

The Metropolitan



Watches Life Pass By Digital Photograph Michele Fuller

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2010

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by Students
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“It takes courage to grow up and become who you
really are.”

e. e. cummings

The Metropolitan 2010

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects Metro writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

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2010 Writing Awards

For her poem, "One November Day," LaVonda Fishburne is the winner of The Metropolitan 2010 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Jody Sperling, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for his story "Grand Slam." The second runner-up, Brian Griess, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for his poem "My Flak Vest."

One November Day

LaVonda Fishburne

Another day I have to take care of
You in this sweet fly-infested kitchen
Washing the watery eggs and crusted
Hash browns off the plate, my hands like prunes. It's
Four p.m. on this rainy, beautiful
November day. My legs wobble like the
Branches on the trees as the wind blows through
Them. You sit there, and I'm picturing a jack-
O-lantern in place of your face. I can
Look and laugh at you all day as you sit in that
Chair reading the week-old newspaper and
Mumbling to yourself
What you think of me.

Grand Slam

Jody Sperling

Melissa sat in the booth across from Shane looking at him and twisting the straw from her glass around her pointer finger. Since the time she was a little girl, she had never liked drinking with a straw. “If I told you something, would you resent me?”

“I don’t know you well enough to resent you. So, probably not.” Shane unconsciously mimicked her behavior, removing the straw from his glass and twirling it around his own finger.

“Good then. You’re too young to have a bald spot.”

“I do resent that.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“I can’t help my genetics.” Shane motioned to the waitress who passed by his booth. She didn’t notice him as she scurried into the back wait. “What do I have to do to be noticed?” he mumbled to himself under his breath.

“Do you always feel so sorry for yourself?”

“I can see you have no problem being blunt.” He put the straw, now a tangled, kinked mess, back into his glass. As the straw displaced the ice cubes, they clanked against the wall of his glass like diamonds being scattered on a proofing mirror. “And honestly, it’s not like my bald spot is so bad any-who.” Shane’s mother had always said, “Any-who.”

“Sure. It’s not bad. It’s just unfortunately big for a man as young as you.”

“And I guess you’re the authority on the median bald-spot of men in their twenty somethings.”

“There’s no need for expertise. Men don’t usually start balding until they’re in their late thirties, early forties.” As if to mock him, Melissa ran her fingers through her full, dark hair. “I guess it doesn’t matter. My dad was already bald as a cue ball when he was your age. It’s just—I swear I read somewhere that a man’s hair was the crown of his pride.”

“Certainly not! How could you let something external and out of your control become the foundation by which you judge all of your successes?”

“I’m not a man. How should I know?”

“That’s right. You’re not a man. Let’s talk about something else.” Shane nearly jumped from his seat as he saw the waitress coming out from the back wait. She turned her head nonchalantly toward him but continued on toward one of her other tables. “Good. She saw me,” he assured himself out loud. The waitress dropped a check for the table she had approached and began to head for a door with a glowing red exit sign hanging over it like a halo on an angel. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a soft-pack of cigarettes.

“Me too,” Melissa sighed.

“You too what?”

“Oh...well, I quit smoking because my boyfriend hated it, but I swear, it was a mistake. There isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t feel like I’d trade my left lung for just one more drag. They say some people just love the habit. Well, I’m one of those people.”

“You’re too pretty to be a smoker.”

“You’re too bald to be picky.”

“Look, you’re great and all, but seriously, lay off the bald jokes now. Don’t you know men are sensitive about hair loss?”

“I thought you said it wasn’t the crown of your pride.”

Shane tried to shrug it off. Instead, he plunged his hand into his glass, retrieved an ice cube, and tossed it into his mouth trying to look casual and coordinated. He couldn’t think of a response, so instead, he just sat staring at Melissa, reminding his eyes not to glance down.

He had noticed Melissa when he walked into the Denny’s a few hours earlier. He had noticed her hair first. She had wild black hair so curly it seemed to be in rebellion. Judging from her physique, she was a runner. Judging from her attire, a pair of extra large sweatpants and a two-sizes too big sweatshirt, she had just suffered a breakup.

Shane had decided to come to the Denny’s to have a cup of coffee since it was the only neutral environment open at two-thirty in the morning. He had been working on his thesis, a document that would eventually become a book about Abraham Lincoln as well as his great doctoral achievement. Somewhere along the way, Shane had realized how much he wished he would

have worked to get a degree in something useful. His book would be lost in the herald of countless others that tried to say something new about Honest Abe but only repeated the same facts with new prose. So when he should have been working on his paper, he was, instead, contemplating the five hundred places he'd rather be, doing the five thousand things he'd rather do. All of his thinking gave him a formidable headache. He decided to get out and have some caffeine, hoping it might calm his throbbing temples.

When he walked in, Melissa was sitting at the first booth to his left. Usually, he wasn't a brave man. He hadn't achieved much success in the way of women, and Melissa was definitely not in his league. She was beautiful even in pajamas. He was balding. Nonetheless, he found himself doing something quite unusual. The waitress had to practically slap him across the face with a menu, "Just one tonight?"

"Oh. No. I'm ah... I'm meeting someone." Shane's voice trailed off as he turned to approach the mysterious and beautiful stranger sitting in the booth. At first, he just stood dumbly at the edge of her table. She didn't even look up at him right away.

He shifted his weight from the balls of his feet to his heels and back again. "Um... I don't suppose you'd like a little company. Er, well, I mean, if you wouldn't mind, I could use some—some company I mean." Suddenly, he felt uncomfortably hot, and he could tell his face was blushing.

"I'm Melissa." She reached her hand out confidently. "And I'd love some company."

