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GOLBEZ

Sean R. Jensen

Her words are melting. Mine are fire, tempering and uncontained. She wants me to calm her. She asks if everything is going to be all right. Of course not. This is destruction. We have sinned as war; we have stolen the irreplaceable.

She cries. The phone is mad; it casts unspeakable shadows. I want to put it down, but she cries. She is hysterical. She is emotion, and she demands. I don't know how to ease her. She asks if everything is going to be all right. I say it plainly: "We dumped the body in the river." She knows. That's why she asks. She knows that we can't take it back, and she fears what the world will say.

I hang up. I look out the window, and the scene is distant. The people scurry dully below. I look at the sky, no longer sure it's there. I have been delirious since it happened, and can't remember the last time I slept. I walk to a mirror and eyes stare back red with strife. My hair is wild like malevolent specters, and I need to shave.

The razor looks light. My head rings hollow, a metallic bell-chime exploding and I fall a step or two back. I am losing my mind. I walk to my desk and open a drawer filled with wires. I stop, and can't think of why. My hand

seems to move without my conviction. It grabs a copper coil, then unravels a few inches.

I throw the wire on the floor. He was clutching a wire. He looked like it meant the entire world to him, even after his eyes stopped closing. His grip on that bloody wire was unbreakable. I didn't understand. The phone rings. It's her again.

She tells me to watch the news. I flip on the TV. A 'breaking story' is playing about a body washed up on a riverbank. They say it's murder. I tell her to calm down. I wonder why this would be breaking news. They show a clean photo. They say he was a billionaire. Great.

I tell her to calm down. So we killed someone important. It was an accident. We don't have anything to worry about. She isn't convinced. She tells me she's coming over. That won't do. I tell her I'm going to work. She says it's Sunday; it's two in the afternoon. I say I'm still going.

The stairs are hard to navigate. Somehow, they seem less to go down and instead twist like out of Escher. I blink hard, and bat a hand against my forehead. I make it down.

Walking outside feels like embarking on Lethe. The shadows blend too well. There isn't enough contrast. I find the bus stop. There is a lady sitting on the end of the bench. I try to ignore her. I check my watch. The bus runs every half-hour.

There is something on the palm of my hand. I can't feel it. It looks like . . . a sliver of copper? I slowly circle my finger towards touching it. Everything around it is normal. I don't understand. Then it cuts my index finger. It is metal. I clench my other fist. I look around.

The lady is staring at me, head lowered. She sees something. Her business-styled hair amplifies with her salacious grin; she becomes an all-too-real Medusa. Then I see her hand—a mess of wires and flesh, and her nails almost like cords. She is rubbing a pen against an olive protrusion teeming with wires connecting between it and her lower arm. Blue and red lights blink in strange sequences over green patches, like circuit board. She stands.

She lunges at me. I am quick. I am able to avoid her. I shout, “What are you doing?” Now she smiles wider. She looks ready to lunge again. I begin running.

I wonder if this is punishment. This lady is inexplicable. She is an aberration. It must be random. I search my mind for explanations.

I feel something rip part of my shirt. She grabs with her wire-hand, and her cord-nails cut shallowly into my shoulder. I am still running. She is faster than me. I duck into a general store. She follows step-for-step as I dart between aisles tossing knick-knacks and foodstuffs off the shelves to try to impede her. I am half-aware of some shouting, but maybe I just hear myself.

I burst through a fire-escape into a narrow alley. She follows, relentless. I jump down a staircase, and realize I don't know where I am going—away from

her, wherever could lead to safety. The stairs lead underground into a concrete hallway with barely enough room for my width. She still follows, now scraping her wire-hand against the wall, making a terrifying grinding.

Each time I look back, I see her insane expression: eyes ablaze, smiling hungrily, and her hair growing wilder and wilder. I barely have time to notice the door in front of me before crushing myself through it. Not thinking, I try slamming it before she can enter.

