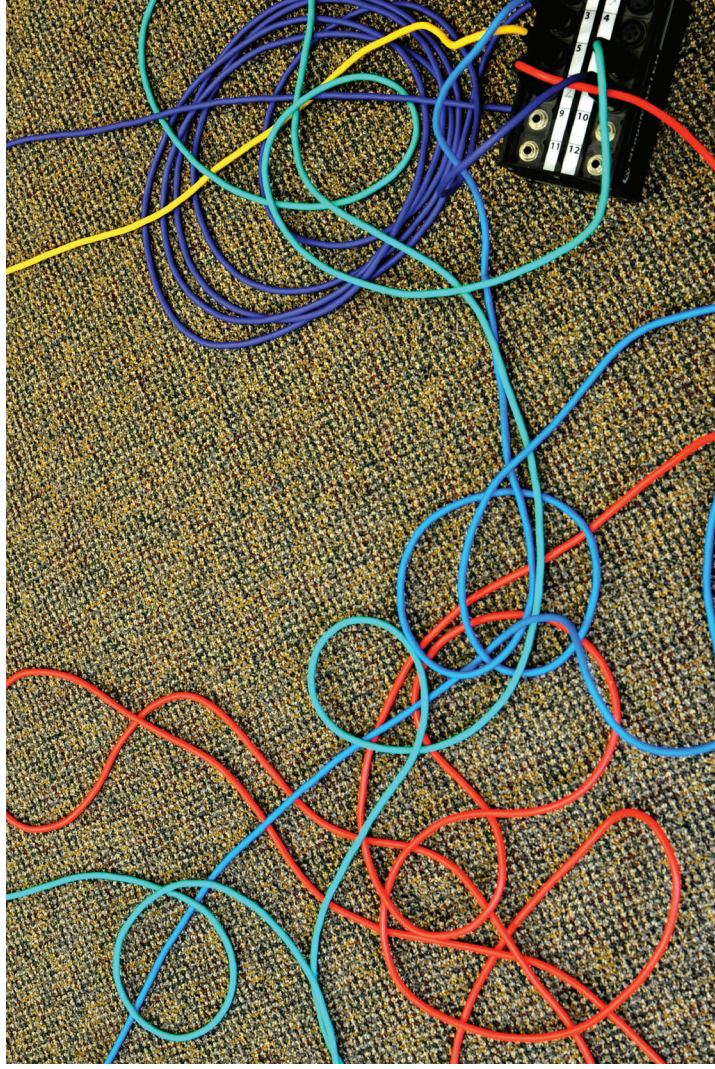


LIVING IN A CITY  
*photomanipulation*

*CATHERINE KEITH*

*SENIOR JUSTICE & PEACE STUDIES MAJOR*

---



**THE STUDIO**



*NICK THEISEN*  
*FIRST-YEAR STUDENT*

---



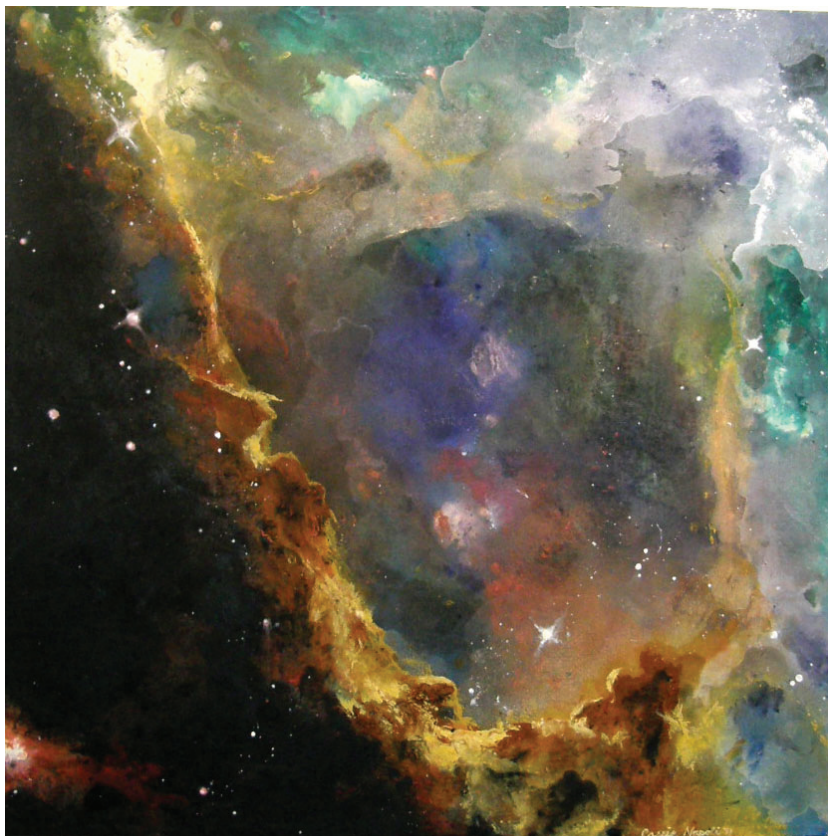
WHERE TO NOW?