From there, for the better part of the last two hours, the two sat getting to know one another. Shane had introduced himself, and they spent all the normal small-talk options, going over work and family, all of that. It had been just after Shane finished describing how he was the youngest of four siblings that Melissa jumped in with the question about his hair.

Overall, Shane had been happily surprised. He didn't even mind that he couldn't grasp why this woman had actually invited him to sit down. He considered that maybe she simply enjoyed taunting him, torturing him, and making fun of him at the expense of his obvious inferiority. He had also considered the less

likely option: maybe she actually liked him. Fantasy has its allure. However, that wouldn't really satisfy the curious fact that she found so much joy in making a fool out of him.

"Shane." Melissa snapped her fingers like she was a hypnotist just bringing her patient out of a trance. Shane felt like he had been entranced. "I realize you find me attractive. I even realize that you did a brave thing by approaching a total stranger, but I'd still appreciate it if you wouldn't stare at my chest." Shane's gaze had slowly lowered, but he hadn't meant to stare.

"I'm really sorry! I wasn't staring, or I mean, I wasn't staring 'at' your chest."

"Oh really. So you were reading the writing on my sweatshirt?"

"Kind of."

"Syracuse. It's one word. No one takes ten minutes to read one word. Are you a pervert? When I looked up at you, you didn't look like a pervert. Maybe I was wrong."

"No. I mean, no, I'm no perv. I was just thinking about something. I just didn't realize my gaze had drifted so much."

"Just," she emphasized, "watch your eyes. It's pretty creepy when a guy you don't even really know starts gawking at your chest. You should be a woman. Then you'd understand."

"Oh, I'm sure." Shane tried to sound confident. Instead, he felt like the pale white kid in the spring break vacation pictures where all the friends are tan and healthy looking from the Florida sun.

The waitress crept past once again. "Excuse me! Excuse me, miss." Shane felt exasperated. The waitress walked past his booth without so much as a glance in his direction.

Melissa began to laugh. "You really aren't so sure of yourself, are you?"

"What makes you say that?" Shane folded his arms.

"Other than the fact that you can't get the waitress's attention?"

"How does that make me unsure of myself?"

"It's easy. You can't get her attention because every time you try, I can tell you're making what you think is a strong effort, but look, if I lift my finger off the table like this and whisper like

this," she began to move her lips like she was trying to do the fish face, "do you think the waitress would hear me?"

"Yeah, right. I practically jumped out of my booth the last time she came around."

"Well, kinda. Mostly no. You think you almost jumped out of the booth, but from where I'm sitting you hardly even shifted. I mean, I bet if you stood up right now, there would be a perfect indentation mark where your ass has been planted for the last couple hours."

"How do you have any friends?" Shane had meant to sound like he was joking, but his tone had a cutting edge to it.

"Who said I have friends?"

"What—you're saying you don't have any friends?"

"C'mon, don't tell me you don't find it a little odd that I'm sitting at a Denny's all by myself at three—oh god," she looked at her watch, "five o'clock in the morning?"

"Honestly. No. I just figured you had gone through a tough breakup and you couldn't sleep, but you couldn't stand being alone either, so you figured you'd just sit anonymously at a booth in Denny's and drink black coffee."

"Good lord, man! Have you been stalking me or something? No seriously, that's really creepy." Melissa turned her head and made eye contact with the waitress who abruptly changed directions and headed for their booth.

"How did you do that?"

"I already told you."

"Right."

"What can I get ya', dear?" The waitress, despite appearing to be younger than Melissa, had decided to utilize terms of endearment. She pulled out her black check sleeve and a clicky pen and poised her hand, ready to write.

"Oh, actually, don't be offended or anything, but I noticed you went out back to smoke, and I was wondering if you had an extra one I might be able to bum from you."

"The waitress put her hands on her hips and leaning back, let a broad smile spread across her face. "I guess so, as long as you're old enough, sweetie."

"Are you kidding me?" Melissa chuckled. She acquiesced

and quickly rummaged through her purse. She produced a driver's license. Shane noticed that she hadn't smiled for her photograph.

"You look pretty mad in that picture there." Shane shrugged his shoulders.

"You'd be mad too if the stupid DMV was trying to tell you what to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, the DMV should mind their own business and let us law abiding citizens take care of ours."

"Like anarchy, you mean?"

"No, not like anarchy. Don't be ridiculous. I don't know. It's stupid really. The lady who took me on my driving test must have been in a bad mood, so she just failed me." Shane waited for her to finish her story, but it became apparent after several moments of silence that she had nothing else to say.

"So she just failed you for no good reason?"

"That's what I said."

"I find that hard to believe," Shane smirked.

The waitress cleared her throat. "Do you want a cigarette or not, sweetie?"

"Of course I do," Melissa gestured, holding out an open palm.

"You'd better tip me for it."

"It's not really a tip if you tell me I have to, is it?"

"That's rich!" Shane cut in. "Here this kind young lady," Shane glanced at the waitress' name tag for the first time, "Janette, gives you a cigarette, and you give her trouble for telling you she'd like a tip." Janette smiled broadly at Shane.

"Would you like some more coffee, dear?"

"I'd love some, Janette. Thank you." Shane turned his focus back to Melissa who was drumming her fingers rapidly on the table. He felt a new sense of boldness overcome him. For once he had played the smooth talker, and Janette seemed to think he was funny. He smiled. "Melissa, I really like you."

"Don't be silly. You don't even know me."

"Sure, I don't know you, but I still like you, what I know of you."

“Why? I’m cynical. I’m blunt, as you pointed out. And I smoke.”