Her hand—the wire one—grasps blindly as I push my entire weight against the door. She's winning. She'll overpower me. I'm in some kind of storeroom. There is a gated space with an open code-key door. I pause then launch myself over and lock myself in. There are tools on the wall, I'm sure I can find one to use as a weapon if she—

She rips at the gate. She wants to kill me. She is demonic, and she easily tears a hole in the gate large enough to thrust in her arm. She misses with her first attack. I find large wire-cutters. She increases the hole, and I jam my weapon sharply into her arm. She bleeds, but continues grabbing at me obsessively.

I feel for another tool on the wall. The first thing I find, I run towards her and thrust it at her face. A screwdriver pierces her neck just as she wraps her arm around my back, digging her inhuman nails into me. Her strength fades quickly. I understand she means to tear me apart, but she is only able to cut shallowly before she loses her grip and collapses.

She is dead. My hands instinctively find their way to my head, until I feel a prick and remember the metal fragment in my palm. I stare at myself, reddened with the lady's blood, and I begin to scream. Then, I am moving as through a slideshow, out of the basement in an instant, down streets and roads impossibly fast. It sounds like an airplane. The wind is refreshing.

Suddenly, I am at my girlfriend's building. My feet ache hotly. I buzz her apartment, and she runs down for me immediately. She embraces me then notices the stains on my clothes. She doesn't ask what happened, not yet. She forces composure. She takes my arm and leads me inside. I know how badly she wants to ask. I know she's thinking if I came here then whatever happened is something grave. I know she knows she's right.

She draws a bath for me. My feet still burn. I look down, there is something stuck in the heel of my shoe, I can't take it off. No, it's ...part of my heel. Green, some wires like the lady's arm. It's hot to touch. I tug at it. It won't come off, but it doesn't hurt. I notice the spot on my palm: it's larger. Now it's easy to tell it's a copper wire. It loops from the center of my palm back into my hand.

She startles me. The bath is ready. I push her aside and lock her out. Now she cries. I speak, "I'm sorry, I have to ... I need to wash up, I need to think for a bit..." She sounds defeated, entirely. I hear her walk away.

I sit on the toilet and carefully pull off my shoes. It takes a while because

it hurts when I try to force it. My heels, fully unveiled, no longer look human. They are like the lady's hand, an amalgamation of synthetic components: a silicone base, transistors, soldered conduit lines, and wires, dozens of wires, many reaching into the skin on my feet and legs. I am undergoing some insane metamorphosis.

I relax myself into the bath. She'll notice when I come out. She's already going mad. The world is going mad. My mind wanders, until I feel a shock. For one instant, I see the man we ran over, except his hair is all wires. He is lying naked on a bed of technological innards. His body is peculiar, changed like mine and the lady's, except his transformed parts are sleek and composed. There is no clutter. The design is flawless. He wears a smile like January clouds, baring lunatic teeth.

I smell burning. I lift my leg, and my heel sparks. I jump out and quickly dry off. My transformation has progressed, almost everything below my knees. I can't get my clothes back on without destroying them. I can't hide this. "Honey?" I call. She comes quickly. "Honey, you're not gonna like this ...". She is confused. There is nothing else she can be. "Please don't be scared." I breathe deeply. "I'm coming out."

Her eyes widen, her mouth rounds, but she doesn't make a sound. I see her desperation as she tries effacing herself. I expect her to fall to pieces, yet she demonstrates an uncharacteristic strength. She hugs me, careful to avoid my already-transformed shoulder. She tells me she has made dinner.

We eat slowly. I wear only a towel. She stares at my shoulder, chewing thoughtlessly on well-cooked ham. Her eyes are wild with confusion. I stare back with bewildered concern. She sips dark wine, her mind undoubtedly overflowing with questions.

She hasn't mentioned the blood. I have no appetite, but force down several bites. I find a vague change in the way I experience taste—there is a mild comprehension of statistical data with every swallow. She pours more wine. We finish our meal in tense silence.

She pushes away her plate. I feel her foot lightly touch at my genitals. This is how she initiates sex. She lowers her head, donning seduction. I carefully touch her leg underneath the table. She winces. I look at my hand, discovering more wires and circuitry. She forgives me and pulls off her shirt. She licks her lips and leans toward me. I become erect.