*DAVID PEDERSEN*  
*SENIOR ART STUDIO & MANAGEMENT MAJOR*

---



**BAHIA**



ETERNITY  
*oil and acrylic*

EVAN TAYLOR  
SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR

---



LEVITATION #1  
*digital print*



CASSIE NAPOLI  
SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR

---



**SKEPTICS & TRUE BELIEVERS**  
*watercolor*

*EVAN TAYLOR*  
*SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR*

---



**ESCAPE TO HOME**  
*photomanipulation*



LEIF ESTENSON  
SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR

---



**ASS PLATES**  
*handbuilt white stoneware*

*HEATHER PALLAS*  
*SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR*

---



**LINES**

AMANDA FINK  
SENIOR ENGLISH MAJOR

---



CHAOS & CREATION  
*watercolor*



LEIF ESTENSON  
SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR

---



**MY IMAGINATION IS A BEACH**  
*acrylic on preserved birchbark*

**BATS**

Dad was a hero  
For killing bats  
With a tennis racket—  
The dark anatomy smothered  
Across the strings  
Like a crisp pancake  
No face to speak of  
No flight  
    No shadow  
        printed on the moon.

Some years later  
when dad left  
I realized  
the bats  
squeeze through  
cracks in the ceiling

even through  
holes in my skull

Who knew they were there?  
like molasses seeping  
through oak  
like groundwater  
permeating rock

Now  
Doubling and looping  
Blindly  
where daylight  
Keeps out.

They multiply  
Where there  
Are no bones  
Nor tissue  
Nor tongue  
To Flick them away.

*JENNIFER HANSON*  
*SOPHOMORE GEOLOGY MAJOR*

---

AN INVENTORY OF CURSIVE

poem on a restaurant napkin  
recipe card for her famous sloppy joes  
price tag at an antique shop  
rusty historic signs offering cold lemonade  
post card wishing you here  
love letter without a date  
valentine sent at school  
instructions on how to operate grandma's tv remote  
coffee filter brand name  
grocery list with scratched out items  
birthday card from the older generation  
congrats written in frosting on a marble sheet cake  
hand written receipts  
rough draft edits  
polaroid picture captions  
overhead projector notes  
laundry lists of all sorts

DIRTY LITTLE BEDROOM SECRETS

**SETTING: A small dorm room for two.**

*The actress should design and construct as much of her half of the bedroom as is possible and within reason. The goal is not cohesion; it is an intimate knowledge of, understanding of, and connection to the room, regardless of whether or not the actress ultimately decides that it is a safe space.*

*Essential components include: two uncomfortable, long, twin-sized beds; two dressers; one futon (up-center stage, facing the audience); two desks (placed at a distance from the futon). There is a cell phone on her desk. There is a whiteboard leaning against the wall by the futon. In large letters, her roommate has written, "See you Monday, Abigail! XOXO"*

*There is a window on the actress's side of the bedroom, above her desk. It is open and the shades are up. It is dark outside. She is on the third floor, at least. She has some sort of bullshit view of nature. It doesn't really matter what she can see, as long as it isn't another person's window.*

*ABIGAIL, 20, is alone on the futon in not unflattering but not totally cohesive-looking underwear and nothing else. She is draped across the futon, legs spread a little, hands resting on her stomach just above her belly-button. Eyes closed.*

*This is not pornography.*

*ABIGAIL (Inhales and then exhales slowly, each time mentally counting to six or more): Come on.*

*She touches her face: first her cheek with her palm, then her forehead with the back of her hand. She leaves her hand there and sighs.*

*She adjusts her legs so that one is extended and the other is bent.*

*She sighs.*

*In one sharp, swift movement, she turns her head so only her face is turned toward the audience. Her arm is in the same position, with her hand resting on her ear.*

*She inhales. Her face contorts barely. Her body tenses.*

*She exhales sharply.*

*Very awkwardly, very deliberately, she moans. It is weird, forced, would-be erotic, and out of place. It doesn't match her contorted face, the rest of her body.*

*Frustrated, she opens her eyes and in another sharp, swift movement, she turns her head to stare at the ceiling.*

*Exasperated, untouched by the irony, not a command.*

Fuck me.