“Correction: You smoked. Right now you’re just thinking about smoking because you think it seems appropriate for the level of heartbreak you’re feeling.”

“And you’re some kind of therapist or something? Because if I remember right, you’re more of a historian. If you’re a historian, you ought to know that relationships are doomed to fail.” She paused, “And you never told me how it is you presume to claim I’m going through a breakup in the first place.”

“Easy,” Shane responded. “You’re not fat. You’re not pregnant.” Melissa winced at the word “pregnant.” “And still you decided to go out in public with no makeup in clothes that are big enough to fit four of you in.”

“All right. You might be right. But that doesn’t mean anything is wrong. Like I said, relationships are doomed to fail. It’s just a little tough to accept at first. I’ll get over it.”

“That seems like pretty shoddy logic.” Shane looked up and mouthed the words “Thank you” to Janette who had just returned with a fresh refill for his coffee.

“Forgive me,” Melissa’s voice was filled with sarcasm, “I didn’t realize the historian was an expert on logic as well.”

“Is this why he left you?” Shane scrunched his face as the words escaped his mouth. He quickly tried to recover. “I didn’t mean it. For some reason, I feel terribly vulnerable to you.”

“No.” Melissa slouched so far down in the booth that only her head remained visible. She ignored the latter part of the comment. “He left me because he said he found someone, ‘I don’t know, more bubbly than you, I guess.’” As she mocked him, she tried to make her voice sound especially deep and manly.

Shane’s gaze dropped to his lap. “I’m really sorry about that. It sucks to be left.”

“Do you know?”

“Sure, I know. See.” He pointed to his ring finger. “No wedding band.”

“I think I thought it would all work out better than this. You know, at first we always talked about how much we loved each other. He couldn’t practically go a minute without doing

something to get my attention. Every time I checked my e-mail, there was some nice note; every time I was driving home from a date, there was a follow-up call; he even started talking about a wedding and groomsmen, then all of a sudden, bam! He just stopped it all. At first, I thought it was just our relationship settling into a comfortable place. It turns out that he had just lost interest.”

Shane looked at the bottom of his empty-again coffee cup. Luckily for him, he had forged a closeness with Janette. She was already headed his way with a full pot. He slid his cup to the edge of the table, reached for a cup of creamer and opened it in preparation. Janette filled his cup of coffee and looked at her unsmoked cigarette still wedged between Melissa’s fingers. “Just a fashion statement there, honey?”

Melissa looked up at Janette. “I just don’t want to go out alone, and plus, your little knight in shining armor here seems to think I’m not really going to smoke it.”

“And why’s that?” Janette inquired.

“Why don’t you tell her, Shining Armor Shane?” Melissa smirked.

Janette focused her attention on Shane who began to blush. “Well, I told her that she was just thinking about smoking because she’s going through a rough time and it seemed like the right thing to do to cope.”

Janette smiled at Melissa. “Your boyfriend is a really sweet guy. You’re lucky you got to him first.” She patted Shane on his shoulder and winked at him.

“No, no, no! He’s not my boyfriend. Actually, we just met. I mean, I’ve never seen him before tonight. He was an absolute stranger when he walked up to my booth.” It was Melissa’s turn to blush.

“Whichever way you shade it, you two’d make a cute couple.” Janette topped off Shane’s coffee again, as he had already finished half of it. “Listen, hon,” she said, looking at Melissa, “if you decide you want to smoke, let me know. I’ll keep you company.”

Melissa looked right at Shane and squinted her eyes, “How about now?”

“Sure. Let me grab my jacket.”

Melissa grabbed her own jacket and threw it over her shoulders. “I’ll be back.”

Shane stared blankly. He watched Melissa follow Janette through the back door where the red exit sign hung. He wondered how it could feel so much like getting dumped for her to walk out, when he had just met her. He began to imagine what it would be like if she were his. And then his mind picked up on a splinter that had been laid earlier in the conversation. He remembered Melissa grimacing when he had said she wasn’t pregnant. The thought consumed him. He decided he might need some fresh air, too. He slid out of his booth seat and made a beeline for the front door. Suddenly he couldn’t keep his breath.

He started to wonder what he had been thinking. This woman was clearly crazy. She was unstable. She came up behind him. “Were you going to ditch me and make me pick up the bill for your coffee?”

“No. No, I was just getting some fresh air myself.”

Melissa took one look at his face and knew something was wrong. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s the matter.”

“Sure, you just picked up a stutter all of a sudden and you want to tell me nothing is the matter?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I mean, no. Nothing’s the matter.”

“C’mon. You’re seriously not that mad that I smoked a cigarette.”

“No. It’s not that.”

“So it is something.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Seriously, if I could be brave enough to ask you about your premature balding, what could possibly be more blunt and offensive than that?” Her reasoning made sense.

“Well—you winced when I said the word ‘pregnant?’”

“Damn it! I knew there could be something more offensive. Well played. You know, when I saw you standing over my table like a puppy that just found a rawhide, I really didn’t make you out to be such a witty guy. You’re really witty.”

“I wasn’t trying to be witty.”

“Why does it matter, anyways?”

“It really doesn’t. I just put two and two together, and then it seemed like I just ran past it in my mind.”

“Women have kids, you know. It’s not a big deal.”

“But you’re not married.”

“No. It’s the twenty-first century, you know.”

“Sure, but, I mean, you got pregnant with some random guy or what?”

“Not some random guy, no.” Melissa reached into the pocket on the front of her sweatshirt. Her hands withdrew a cigarette and a lighter. She promptly lit it and blew the smoke over her right shoulder.