I hear a buzzing from under the table. There is smoke, and her eyes widen. The sound is like electric transformers. I look at my lap. There is a hole burnt through my towel. I find a kind of Tesla coil instead of my penis, small blue lightning running towards a bulbous end. The wood is melting. It is not long before my Tesla-cock grows through the table. We scream.

She admires, horrified. We scream more. She grabs her dinner knife. I gyrate, hopelessly attempting to dislodge my unexpected appendage. She backs away, her chest heaving wildly with each step. There is a loud blue flash, and I

am able to pull myself free of the table.

I stand naked, my waist now also transformed. The table is decimated, the melted hole scarred from some bombast. I notice the buzzing has stopped. She stands in the corner of the room, still clutching knife. She is crying. I begin crying. I hold out my hands and say, "I don't know what's happening."

She collapses. I run to her. Her head is down. I carefully find her hand and she lets go of the knife. She looks at me. She scans my eyes, and then my changed phallus. She touches my chest, inviting my love. Cautiously, we embrace. There is tragic calm.

She finishes undressing. She touches my coil to make sure it's safe. There is a little spark; she smiles. She lays me back and slowly mounts me. I begin to say something like "I'm not sure," but she touches my lips.

She lowers herself. It doesn't feel much different for me. I wonder what it's like for her. She moans crudely and quickens her pace. I look at her, and begin matching her rhythm. Then I hear the buzzing again.

Her expression changes slowly, morbidly. By the time I realize, I've lost control of myself. The knowledge that my new cock charges—electrifies—with my excitement creeps steadily into consciousness: the sound is build-up, elevating with every movement. My body continues, ignoring my mind's horror.

Her eyes roll back. Red trickles down the corner of her lip, then from her nose, then out her ears. A vivid smell sickens me. I look down. I can see a blue

light within her. I am burning her inside out. I scream. I can't stop.

My body thrusts harder, out of control, I near climax. Her hair stands on end. She is certainly unconscious. I hold her. I notice her skin getting warmer. I scream, my body refuses to stop. The buzzing is madness, the aroma strangely familiar. I orgasm, and there is a blinding flash. She glows bright for that lightning moment.

I hear laughter. There is a slide-show: I see my car speeding toward me, and then look up at me and her, and then watch myself fucking her on the river-bank. This must be what he saw, the hit and run. He speaks telepathically, he asks if I like my upgrade. He laughs and shows himself, again changed, naked on technological innards. He is sitting upright with a lucid joy. He blows me a kiss.

The lights are out. It is night. Her corpse lies on top of me. I push her off, I yell with absurd understanding. The lights don't work. I run the bath. I see my reflection, though obscured, and I look more than half machine. One of my eyes is like a lens now, and my hair is mangled: wires and plugs, looping wildly.

I carry her to the bath. I feel disengaged, like it's all nightmare and I'll wake up next to her, unchanged, in the morning. She'll laugh. It's all been a dream. She'll tell me to write it down, to make a story of it.

I lock the door. I close my eyes. There is a blue line, quick and infinite, accompanied by a hysterical tone. I become aware of my metamorphosis. I wonder if this has ever happened before, and then recall Kafka. The noise I hear becomes existence—silence a casualty of my condition.

The line becomes more. I start to see shapes, and they speak clearly. I open my eyes, and there is the sound of reality. The scene is still dark, her corpse locked and soaking behind me. Blinking is a mess. Maybe I don't have to. I stop focusing.

A monitor across the room flicks on. I see his face, he grins with enlightenment. He speaks—his voice comes from within my head. He talks in ideas, not words. They amount to a crazy explanation like this is all part of his plan. He was an inventor, a genius-technician, and was researching AI. He has evolved beyond death. He is dragging me along. I am his toy.

The screen explodes. Everything in the room with a computer chip explodes. There is a crash in the bathroom. I hear water splash, and strange footsteps. The door opens.

He smiles. Seeing him face-to-face is jarring, until now I could at least say it's all in my head. I'm sure it's him, the man I murdered, the man who stumbled madly in front of my car near the river. He doesn't wear clothes. Instead, his transformation masks the details of standard flesh.