*Slowly, she moves the hand by her belly button until it comes to rest over her underwear. She doesn't move it any more than this; it remains totally passive. Troubled eyes glued to the ceiling. She stays this way for 30 seconds.*

*Quickly, she sits up. She pulls her legs up, one at a time, so that she is cross-legged. At first she is hunched over, but then she leans back, as though trying to disappear into the futon. She stares straight ahead. She has been defeated. She is absorbed in this defeat. It hangs in the air around her.*

*Her cell phone rings. She looks at it, on the table, under the window.*

*She realizes the window is open. She slinks down to the floor from the futon and sort of awkwardly crawls across the room to the phone to*



*avoid being level with the window.*

*All at once: she picks up the phone, looks at the caller ID, bugs out, and throws the phone at the wall across from her. It breaks into pieces against the wall.*

God.

*There are no words to describe how absolutely mortified she is. She takes as much time as she damn well needs to bask in that mortification.*

*Quickly, she crawls to her dresser drawers. She opens a drawer and digs through her clothes until she finds a pair of oversized sweatpants and a loose t-shirt. They don't match and are totally unflattering.*

*She stands up, looks out the window, and sighs.*

*She crosses the room, collects the pieces of her phone, and puts it together. She turns it on, sits back down on the futon, sets the phone down next to her, and watches it. She waits, cross-legged, arms folded over her chest.*

*Blackout.*

**MEMO 18**

They sat together after a long time apart  
She drinking wine, he beer.  
They laughed loudly but didn't touch

On anything real—  
Jobs, yes, they were students of a  
Kind and difference.

He paid the bill and leaned  
Out the door into the street—

She sat with the  
Leftovers and crossed and uncrossed her legs  
For a few moments.

*KATIE ASFELD*

*SENIOR ENGLISH & COMMUNICATION STUDIES MAJOR*

---

**I WENT TO THE BARN TODAY**

I thought maybe I'd see you there  
like in movies,  
you would appear to me, a ghost  
and we would have a supernatural reunion.

Your ghost didn't show, but  
I did see you.  
In every dust-ridden corner,  
cobweb, and mouse hole,  
you were there.

I closed my eyes  
and there you were  
nestled between two cows  
squirting me with milk,  
your eyes laughing.

Opening my eyes,  
I saw the collapsing roof,  
mildew consuming the walls,  
and emptiness growing  
where cows once stood.  
But you are there.

*CAITLIN SKVORC*  
*SOPHOMORE ENGLISH MAJOR*

---

**SURREPTITIOUS MAYBE YOU WOULDN'T KNOW**

the genius next door was washing tables said a spectre of my imagination  
or maybe it was i who appeared in hers i don't know leeching off  
the creative juice dribbling down someone else's chin  
what was your idea that i stole because i'm sure that i did  
the deed washing tables of my own with the punctuation and grammar  
i left in the slop-bucket of yesterday's creative pigsty still mucking about  
the genius next door who sometimes sleeps in my stealthy imagination you

FORTY-TWO

**Setting: A private school in New England.**

*Class is over for the day, but two students and a teacher have taken up residence in an empty classroom. An informal practice session for a WordMasters-style competition is taking place. The students wear uniforms. SALVATORE is a suave, quick-talking young man of Mediterranean heritage. His demeanor belies a privileged international upbringing. BLAKE has a nondescript, intelligent air about him. MS. ATHERTON is a disillusioned middle-aged high school teacher. The audience joins them mid-practice.*

MS. ATHERTON: Levity is to brevity as life is to...

BLAKE: Knife.

SALVATORE: Well, that's entirely dependent upon whether the rhyme scheme is the locus of comparison, or if the definition of the words is of central importance. You're like a Nascar driver that's forgotten how to turn right: always in a hurry to go nowhere. We have to step back and evaluate this objectively before we go around spouting words willy-nilly. Christmas, Blake.

BLAKE: Strife.

SALVATORE: I suppose that's a bit more semantically inclined. It makes sense, if you're a Buddhist—impermanence is suffering, too true, too true. You a Buddhist, Blake?

BLAKE: No.

SALVATORE: No, I suppose you wouldn't be. Too damned simple, huh? Buddhism is eloquent, Buddhism is a spiritual wellspring of cognitive enhancement, a lucid dream in a slumbering dystopia.