“You’re not going to start up over some silly guy, are you?” Shane’s voice rang with desperation as if he were her guardian and he were watching her throw her life away to the crack pipe. In fact, that was somewhat how he felt.

“That ‘some silly guy’ is the father of my unborn child and the man I’m mourning the loss of. How can you be so witty and so slow at the same time?”

“Oh,” Shane uttered. He was otherwise dumbfounded. The only thing he could think of was to tell her to stay put. He ran back into the Denny’s and pulled out his wallet. He handed a twenty-dollar bill to Janette and hurried toward the door. Janette followed him to double-check that he didn’t need change. “No, I don’t need change, Janette, you did a fine job. You deserve it.”

He ran out of the Denny’s and into the night air just as Melissa was drawing the last smoke out of the smoldering butt.

“Do you want to walk with me for a while?” Melissa asked Shane.

“Yeah. I’m up for it.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

My Flak Vest

Brian Griess

My flak vest weighs me down, but ocean water crushes
a deep sea diver, too. My vest is personal protection from
bullets and fragmentation, an ignorance shield. My army
green vest is painted desert dust tan by the winds
of boredom and rage.

I say, "I'll guard the truck, Sergeant,"
because months from now I'd like to go home and
hopefully this male corset will stay here with the
sand that sticks to the collar rubbing my sunburned
patience raw.

Kevlar and ceramic traps and contains my heat, my sweat,
my mental stability. It cramps my back and my style.
Is there a reason why grass never grows on graves the first year?

Scratching Itchy Words

Brian Griess

I write random bricks
that sink like granite ships
in the clear as mud pool of language.

With muscles tense
I scratch text,
poetry that leaves me scratching my itchy head.

Words bite
bloody chunks away
and stanzas flop
like salmon in black bears' mouths.

Or my words fizzle
like sleet
striking dead leaves
on an autumn forest floor.

Screw rigid iron structure
and return the favor.
I'd much rather tiptoe poetic lines
through shatter shards of words.

The words spill out
like fluids from a sick kitten.
Spotty words I clean up off the kitchen floor,
returning it to order.

After hours of deliberation
a nearly hung jury,
I slide into a snowbank
called satisfaction.

Discovering the Music in Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"

Rebecca Anderson

As Dylan Thomas watches his once-imposing father succumb to the forces with which advancing age pulls him toward the grave, he pleads with him to fight against them with vigor and persistence. In "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," Thomas marries the music of this poem so tightly to the message that the result is a hauntingly beautiful work of art. The strength of Thomas' musical elements resonates through his mastery of sound, as he manipulates words and punctuation to craft a poem of active resistance to death's inescapable pull.

From the first line, in which the speaker implores his father, "Do not go gentle into that good night," the reader is met with a preponderance of the plosive *t, d, g,* and, in subsequent lines, *b* sounds. These consonants, which can only be produced by completely restricting the flow of air, create significant resistance in the mouth, forcing the reader to struggle through the words in order to reach the end of the line. As a result, the music draws the reader physically into the drama of this struggle between life and death.

To amplify this effect of musical resistance, Thomas occasionally ends one word with a plosive and begins the following word with a different plosive. This is especially artfully rendered in the opening line, where there are two occurrences of a word ending in *t* preceding a word beginning with *g* (*not go; that good*). One of the characteristics that make music pleasing is the concept of repetition and variation. This pattern of double plosives is repeated in lines 2 and 14. However, Thomas creates variations by changing the sounds so that in line 2, all four plosives are heard (*should burn; at close*) and in line 14, the *d* and *b* (*could blaze; and be*). The other verse which forms a thematic refrain in this musical poem is the speaker's plea to "rage, rage against the dying of the light" (3, 9, 15, 19). Though there are fewer plosives, the tempo remains slowed by the presence of the affricate in *rage* and the comma which separates the repeating

words. Still, this is the first hint that death must ultimately win this battle, as the tongue seems to glide a little too easily toward the "dying of the light." Thomas also uses punctuation to further resistance when he speaks of "good men, the last wave by," wild men, who "learn, too late," and "grave men, near death."

As is true in music, the passages which do not conform to the overall theme lend interest to the work. So it is in two passages of this poem, where the tongue seems to move more freely still, unencumbered by commas or double plosives. Thus, the reader's tongue might also "dance in a green bay" (8) or "sing the sun in flight," (10), reveling in the life force which defies the pull of death. We may also sense the life force as assonance carries us along on the wings of the long *i* in stanza three, where with the "good men, the last wave *by, crying how bright*" (9). The speaker's voice softens dramatically when he addresses his father directly: "And you, my father, there on the sad height, / Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray" (16-17). Suddenly, the number of plosives drops, replaced by softer, fricative sounds like *f, s, h,* and both the voiced and unvoiced *th*. These consonants are looser and allow more air to pass through. Here, the abundance of commas which continues to restrain the tempo keeps the tone somber, and the euphony of these lines suggests both the respect which the speaker has for his father, as well as a further sign of the speaker's acknowledgement that his father is giving up the fight.

Finally, Thomas' choice of rime also creates a musicality which embodies the struggle between life and death. The classical variant of the villanelle is composed entirely of two end-rimes, and the sounds which Thomas selects mirror the conflict in this poem. The alternating closed plosive consonant which ends the A rime and the open, long vowels of the B rime create a vivid auditory contrast and yet another depiction of the struggle for life in the face of death.

It is no accident that Dylan Thomas' poem is so powerful. Through the choice of rime in a tightly structured form and the careful interplay of sound and tempo, Thomas has channeled the emotional energy of this highly-charged plea into a musical work of poetic mastery.