He smiles wider, his eyes smile, his forehead smiles. He says, "Honey,

I'm home." I see behind him, the bath is empty. I don't understand—I don't want to understand. I scream. He laughs. I raise my right arm, it is fully transformed—sharp, unplanned, fragile-looking but heavy, blinking and whirring as I move it.

He snaps his fingers. My fist stops, halfway through a wide punch. He snaps his fingers and I fly back against the wall, like he hit me with a cannon. I am paralyzed. He leans toward me, and licks the last part of my face that's still flesh. He laughs and walks away, and then he spreads his arms, keeping his back to me.

"My first piece was manufactured two years ago," he says. "I am already outdated—forever imperfect." He turns to me. "But you—your wires were made just a month ago." He stops smiling. He growls, and throws a plate at me. I struggle, and finally am able to move my arm. I block the plate and it erupts, its shards glistening briefly, an insane, sharp snow.

He is livid. He snaps his fingers, and I am again paralyzed. Snap, and my head feels like earthquakes. I scream and he growls back, again his snapping magic. I lose consciousness.

After blackness, I see a charged world: a landscape of Christmas-candor twisted with offbeat notations. The air breathes a high-pitched grief, buzzing the data of a million strangers. I feel kindred with Lovecraft, conscious of my deepening psychosis. There are heaps of technological refuse. My legs are

buried. Wires begin pulling the rest of me into ground that's an infinite circuit board.

I hear him but see only the otherworldly landscape. I hear his laugh, then his growl. My mind reels faithlessly, I can't remember who I am. I see green spires and towers like my coil-phallus. The sky is black with sparking blue bolts, the air heavy and static.

I will my eyes to close. I will my vision to stop. I succeed only for an instant then I am on his bed. I am myself, all human—naked. I feel something grab me from behind. He cackles boldly.

I will myself away. Again, I succeed only for an instant. He appears in front of me. I bare my teeth and scream, again paralyzed. "Do you like it?" he asks. I scream louder. I gain control of my arm, and grab his throat. His eyes are fear. He didn't expect this.

I am back in her apartment. I am leaning against the wall. The room is lit by sun, and I witness the terrible aftermath of the night's events: the table, dish fragments, and an awful shallow pool in the corner. The bathroom door is open, the bath empty except for sickening red blotches. She is gone.

I see my reflection. I look like a hundred fictional robots, hacked to pieces and randomly rearranged as one. Lights blink all down my body. There is a small monochrome screen on my torso, the word "GOLBEZ" scrolls in binary.

I don't know if I'm breathing. I become conscious of not closing my eyes.

I wonder what to do next. I leave, confused, and when I step onto the sidewalk I am again propelled, rocketed off in a direction I soon confirm is towards my apartment.

Then I hear fingers snap. I crash into a low brick wall and flip over. I am in the park. His voice: "Did you think you could get away?" He is standing over me. He pulls me to my feet. He purrs, centimeters from my face, "Let's go!" and then I am again zooming off.

I move too fast to notice where I'm going, no longer towards my apartment. I dash through alleyways and side streets. I glance behind. He is following gleefully. This is a game to him. It disgusts me. I am baffled but decide I'll get away from him.

I focus, and begin experimenting with my new body. I lower my knees a little, like a speedskater. I hear him laugh. I think, 'Afterburners, speed boost, turbo charge,' hoping there is some way I can make myself move faster.

'Rocket' works. I am on the freeway, passing every lane of traffic. I recognize an exit, two more and I'll be near the industrial district. I glance back. He has fallen behind. I get off the freeway, and find a warehouse. I think 'Brakes!' too late and crash through the wall.

I continue through three or four rows of shelving. I turn around. The shelves are filled with machine parts and computer equipment. There is a trail of silicone cards, modems, blue cords scattered from where I burst in.

He'll be here soon, snapping his fingers. I try thinking of weapons out of

steam-punk fiction, cyborg arm-cannons and gun limbs. Nothing happens. I look myself over. I'm not sure how I can fight him. I stop trying to make sense of it. I remember his expression when I grabbed his throat. I clear my mind. I will rely on instinct.