No, you certainly wouldn't be raring to dive down that rabbit hole...too damn Protestant. HA.

MS. ATHERTON: Boys, may we return to the task at hand? Waverley's not going to beat itself.

BLAKE *snickers*.

MS. ATHERTON: Joseph. (*Sighs, then continues resignedly*) The correct answer was, in fact,

SALVATORE *leans forward, nonchalantly staking his life on the answer*.

Buffalo.

*Total silence.*

BLAKE: Buffalo.

SALVATORE: Buffalo.

MS. ATHERTON: Buffalo.

SALVATORE: For the love of Beckett, Miz Atherton, do not let such a discrepancy go unexplained. Buffalo. Buffalo?!

BLAKE: Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo!

SALVATORE (*taken aback*): What in hell was that? Sounded like a koan for the Sioux...

MS. ATHERTON: It's actually a grammatically correct sentence.

SALVATORE: You still have failed to mention why on earth BUFFALO is the appropriate analogue to life. Levity, brevity, life...fucking Buffalo?!

MS. ATHERTON: Hey, just you calm down, mister Salvatore!  
(*Composed*) I lost the answer manual, so just go with it. Let's move on, shall we? This one should be simple: Here is to there as near is to —

BLAKE: FAR! Far.

SALVATORE: Duh. Christmas crackers, that's a first grade level.  
What on earth / is it doing —

MS. ATHERTON (*Chagrin*): Actually...

SALVATORE: What. What else could it possibly wonderfully terribly be? Please detail to me what miraculous answer like a startled flock of bats will find itself blinking in the shocking daylight of our awareness?

MS. ATHERTON: ...the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle.

*SALVATORE stares unblinkingly at the ground in stunned silence. He slides off of the desk he was sitting on and very slowly begins to pace. When he finally begins to speak, he sounds quite rattled.*

SALVATORE: Alright. Okay. Let's employ our inductive reasoning skills here. The uncertainty principle is—

BLAKE: the accuracy with which certain pairs of physical properties of a particle such as position and momentum can be simultaneously known.

MS. ATHERTON *is losing power.*

SALVATORE (*Taken aback*): Jesus, Blake, what are you, the god of useless facts? I bet they'd worship you in England.

MS. ATHERTON: Boys, please—

SALVATORE: So. What if this damned analogy is implying... simultaneous occupation of space? Here AND there are the same

thing! Therefore, the use of ‘near’ implies that...the Heisenberg uncertainty principle...is close by?

BLAKE: It’s in play.

SALVATORE: Perfect! It’s in play. It’s in play, that’s right, isn’t it Ms. Atherton? Let’s go, what’s next, come on! I’m meeting Dad at the club for dinner in like, half an hour ago.

MS. ATHERTON (*Not fighting it*): Five and four is to seven and six as twenty is to...

SALVATORE (*Grinning*): Sneaky bastard, Douglas Adams—

BLAKE (*Also grinning*): Forty-two.

SALVATORE: If this next one’s bullshit, it’ll be like a one-liner from beyond the grave. I don’t even care, that would just be completely, unabashedly appropriate.

What is it?

MS. ATHERTON: Ha. Hahahaha. Haha. Jesus.

BLAKE: What?

SALVATORE: What, Ms. A, what is it?

*Tense pause, MS. ATHERTON still chuckling darkly to herself—*

MS. ATHERTON: The answer. Haha.

SALVATORE: Yes, the damned answer! Come on, what is it?

MS. ATHERTON: Haha. That is the answer. That’s the answer. Vincent, “the answer” is the answer! Haha!

BLAKE (*Oblivious*): She’s off her nut.



SALVATORE (*The truth dawns on him*): Oh, that...that is just absolutely perfect. I feel like I just went searching for the holy grail and instead encountered a verbose old man with a tin cup. Ha. "The answer" indeed. Of course.

*Pause.*

*Suddenly, as if breaking from a trance, SALVATORE starts packing up his things.*

SALVATORE: Right, I'm off. Good luck.

MS. ATHERTON: What? But what about the competition, what about Waverley, Vincent?

SALVATORE: You'll be fine without me, Ms. A. Life's too damn short for word games.