The Toulouse Jingle Dance

Nicole Cantrell

Chance Whitedeer was born on January 1, 1977. He'd always hated the Minnesota winter, so he ate his yearly solitary birthday cake June twelfth. No one knew his actual birth was in January or seemed to care that he went through the invented motions despite reality. He figured it wasn't much to celebrate, given the way his mother had rarely described it. Whitedeer was the "most defining disappointment" of her life, she joked. There was enough truth in it to sting. His mother, Agave, had been quite the Bohemian in her time and seen all there was to see in the wide world of the hipster vanguard. She had returned to her virtual tribal home in Minneapolis just in time for his breach birth. Splat, he'd landed on the ice of the Indian Health Services Hospital parking lot. The nurses thought it was very considerate of him to enter the world without their medical assistance and were glad to send him home without spending a dime of that precious imaginary treaty money. There, in the post-tribal ice, they remained, a boy and his mother against the city and themselves.

Since his first seizure in the year of his sixth birthday, he had imagined things when he wanted to be distant from the conversation. Typically, his mother would prattle on about his aimlessness, and he'd picture dancing pink robots. In Whitedeer country, disco robots had a vibrant culture, an evolving, living story. Sometimes, he couldn't think of anything but dancing pink robot stories when he watched lips moving vague syllables towards him. It was comforting, the ease of his stroking smooth cold metal thoughts, like the feather weight of an aluminum baseball bat. It brought him pleasure to see the foreign, hard motions of the robots. It distracted him from the vestigial urge to speak his desperate mind. He couldn't tell his mother how badly he needed to escape from his life, from his own skin. He couldn't wait to be a man so that his life would begin.

Finally, the day came. His childhood ended in the sunny backyard as he relished the taste of his first adult bite of cream frosting. Whitedeer, the man, made plans. His absurd resolution,

in the January of his magic twentieth year, was to visit the Black Forest. For as long as he could remember, he had fantasized about traveling there. He imagined it was like eating cake, the cherries, the almond frosting spreading across the tongue in his dark mouth. The concept percolated until it became a fetish. It encapsulated his desire to escape the "rez" of his mind. To Whitedeer, his brown skin seemed to be an invitation for the whole world to preserve him in an allegory. Every interaction was ultimately about his conquered culture confronting their unbearable whiteness. He didn't care. All he really wanted was to shed his skin like a serpent and crawl into a new one when it looked like a good ride. It was so boring to listen to their questions about what his wise 'naabe grandmother taught him about nature, or exactly what an Indian was in postmodern America. He did not try to dispel their notions. For him, nothing worth saying could ever be said—he was there only in the act and the experience. And so he acted the way he felt and hoped whiteys would appreciate his stoic example. They did not, and he barely registered their confusion. He remained focused on his goal. He wouldn't have to tolerate their self-centered attempts to connect with him much longer. There was a perfect Teutonic spirit waiting in the Black Forest for him to inhabit, and he was on his way as soon as he could get the cash.

His stomach churned audibly as he handed the money to the Nicois ticket clerk. She was staring at his face in that familiar way, but, thankfully, she didn't ask about who his ancestors might have been. She bent down and handed him the trash bin behind the counter. He sprayed curdled stomach acid all over the bottom of it and then rested his throbbing head on the counter.

"Are you sure you're well enough to board the train, Sir?" she asked, seeming genuine enough. "Do you have maps and an itinerary scheduled? Is there something *else* I can help you with?"

Stammering through his ticket order must have raised her suspicions, and now he was going to be harassed by clerky concern. "Uh, I feel, uh...fine, mmm...thanks. I'll be alright um, as soon as I get to my hostel in....Toulouse? Yeah, Toulouse," he said, mostly to convince himself. He opened the massive envelope

from his inside coat pocket. With a sudden guilt playing across his broad face, he handed the clerk the fat tangle of bills from inside his fist.

Unimpressed, she continued, “According to your passport records, you’ve been halfway across Europe in the last two weeks. How on earth did you wind up in Prague trying to get to western Germany?”

He had no defense for his irrational decisions. “I got drunk on the wrong train... and... didn’t want to go back through...to Paris. So I just stayed on the same railway.” He knew that was a nonsensical excuse, but he couldn’t concoct anything better in the moment.

The ticket clerk glanced around quickly, possibly looking for some kind of intervention, but no one had noticed her strange customer. She sighed and handed him the tickets and his passport. “Well, there are several hostels here in Nice, so if you can’t get where you’re going, you can always come through here again. There are medical services available—”

He cut her short, “Thank you, but that won’t be, um, necessary.” He fumbled in repacking his documents and gathered his bags to make his shoddy exit. He could feel her confused eyes following the back of his head all the way through the baroque entryway and onto the fragrant street.

Whitedeer had been enjoying his random travels and didn’t think it was problematic to adjust his wanderings—at first. He had been guided by his mother’s partially-read journal into this gross miscalculation. It turns out that one of the perils of having been born to a mother late in her life is that many of her written memories were enshrined in places and things that simply no longer existed. Most of the landmarks, routes, and people she described were long gone or unrecognizable. He wondered if it was wise to continue following her muse, but he had already come so far.

The train wrenched from the tracks laterally. It was refrigerated, just stiff, freezing, empty metal inside. The sound of the steel scraping across the track forced the pink robots in his head to slam dance and self-destruct. He could not

sleep through the whole ride, frozen eyes watching him from puddled passengers sitting on the other side of the freight car. His impulse to hop a free train to Warsaw was obviously not an advantageous one, and he was thrilled to jump off as soon as the rails groaned from brake pressure. Within about an hour of effort, he spotted a bus depot and arranged a tour of the nearby Bialowieza Forest. He felt a modicum of satisfaction that his aimlessness still had some benefits.