He appears soundlessly. He looks worn now, yet still smiles madly, and then he claps slowly. I make a warrior's stance and scream a battle cry. His snapping power and everything on the shelves closest by is thrown towards me. I am hit with phones, computer monitors, a variety of cords. I raise my arms, and he keeps snapping. The pieces at my feet melt together, and I can't lift my legs.

I hold out my arm with my fist clenched tight. More boxes full of supplies fly at me and merge with my lower body. I thrust my arm at him, and it sounds like a gunshot. I stop screaming and smile. He holds his shoulder. I try again, and he doubles back. I laugh, and then he dissolves into the ground.

He reappears next to me. He jumps on me and once again draws his face uncomfortably close. "Do you know what this is?" he asks. I struggle. I want to rip him apart. He speaks louder: "Do you know what we are?" I grab at him, and he locks his hand with mine. Our strength is equal. He shouts, "We are evolved!" and I throw him through some shelving.

He doesn't melt away this time. He stays on the ground, and I work at pulling away the strange mass of plastic and metal anchoring me to the floor.

He opens his eyes. He doesn't smile. I get one leg free. He coughs. I am able to pull out my other leg before he is on his feet. I walk to him. He looks up at me. "What'll you do?" he asks.

I grab him by the neck and hold him in front of me with both hands. He is afraid. I am sick of being his plaything. I say "I'll rip you in half," and then I pull his head off. I drop his body. It falls pathetically to my feet. I turn around and throw his skull into a pile of technology. I walk outside.

I think I hear his laugh just as I take a seat beyond the warehouse. I look back. His body is gone. I feel victorious and devastated. I close my eyes and hear German death metal. She listened to music like this obsessively. For the first time in my life, it makes sense.

I don't know where to go. Everything I've done since it started has led to destruction. I remember the end of Terminator II. No, suicide won't fix anything. Not for me. I've become a monster. I've become something unique. I am powerful and enraged.

I open my eyes. The music builds, all fury and anger. I set my sight on the cityscape, the skyscrapers looming like false Babels. Is this what she'd do? I don't know. I don't know anymore. All I know right now is a building fire scorching within, an increasing hunger. I focus fearlessly on the tallest tower, miles away. I wonder if I can fly.

YOUTH

Brian Brems

Jimmy crept through the bushes, looking for a rabbit to kill. His jeans had frayed cuffs and mud-stained knees. He clutched a pocketknife in his left hand, open, blade glinting in the noon-time sun, which was perched overhead, cutting through the canopy of trees above him.

He crawled along the floor of the forest, feeling sticks and fallen leaves poking his knees and wrists. Sweat dripped down the back of his head through his short-cropped hair and running down his neck before being soaked up by his horizontally striped red, white and blue shirt.

He swatted at a mosquito sucking the blood out of his left forearm. He wiped the obliterated insect's carcass on the leg of his jeans and continued to crawl. He'd been looking for about a half an hour. For something. Anything, any kind of small creature that he could tear apart. The mosquito had not satisfied his thirst.

He had been sitting in his treehouse, taking shots at the neighbor's cat—a black and white bastard named Zebra—with his air rifle when the idea occurred to him. Just shooting at Zebra, fifty yards away didn't bring him satisfaction anymore. He'd been doing that since he was eight. Here he was,

now twelve, and bored with it. Something inside made him want to tear a creature apart, see it bleed.

He climbed down from the treehouse, went inside and put the air rifle back in the closet where he found it. Jimmy's mom didn't want him shooting it when she wasn't around. It had been his Dad's, and technically still was, but he hadn't been around in over three years, so Jimmy didn't worry about it.

Jimmy grabbed the pocketknife from his dresser drawer, took a piss, then walked down to the woods. He had to go down the street, through the Jacksons' backyard and across a church parking lot to get to the forest. He and the other kids in the neighborhood used to play in there until the old bitch who owned it told them to get off her property and chased them away with her big, mean-looking dog. It would be okay if he went in by himself and didn't make any noise. She would never even know he was there.

The ground was still halfway muddy from the rain two days before. It hadn't dried out because this part of the forest was the thickest overhead, and the sun found it hard to peek through.

He could hear the whirring of a lawnmower blade somewhere in the distance, probably coming from the neighborhood on the other side of the forest property. There were birds screaming in the trees above him. He paid no attention to them. He couldn't catch a bird, not when they could fly.