*He briskly leaves the room, and the door shuts behind him. BLAKE looks guiltily up at MS. ATHERTON and slowly begins packing up his things too. MS. ATHERTON sighs quietly and shuffles the practice papers on her desk. Two of them fall to the floor—the ones she'd just been using. There is writing in big letters on the back in red ink. One says "Answer Key 42." The other says "Practice test 43." By this point BLAKE has left. MS. ATHERTON looks at the papers, smiles half-heartedly to herself, collects her things unhurriedly and leaves.*

*Blackout.*

*KARL BRUDVIG*

*JUNIOR ART STUDIO & PSYCHOLOGY HONORS MAJOR*

---



**BIRD’S EYE SELF-PORTRAIT**

**MEMBER OF A MURDER**

I sit and watch most days  
On a tree limb that bends  
And aches to my shifting weight  
Because my beady black eye  
That hides against my smooth  
Dark body so well gives the sense  
That I know more than a bird should.

BREATHING HARD

I was on the coast of Mexico when I was eight, and the air was heavy and damp and made my hair wild. The fish were jumping out of the water so often that it looked like it was pouring rain just in that harbor. My aunt told me it was because they couldn't breathe in the filthy water. We all know fish can't breathe our air, and I imagined my air tasting so toxic that I tried to breathe water. When I licked my lips and tasted salt, it almost seemed possible.

The second time I breathed that heavy air that lingered on my skin was in Istanbul. The fish in the Bosphorus seem to stay put, satisfied with inhaling oxygen from that salty Turkish water, until the big nets sweep them up and bring them into the poisonous air that those Mexican fish had desperately tried to breathe. Then, fishermen fillet them and lay them on big piles of ice for sale.

Before I went there, the strait was just a blue line on a map and the Turkish word felt in my mouth like oxygen does to fish. *Boğaziçi*. Bo-ah-zuh-chee, I repeated to myself over and over. Bo-ah-zuh-chee. How my throat longed to give voice to that g! To let it breathe! But instead, it gets buried between a and z, pushed into silence, demoted to a *yumuşak* g. Bo-ah-zuh-chee.

Now, salty air and dying fish are only a memory, but I still struggle with words. Still gasping for breath to express what happened there, what's happening here and how to make them pretty.

**SEPIA**

Long car rides with you  
the light fading  
the visor pulled down to cover  
    the brilliance of the sun  
my world turns to sepia  
You turn up the radio  
and I hum  
we have no words  
for this moment now  
the blackness of the trees  
and their shadows  
framing the setting sun  
my world turns to sepia.

You love when I sing  
so I sing for you  
carry the tune and let it  
carry me away  
You join  
We make a harmony  
The meanest man with the hardest heart  
would tear to know how hard we try.  
Living our love in a world of sepia.

LONGEVITY

*Claude Monet—Chrysanthemums—1897*

Take simply,  
a mum.  
Memorize the way the petals,  
slowly curve open  
and down.  
Learn their colors,  
the transition from  
dark hue  
to light hue.  
Some are short and some are tall.  
After the process  
of choosing which  
to capture,  
look.  
They may have posed  
for the briefest of moments.  
To be rendered beautiful  
for more  
than their season.

### **IT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO TASTE LIKE PANCAKES**

I made guacamole with my dad's special recipe where you mix in real maple syrup when you're putting in the lemon juice and that gives it a sweetness to balance out the tang except I didn't have any real maple syrup because in first-ever-apartment grocery shopping you don't put real maple syrup on your list because it's hard enough to make yourself open a yogurt cup every morning much less mix up pancake batter and drip the drops onto a hot pan and watch the edges spread and curl and dry so instead I went to the cafeteria and took home a tiny dressing-cup-full of the fake maple syrup that bubbles hot next to the whipped cream at the caf's waffle station and I said a quiet acknowledgement to my dad a thousand miles away that I know this isn't how he would want it done but I made it anyway and at first you don't notice the sweetness because the salt of the chips is overpowering but pretty soon the fakeness of the syrup leaves you with the sugary memory of weekend mornings settled on your tongue

I hope you still like it

LIVSLØGNEN

*We meet an ACTOR running lines in a bar on New Year's Eve. He is not drunk—in fact, he is quite sober, and sobers even more as the scene progresses. He shouldn't be mean or angry all the time. The ACTOR should find the lightness in the delivery. The BARTENDER gives him his first drink for the night: a Guinness. Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" is whistled by the guy next to him, on and off. The TV in the background is on—"Dick Clark's Rockin' Eve." He is rehearsing "A Wild Duck" by Henrik Ibsen. Role: Gregers.*

BARTENDER: New Year's resolutions?

ACTOR (*Lifting himself out of his script*): Ha.  
Learn my lines.

*Beat.*

Yes.

Tooooo...

not share as much about myself.

With other people. At least not like an open book.

I'm gonna have secrets instead of wearing them all on my sleeves.

That's

"professional..."

"Conducive."