From the bus window, he was overwhelmed by the tiny, visible slice of the forest boundary. He almost ran from the bus straight into the thick of it, but he saw the tour guide gathering a small group of hikers. He hid behind the nearby post office wall until they had moved on and cautiously approached the fencing. He wriggled between the wooden slats and hid behind the nearest tree. He continued to keep watch for signs of human traffic until he had walked far into the tightly woven forest. Close to sunset, he spotted a couple of feeding wisent. He felt an instant kinship with the beasts, which looked so much like the buffalo from the Anishnaabe tribal cooperative. For a flash of a second, he was homesick for the rez. He followed them into a valley clearing, and they continued to move along towards a stream in the distance for a drink. He was immediately distracted by the overgrown sign a few feet ahead. He walked up to it and pushed the vegetation aside to expose the English words written just below the Polish. *Bialowieza Forest, refuge of Armia Krajowa soldiers. Site of mass execution by Nazi officers. Long live the resistance!* There was an engraving beside the message depicting an execution of Third Reich generals. The words of an accompanying poem particularly struck him.

Here is our long-forgotten family home.

*And, having heard now and then the voice of ancestors calling,
Like a grey little forest bird, from far-away centuries,*

I fly to you, Belovezhskaya Pushcha.¹

It was some heady stuff, and Whitedeer decided he’d better recuperate while he had the chance. He lay in the high grass near the sign and stared up into the darkening violet clouds. After daydreaming for a while, he noticed the stiffness in his legs prickling for attention. He stretched out until he bumped against

something hard beneath the forest litter. He sat up and brushed the grass and dirt off the stone near the impression he'd left behind of his body. He was surprised to find it was not stone, but a crumbling grave marker. It read *Leleke Edelman. Polish partisan and Armia Krajowa soldier. August 15, 1920–July 1, 1942*. A chill passed through him, and he decided it was time to go back the way he'd come before he found anything else.

Whitedeer walked among the ferns and sweetgrass until he stopped to admire a single ghost orchid shining among the cattails. Paused in reverie, he suddenly felt his paper heart hurtle forward a few beats. Then, it shuddered back a bit. He did not feel fear, only admiration for the massive creature suddenly in front of him. It must have been traveling the primordial forest for half an eternity looking for a large enough meal. It was a monstrous teddy bear that ate millions of smaller screaming teddy bears for breakfast. First, his backpack was torn off his back with a shocking Velcro unzipping sound. The creatures' swiping nine-inch claws sliced through the bag's canvas without the slightest apparent intention. It then fixed its tiny black neon eyes on him in a passive and lethal kind of way. He thought it likely he had only disturbed its sleep—but that matters little when you are a creature so near God in earthly power that you can kill, without even a momentary malicious whim. He would have thought the bear might smell of honey and berries, like a furry bottle of mead. Instead, the creature stank of musk and fermented evergreen Christmas.

He hadn't ever considered a bear eating him. He decided that the bear should be named Ivan. He would travel down the bear's muscular throat and rest inside its cave stomach. He would be turned inside out by the bear's juices, like a stop-motion flower. He would transform into an inverted orchid. His petals, stamen and pistil would stretch out as fingers spelling a message, then curl under to drop to their shriveled death. He would be unwrapped like a gift to the circus bear, joining his bloodstream to be incorporated into his strong flesh. He addressed a mental letter to the bear, "My dearest Ivan, your fur is a velvet bristle brush." Nothing would remain of him but a trail of human hair, the fuzzy bits that trace the shower drain.

As the eye teeth pierced his left arm, he let out a shrieking,

inhuman whelp. The sound must have caught Ivan off guard, and slipping on damp earth, Ivan seemed stunned. Quickly, Whitedeer took the chance to pick up one of the heavy rocks strewn around his feet and menaced it towards the beast. His strange instinct paid off. The forest gods spared him, and the startled bear blinked and just as quickly seemed to bore of the pathetic human disturbance. Ivan awkwardly shuffled off towards whatever noiseless, rank, secreted home he had been slumbering in.

The forest was silent again. After his encounter, Whitedeer knew the darkness crawled and vibrated with the muffled sounds of a million glass-eyed creatures. Unable to locate any with his primitive paranoid eyes, he worked towards any footpath in sweet morphine numbness.

Finally, he had dragged himself to the edge of the forest. In a cartoon parody of unconsciousness, blue feathers, sans bird, circled his head. A sudden deafness blinded all his faculties, and he melted into the vacuum. He dreamed of wicked smiling crocodiles playing backgammon with his crafty 'naabe grandmother. Someone lifted his shredded arm carefully, and it momentarily woke him from the rapture. He slid between the resting void and pained waking for uncounted days. When he was healed, he opened his eyes to the village hospital ceiling. Someone had cared enough to carry his prostrate body all the way to the rudimentary doctors. He thanked them by sneaking across the room to his folded clothes in the cabinet, dressing quickly, and slithering his way out of a medical personnel exit. It felt miraculous to be free from the emanation of death. He found his bearings and headed for the train station.