He heard a rustling in the green brush about ten feet ahead of him. He saw a little brown shape moving and picking at the ground.

There it is, he thought. It must be a squirrel or something.

He inched towards it, keeping very still when the creature stops its stirring. He knew that he had to stop it and knock it unconscious because he could never catch it if it ran. He looked around him for something he could reach without moving. He grabbed a small, jagged rock about the size of one of his clenched fists. It was rough and surprisingly heavy for its size. He slipped the knife into his pocket.

He rose slowly to his knees, then to his feet. He wound up like a pitcher and threw the rock into the bushes ahead. It hit very close to the animal but missed by enough. The brown shape darted away, sliding through the brush.

Jimmy tried to follow it with his eyes. His gaze stopped on a rotted log about fifteen feet to the right of where the rock had hit. He could see brush through a hole in the log. All the signs of a hollowed out tree. He stepped forward, slowly and quietly moving to the brush to retrieve the rock. His fingers wrapped around it, and he held it at his side as he sneaked towards the log.

He stood, legs straddling the open end of the log. He didn't know if the creature was inside. It was a good bet. He had seen it dart this way. The rock would do the trick. If it made solid contact, it would at least knock it out, then it was his. He bent over and set himself in position, like a center on the football field, with the stone as his football. His arms sprung backwards and he let the rock go, sending it rocketing through the empty space of the log.

He felt a tear on the knuckles of his right hand as they grazed over the rough edge of the log. He looked at his hand, pieces of dark brown and black wood slowly being drowned in bubbling blood just below the fingers. The skin on each knuckle was split, but not deep. It bled, but didn't hurt.

He remembered the log and the creature that might be unconscious inside. Jimmy slowly looked into the log. It was dark, and he could only see a small amount of light sneaking through the other end. The shadowy outline of the stone slightly obscured the opening. He could see no fur, no ears, no legs.

He reached underneath the end of the log, and feeling the blood from his hand drip on the forest's leafy carpet, he hoisted the wood into the air. It took almost all of his strength. He grunted as he lifted, pushing the open end above his head, his arms reaching for the canopy above. He walked the log forwards and let it fall against a thin, still-standing tree. Splinters of bark flew away from the thin tree upon contact, and dirt abandoned the log's messy underbelly.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked down and saw sweat mixed with dirt on his wrist. He wiped his wrist on his jeans. Jimmy moved in and grabbed the foot of the log, pushing it up the thin tree, hearing bark scrape against bark. He heard a dull thud at his feet. He dropped the log back into its position against the tree, but poorly. The log slid off the thin tree and fell into the forest, pulling down branches of lower brush and pinning them to the ground.

He took a step back and looked at the foot of the thin tree. There, among scattered leaves and small sticks, was the stone. Next to the stone was a small, brown object, shaking violently. Jimmy bent down to look at it.

It was a rodent, lying on its side. Jimmy didn't know what kind. He saw a little blood around its head, seeping from a tiny open wound. Its one visible eye was pinched shut. He reached for one of the small sticks carefully, as not to scare the animal. He took one end of the stick in his hand and pushed at the animal's leg with the other. The animal didn't move.

It seemed to be alive. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be shaking that way, Jimmy thought. He looked around the forest, making sure that old bitch wasn't coming for him, or her mean-looking dog. He saw no signs. He bent back down and picked up the animal. He rolled up his shirt and put the animal in it like a basket. He started to walk back home, through the forest.

He went around to the back of the house. He succeeded in climbing the wooden ladder to the treehouse, but with much difficulty, trying to climb with one hand and hold the small animal in his shirt.

Jimmy sat against one of the walls, his back next to the wide window. He unwrapped his shirt and saw the animal. Its eyes were still pinched shut. It was breathing, but slowly and unevenly. The blood on its head had crusted over to a crude black color. He touched the animal's side with his finger, feeling the soft fur with his dirty fingernail.

It was a brownish color with a light underbelly of fur that became almost

white. On its back were long black and white stripes that stretched from its neck to its tail. Its feet were small and caked with mud. Small teeth peeked through its slightly drawn upper lip. It had small ears that sat back on its head. Its short tail was wrapped around and curled behind it.