It makes people wonder what's going on,  
makes them give a shit.

(*Referencing his script*) I mean.

*This* guy gets it.

"If you take the life lie from within a layperson, then you've taken  
all that makes him



happy.”

*The Life Lie.*

*The claim of the ideal.*

Shit.

Dude’s got issues

at least.

BARTENDER *starts making another drink, flitting around the quiet bar.*

*Beat.*

*The next lines grow increasingly louder.*

I want to be happy for other people and the things that make them happy  
—like my roommate, for instance.

I want with all my heart to tell him that

I’m proud of him

that he’s super successful and that he’s been accepted to a 27,000  
dollar-a-year grad program,

and I say that I am. I say, “Hey dude, I’m *so* excited for you!

That’s *so* awesome.”

Or when a best friend has a

revelation that his on-and-currently-off-again girlfriend still likes him,  
and he tells me

that *that’s* somehow worth celebrating.

I want to say,

“That’s right, bud! That’s great!”

And—and

pat him on the butt and tell him to go back out into the field and hit a fff—  
(*Without pause or loss of intensity, but quieter*)

*fucking*

home.

*fucking*

run—sorry.

And

I-do-I-say-it. But it ReallyJustSeems

so  
far away for me. The answer feels  
so *scuur-ip*-ted.

*Beat. A breath.*

This future I've got coming for me is nothing like anything I can ever imagine.

When I was little, I thought that I could be a big-name Broadway star,  
or

a UN translator  
that makes

*(Fancifully)*

international policy a reality,

a teacher,

at least until I realized that was a joke...

or even a *circus* clown that spends all day making people laugh and  
feel happy. Today, I have no dreams—no life lies.

I'm a,

uh series of failed attempts at a dream

—my Broadway is beginning to look more like a bad karaoke  
night in Iowa; my UN gig is looking more and more like a job at  
a Norwegian summer camp teaching children; my teaching job is  
really a question of who will actually listen (*Sarcastically raises a  
glass to the BARTENDER*) and my ability to make anyone smile is  
completely and utterly dependent on faking it—

*(Acting, as in his previous examples)*

"Sure! You bet!"

"WOW. You must be so proud."

"I'm so glad to have a FRIEND LIKE YOU."

*Realization.*

I'm a life *of* lies.

Like

The *Easter* Bunny of lies

With fake plastic eggs for all of the innocent little folks  
who succeeded with last year's resolutions.

*The BARTENDER has ignored him this entire time, and walks back into the conversation, on this last line. The ACTOR is drawing in the foam on the top of the Guinness.*

ACTOR (*To the BARTENDER*): Hey. I made an “E” for Ethan.

(That’s me.

Ethan.)

We’re both a couple of clichés, ourselves! An actor talking about how tough it is to be an actor.

Drinking

in a *bar*.

An actor.

Drinking.

(*Whistling stops.*)

I mean.

Who knows if our lives aren’t even scripted for us.

What if this is all just a show on the stage?

*All the world’s a stage!*

(More clichés, sorry).

I mean.

How fucking meta can we get?

*House lights up. BARTENDER leaves.*

ACTOR (*Pours Guinness onto stage floor as he speaks*):

Happy fucking New Year.

*The whistling starts back up.*

BARTENDER (*Returning*): That’ll be five-oh-eight.

*LEIF ESTENSON*  
*SENIOR ART STUDIO MAJOR*

---



*THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE WATER*

**EXPECTATIONS**

A cemetery is a dark beauty  
for its subject and depth—  
I never once saw a tombstone  
that didn't live up to its  
expectations.

**SHOW BOY**

It was Saturday, and I had on my Batman pajamas. Something good was going to happen. I could feel it. Yesterday's bedtime garments became my daytime ensemble. Batman. I wore that cheap, pilled-cotton onesie like a man with a purpose. It even had a yellow cape that attached to the shoulders with Velcro. I was unstoppable.

It happened to be the same day my sister Katie and I discovered new potential for the bunk bed that Dad built: it was the perfect stage for our latest production, *Batman Saves the Day*. We spent the morning searching through the basement for the folding chairs and dragging them up the stairs to our bedroom.

Mom and Grandma were sitting on the couch talking about motherly things. Mom was breast-feeding my new little sister. I knew what breast-feeding was, and it was nothing unusual to me. Inevitably, we had been dragging the chairs through the living room to get them back to our bedroom, but I was beginning to suspect they hadn't yet taken notice.

"Mom, you better not look, we're not ready yet!" I said. They turned. I had ruptured their hushed tones.