Whitedeer crossed into Prague but had no idea what exact course had led him there. He no longer believed in accidents, so he embraced his error and took in the sights. He got off the train and wandered in the rain among the brothels and cryptic store fronts. Not far from the train station, he was knocked flat on his ass into the snow by a reeking red elf. The running weirdo looked behind him and seemed to note that his invisible attacker was no longer in sight. The drunken Ded Moroz, Grandfather Frost,

stopped and turned to help Whitedeer to his feet. He explained that a frothy-mouthed dog had chased him from the alley where he was dumpster diving, towards the hostel where he was hoping to give the beast the slip. Whitedeer welcomed his prompt invitation to sleep somewhere warm, even though Ded Moroz was a smelly, drunken little creep. They walked the few blocks to the elf's room, Grandfather Frost all the while chattering about his previous follies in England. After they settled in on the thin, single Murphy mattress, they shared a nip. At some time during the tale of Saint Nick's Foundation for Former Youth Sex Slaves, the liquor caught up with Whitedeer, and he fell into a frigid narcotic sleep.

He woke up in total darkness with Santa's tongue in his ear, dripping vodka backwash into his bloodshot eye. It took a full two minutes for Whitedeer to comprehend the carnal absurdity of the situation. He had finally had enough of turning the other cheek. He stabbed the jolly pervert straight in the groin with the bedside telephone near his good right arm. Then he ran from his crime and waited at the station for the next train to Nice, France, far from that Slavic hell.

Thankfully, he'd retained custody of his backpack somehow, and during all the traveling he'd had ample time to read. He'd finally reached the passages about his mother's own college days, backpacking through Europe and how she'd encountered his father. Although he could look in the mirror and tell his father had obviously not been Native, his mother had only replied that he was "May-born" and refused to say anything more. He'd researched the term as soon as he was able, but the books told him nothing about who his father was or who a May-born half-breed in Minneapolis was supposed to be. It was strange to him to know this side of his elusive mother. He had always respected her fierce privacy and kept his questions to himself, like everything else he bottled up. It greatly upset him to feel so close to her in her writing now and never in her actual presence. Still, Whitedeer was excited to see the city where he had been conceived and even more impatient to reach the end of his travels in the Black Forest.

As soon as he arrived in Toulouse, he went straight to the

last known address of his father. Courtesy of his mother, there was a surprise waiting for him. A statuesque Ethiopian woman answered the door. As it turned out, it was his father's widow. He had died several years before, under vague and mysterious circumstances. The widow was used to visits from his far-flung children and was quite absently congenial to Whitedeer. She offered him a tour of the house, use of his father's library, and a guest room to bed for the night. Rummaging through the library, he found strange allusions to the person his father may have been. There were numerous photos: daguerreotypes and sepia-tones, black and whites, and even a few Polaroids. Most were frankly labeled "wives," "lovers," "children," or "friends" of this man—but they couldn't be from this man, they looked to be over a hundred years old! His mother had written in her journal that he was a feisty, ancient one-legged man when they met in 1976, but he couldn't be *that* old. There were still other documents. There was a crude death certificate in the name Rimbaud, Jean Nicholas Arthur, dated November 10, 1891. There was another death certificate for 50 years later under the name Etienne Rimbaud, and an accompanying photo of the same, but aged, man. More mysterious, there were private journals and books of poetry under his name, too. Whitedeer tucked the journals into his backpack and walked to the guest room. He spent most of the night there, skimming the writings and trying to make some sense of them.

Apparently, Mr. Rimbaud was so disturbed by the writing of his poetry that he had a nervous breakdown at age twenty and never wrote again. After his first death, he married again, moved to Montreal, and began painting. His paintings now covered the walls of nearly every room in his widow's three-level flat—and they were definitely something to behold. Even more curious were the passages written about Mr. Rimbaud's third death in 1942, after which he came to Toulouse and married a previous family friend he'd met in his military service in Ethiopia. Then, Arthur, or Etienne, had met a young man named Leleke Edelman. Leleke had escaped from the Nazi's ravage of the Warsaw ghetto but could not stand to leave his family behind in the death camps. Etienne was so in love with the beautiful

young man that he followed him back to Poland and stayed with him until the end. Afterward, a lone and despondent Etienne allowed himself to be captured among the French resistance in Wolfach, where all were summarily executed. Etienne was never resurrected, and Arthur lived out the rest of his days wondering what could have been.

Whitedeer woke to a scream, but it was only inside his dream-mind. He had nodded off. Shaking and sweating, he felt not horror, but a deep craving. He thought it was a craving. *In afternoon sex, furry things such as us frenzy against the last moments of sun*, he wrote at the end of his father's journal. He set it down on the writing desk. He imagined the sweetcake and knew he'd better head east. The sweetcake compass told him there was something waiting for him. His plans would not endure any more delays.

Before he boarded the train for Wolfach, Germany, he bought a few supplies. The shop near his father's home was well equipped. First, he found an adequate tea pot and large cup, along with a portable camp fire. He bought several sprigs of mistletoe, ripe pearl-berries still attached. He paid for the items and solemnly walked to the train. The twinge of guilt was hard to ignore, but he was comforted by the ceremony he had created for himself. The plan had been in motion since before he left Minneapolis, and now, he had only to let it unfold.

Whitedeer sat inside the circle of stones he had carefully arranged. The Black Forest was more beautiful than the richest cake and sweeter than the most vivid sunrise. He boiled the bottled water and placed the herbs in the bottom of the teapot. He pulled the wide teacup out of his pack and set it in front of him, making sure each item was in its proper, cozy place. After the herbs and berries had steeped, he stirred in some honey and began to sip it. The warmth soothed his noisy stomach, and he rested his head against the towering bent beech tree just outside of his circle. As he drank, he was sure he saw the face of the Green Man jumping between lily of the valley and bleeding hearts. Their fine petals dripped down into his bearded face, and he smiled on Whitedeer. All in all, he was pleased that he'd gotten there with a little money to spare. His mother's insurance

had been enough to satisfy his needs, and he didn't have to feel guilty anymore. His hands began to shake, so he quickly downed the rest of his tea and placed the empty cup and all the rest in his backpack next to his mother's journal. His legs began to spasm, and he bit down on his tongue, hard. He lay down in the circle to prepare for the pink robots. Then, nothing.