"Ben, you've got to be quiet," Mom said. "We're about to put your sister down for her nap." She paused, adjusting my baby sister, my Grandma beaming. "Now what did you want, honey?"

"Nothing, we're almost ready!" I said in a stage whisper. I darted back to my bedroom, cape billowing, where Katie was putting the finishing touches on the stage. When I got there, all three of the folding chairs were set up facing the bunk bed and Katie was busy adjusting the jungle print comforter on the bottom bunk. This, of course, was where we would be performing.

"Katie! Hurry up! You have to welcome our audience!" I said.

"Shouldn't we practice first?" she asked. I couldn't help but sigh at her nonsense. Batman never needed practice. The baby was going for a nap. This was our only chance.

I rushed back out the door, down the hall to my old bedroom where Mom and Grandma were putting baby Anna into her crib. She was already sound asleep. I stood impatiently in the doorframe with an air

of hospitality.

"Ladies and Grandma, the show is about to begin! Right this way!" She followed the gesture of my arms down the hallway, but only after scolding me again for being too loud.

After the audience was all seated, Katie and I were backstage, which was our closet, and I was drilling her on her cues.

"Okay, remember," I said, "we changed the waltz during the Batman ballroom scene to a tango, and the track on the tape is number three, got it?" She nodded. The scene was set for me to do something heroic.

"Okay," I said, "here goes. Hold the door for me."

She opened the closet door, revealing me to the audience, but I froze. I got cold feet. I wasn't ready to take the stage. Maybe I should have written a script after all.

"Ben, you're on!" Katie said, pushing me toward the bottom bunk. I resisted against her weight, but my footie pajamas didn't have enough friction on the bedroom carpet. Thus, I was thrust onto the bottom bunk right into the "Batman in a back-alley" scene. I switched on my flashlight, heart pounding in my dry throat. This was the part where I was investigating the alley for anything in need of justice. My knees began to shake as I felt the eyes of Mom and Grandma while I realized I had no clue what Batman would be searching for. The quivering beam of my flashlight happened upon something. Behold! I thought. It was a plastic googly-eye that you use for art projects, paper hand puppets and such; you know, girl stuff. I stuck one on the underside of the top bunk earlier that day. Whew. So I began to investigate it, circling this monstrosity in the blackness of the grimy alleyway. I then delivered my heroic monologue.

"Hmmmmmm," I said with focus. I paused to let the intensity of the moment creep in, but instead, it was received by poorly hidden chuckling from my mother. It escalated to outright laughter, and soon my Grandma had joined. *This is serious!* I thought with a scowl. Wouldn't you find a human eyeball in the middle of a dark alley somewhat peculiar? Muscles and ego deflated, I gave up and marched offstage into the closet where my sister was waiting.

"What are you doing?" she said, closing the closet door, "the scene isn't even over yet!"

"I know, Katie! It's the audience, they're just not very attentive tonight. I think we just have to skip right to the ballroom scene." She rolled her eyes and hit the play button on our tape player.

We rushed on stage to the tune of "Daniel" by Elton John and

began to dance. I was a dreadful mess. While Katie had acquired grace through her preschool ballet class, I was not so fortunate. I spent the first thirty seconds tripping on the hem of her nightgown and trampling all over her feet. Panicking, I began to solo, disregarding all of Katie's choreography. When it came time for the dip at the end of the song, my sister and I regained our partner position, and she leaned deep into the final pose with my support. Grandma leapt up from her seat and put her hands beneath Katie's head as if to catch her fall. *Grammaaaa! It's supposed to be dangerous, that's what makes the dancing so breathtaking!* I was livid. What was I, some inexperienced, common school child? No! I was Batman! I called the show off without the "Batman Saves the Beautiful Lady" finale and began to shoo our guests. Mom and Grandma clapped anyways and told me, "You were wonderful!" On the outside, I stayed mad at them for ruining my chance to be Batman. I was outgrowing those pajamas anyway.



**TV GIRL**

It's in the basement,  
Where cushions  
Sag towards the concrete floor  
That I wish I could sleep

It's where the old things are  
the old color TV  
casting colorless shadow  
onto dusty planets  
and the vinyl rings of Saturn  
the gaseous black holes of history

Like the old TV—  
picture collapsing  
to dark nothing  
as loose grains skitter  
through wire and alkaline

shed transmissions  
from space and scatter  
the image like shrapnel  
back into dead air

There's a whole  
Cosmology to the Television

And I can press it  
on and off.

If only.

SLIP

"I love you." The words sneaked out of my mouth before I could stop them, slipping, sliding, gliding, gushing. Too soon, too soon. I snatched at the air, wanting to erase, rewind, but the letters—eight of them—were too far already. They were in the world. They were nothing, and everything. They swam through space, shimmering gold, weaving around his head, tickling his ears, brushing his lips. They swayed shyly, a scarlet script, rippling as his nose breathed in and out, creating a wind. They dangled seductively over his head, taunting and teasing. They installed themselves stubbornly in front of his eyes, enormous and black, Courier New. **I LOVE YOU**. All caps, no holding back. Bolded, preferably.

"I love you." These words, the classic three little words sat suspended in my own little cartoon speech bubble—I could see it with its little corner pointed at me, accusing me: "She said it! That one! She's the one who released me!" Then this bubble swelled, expanded, and produced its very own little bubble, a baby bubble, the first inkling of an idea, barely even sprouted. And as I looked on in terror and awe, the baby told him everything that I had been thinking, wondering, wishing, even if it had just been a shadow of a thought, even if it had just been the briefest flicker of an image of us. Maybe I didn't want to pursue this idea or that one, but it all came out. Everything that I hadn't dared to say, yet wanted to, as if to tentatively place one foot on the ice to see if it cracked. "I love you a lot. I love you so much that I want to spend more time with you, all day with you, all month with you, all my time with you, live with you, marry you, spend the rest of my life with you."

The bastard love child of the speech bubble and a bad idea stretched and inflated. "I want to have children with you, and raise them, and watch them become their own people. Are you a good father? Will you be? Will you be the good cop, or the bad one, or will we take turns with the discipline? Do you want a dog, or a cat, or both, or neither?" The ice groaned with the weight of the questions, protesting, refusing, but I—or rather my thoughts, the ones I keep hidden away every time I start a new relationship, locked in a box, a Caboodle with stickers

from my eight-year-old self, locked in a diary with a key from when I was thirteen, locked in the fiction that I write now—pressed onwards, paying no heed to the soft crackle beneath my feet.

“Where will we live? What will you do? Will we make ends meet, or will life be a struggle? City, or country, or small town? How will the kids be raised, will one of us stay home? Will they go to a private school, or a public? How many? Lots, or maybe just two? A boy and a girl, to spoil, to love. And we’ll name them—” My feet slipped out from underneath me. I was not ready for this, unprepared in mind and body and footwear: my tennis shoes afforded me no traction on the frozen water. I fell—too hard, so hard that my head slammed against the ice and it took me a beat to figure out what happened, and where I was. But as I was falling, as the weight of my body, of my mind, of my thoughts hit the delicate solid, the ice could no longer hold me. It broke open, sucking me into the watery abyss, where I will freeze, harden. It is dangerous to walk on ice that is not yet ready, too thin, too frail and delicate. It can take you and kill you.

“I love you.” The words are not there, not really, but they exist outside of my head now. They are there, however intangible they may seem. There is a silence as he stares at his shoes, or at the wall, or worse yet, at the door, but not at me. He scuffs the toe of his sneaker on the mat meant for wiping mud off of our shoes, so that they are exposed, no longer hidden underneath dirt and lies. He sniffs, smelling the words, tilts his head, listening, rubs his forehead, bites his lip and swallows, and shifts his eyes. My sentences have assaulted all of his senses, pouncing on them in a blitz and they linger now, waiting.

“Uh, well...” he mumbled, but I wanted to explode. I knew what would happen, but like a car wreck, I couldn’t rip my thoughts away from the horror that was coming because inside, there was that tiny hope that he might return—

“I think it’s a little soon.” And he was gone, out the door, the escape that he had pinpointed before he had even entered into my house, or the conversation, or the relationship.

Too soon. The lake swallows my body, welcoming it, wrapping it in the ~~freezing-chilly~~ familiar waters like a blanket around me. I can feel my heart begin to glaci-ate.

Too soon.

**A REOCCURRING NIGHTMARE:**

—I find myself halfway up the mountain Bodhibhadra  
on my way to see the great yogi Atisa  
who will teach me about the universal rhythms:  
how the pumping of my lymph nodes aligns with the life-cycles of  
suns  
and how the hair on the back of my toes can be understood to  
hearken back to the days of the great Mei-Ling dynasty  
and my supplies are just enough to get there, not back,  
for at the summit I am to gust away to nirvana  
leaving my clothes behind on the mountaintop  
if he (the yogi) will only reveal to me the one word  
that is holding this poor tired universe together...

but when I reach the top, in great Atisa's hands  
sits the meaning of life, granite etched, in comic sans.