Sleep paralysis: Something pushed his tongue backwards in his dark mouth, sealing it against the tender hind of his throat. A perfect circuit was created in that moment, and all breath in the universe coincided with his own. An accidental and holy image of his ossified pineal gland hovered above his frozen body, in poetics of delirium. A horn like a giant incisor tore its way through his skull and into the infinite starry space between his eyes. The horn acquired blinking lids and a vividly receptive eye. The horn-eye allowed him to anticipate the coming armies of deepest dark he somehow feared and knew were on their way to him. A fiery garnet of imprecise immensity and incalculable ferocity emerged from the mistletoe in his gut. It spoke and handed him his own heart to eat, a luscious pomegranate full of seeds that might impregnate him with an ecstasy foreign to him. He swallowed, and the heart began to beat again in his chest. His tongue was unglued from his throat, and he joined with his levitating and glowing body.

Suddenly, his mother emerged from behind the Great Rabbit. Whitedeer was overwhelmed with emotion at the sight of Agave and fainted straight away. He woke up a few moments later to the sound of her shaking her anklet bells. The ringing easily passed through the loose forest ground, and its gentle rhythm helped to soothe his shock for the moment.

Great Rabbit said, "Listen now, Uncle. I have come to show you that your mother lies beyond the sky-road, dancing for your grief. I have allowed only you, among all humans, the presence of the dead. No others have seen this since the time when I first showed creatures the need for death."

Whitedeer tried to interrupt but only managed to say, "You brought her back to me?...You...You!.. You cannot take her back! I won't go back without her!"

Great Rabbit was not happy with Uncle Whitedeer, and

the trees nearest him exploded with black and blue lightning strikes. Rabbit began again, "Uncle, you MUST listen. This is not just for you, but for all your relatives. This dance of grief that your mother is doing on your behalf has exhausted her. It is not in balance with the upper worlds for the dead to be bound to the living like this, and the Gitche Manidoo will have no more of it. Watch. The grief dance will be taught to you. It will help you to transform your struggle, and you will go back to your proper home. You will teach your people the dance as well, and it will heal their struggles. Most important, Uncle, you WILL cease your backwards motion. The water panther listens to these things, and he will poison you again with his powers. You must move with the sun beyond death. And you must release your false self here, before it consumes you. You were born in the land and among the people that I intended for you. You will teach others like yourself this dance, and it will help them to release their division. You will need to be a new kind of people, and so I have made all of you stronger than those who stay among only their own relatives. I have shown you where you come from, it is time now to go back."

Whitedeer watched his mother moving through the motions. She gained speed as she wove around the fire, sparked by the metal and turtle shell jingles of her anklets. As her dance became more graceful, she seemed to become her old self again. Her hair grew back to its full shining length, and her shapeless aura became a flowing, multi-colored gown. She smiled and looked vibrantly alive. After her song and dance faded, she sat down in front of him. She took his hands in hers and looked into him for a long while. Finally, his crying stalled, and he asked his mother, "Why?"

Mother Agave kissed the back of his hands and said, "Live."

He woke up as he always did after a seizure, drained and suffused with the spirits of what he'd experienced. On that day, he was happy to go home.

Note

¹ from the Russian ballad *Belovezhskaya Pushcha*, lyrics by Nikolai Dobronravov

Late Night, Cold Pizza

Will Epler

I am almost home. Greetings from a distant train rumble
As it chugs towards town. I pull into my driveway
And step out of my car and walk up to my unlocked
Door. Then with the stealth and grace
Of an ox I stumble through a minefield of toys.

Stomach rumbling in violence, retort to my bedtime wishes,
I slide into the kitchen in search of sustenance.
In a cardboard box I find the edible conglomeration
Known as cheese pizza. "Why the hell did she get pizza? We got
food!"
Crust crunches under the pressure of biting jaws. Rubbery
Cheese stretches, breaks. Pasty mix of cheese and crust sticks
To the roof of my mouth and I scrape the gunk off the cardboard.

In my bedroom I sigh at the sight of the wife asleep, too stoned
To know I'm home from school. I go to bed but sleep
Eludes me and I toss and turn in turmoil and wonder what
To do with the unopened envelopes haunting me from across
The hall where they lay upon the kitchen counter. I rise and rip
Those bills in half and throw them in the trash.

Stumbling over trucks and blocks and cars I search the couch
For the remote and sit and flip through the channels
In search of a diversion from my midnight restlessness
As sorrow and uncertainties seep deep into my soul. I finally
Doze and five hours later awaken to electronic chanting
Telling me it's time to wake the boys and ready them for school.
Today I will search for another job and repeat my late
Night again, and I will try to remember why I am doing this.

Sunday Tea

Rae Lynn Frogg 

They came to touch my wrinkles, all
four grandchildren, not long after
their mother's death. Mostly they came
for my sugary pastries. Their
faces too soon wizened, looked tough
as an overcooked roast. I knelt

to kiss each child. "Your mother loved
adventure!" They moved in closer.
"I remember her sliding down
banisters, hitting softballs out
of the park, and being first in
line for roller coasters, scary

movies, sky diving, and mountain
climbing." With eyes brighter, tiny
ears perked up, and interest shown
on their faces, I could see hope
for my young grandchildren, in spite
of their grief. A spark of progress.

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Isolated Digital Photograph Michele Fuller

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