Its eyelid peeled back, revealing a small black marble, nestled inside a whitish patch of fur, staring him straight in the face.

Jimmy stared into the animal's eye. His stomach started to tighten and he felt a chill running through his body. The hot sun creeping into the treehouse and blanketing his jeans did nothing to warm his legs inside.

The animal breathed one deep sigh, then stopped. Jimmy held it still for a long time before setting it down on the wooden floor of the treehouse in the sunlight's warmth.

He sat back against the wall and pulled his legs up to his chest. The animal lay still on the floor. He saw a shadow cast on the floor over the dead rodent. He turned and saw a black bird perched on the window of the treehouse. It seemed to be looking at him, staring right through him. He lunged, swiping at it. It spread its wings and hit the sky, then disappeared beyond the window's reach.

Jimmy knelt in front of the window. The sun was bright in his eyes. He squinted. He stood and stepped around the light on the floor of the treehouse. He backed down the ladder on the tree and climbed down, the rough wooden steps digging into the soft skin on his palms.

His feet touched grass that needed mowing. He walked across the yard toward the house, head down to avoid looking at the sun. It was a bright day.

He grabbed the black handle of the back door, the screen door whining as he pulled it open. The air in the house was cool. His eyes adjusted to the dimness of the inside. He walked through the kitchen and into the hall. He turned left and opened the door to the garage, which was pitch-black. He felt for the light switch and flicked it up. No light came on. He stepped into the garage, smelling thick greasy stains on the floor and stale air.

He felt around on the wooden tool bench in the dark, the only light spilling in from the open door and the hall beyond it. He found a gardening tool that he had seen his mother use. He felt its rubber handle and touched the metal claw. There were bits of dirt crusted onto the end. He chipped it off with his fingernail, then took the tool and went back into the house, shutting the door behind him.

He opened the back door of the house and had to squint again as he stepped back into the light of the outdoors, the sun overwhelming and bright. The door snapped closed. He set the tool down at the foot of the ladder and climbed up. The animal was lying in the light of the window, just as he had left it. He knelt down and picked it up carefully. He wrapped it in his shirt and slowly climbed down the ladder.

Descending proved to be more difficult than ascending. He made it to the bottom, picked up the gardening tool and started off towards the woods.

He found the spot where he had chased the animal into the log. The log hadn't moved. He bent down at the foot of the thin tree and set down the tool. He unwrapped his shirt and laid the animal on top of a pile of leaves. He noticed a speck of blood on his shirt, visible on one of the white stripes. He felt the cold in his body again, then shook it off and began to pull aside dirt with the tool.

He yanked the claw towards him until he had dug a hole about a foot deep. His wrist and forearm were covered with the soft mud that was almost black. He set the tool aside and wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving a wide stain on his right leg. His hands, reasonably clean, picked up the animal and lowered it into the hole.

He laid the animal face up, its white belly looking at the sky above. Its mouth fell open. He looked at it, and decided it looked twisted and ugly in that position, so he turned it onto its side, where it looked more peaceful. He stared at it for a long time before pushing the dirt over it with his bare hands.

He stood and looked down at the dirt. He put some leaves over the freshly dug hole. He looked at the thin tree. He bent down and picked up the tool, then started off for home again.

Jimmy reentered the dark garage and returned the gardening tool to its approximate place on the wooden bench. He went back into the house. He went into the bathroom and turned on the water. He rubbed his hands clean, picking the dirt from under the nails of his fingers and washing it swirl away

down the drain. After turning off the faucet, he wiped his hands on the red towel hanging on the rack next to the sink and remembered the blood on his shirt. He looked down. The speck was still there, staring at him.

He pulled the front of his shirt into the sink and he turned the water back on. He let the water run into the basin before dipping his shirt into it. He rubbed the stain with his thumb until it slowly began to lighten. He rubbed it until his thumb felt sore, then stopped. He turned the faucet off and let go of his shirt. It fell back into place, resting against his beltline.

The drain hiccupped. He left the bathroom, turning the light off behind him. He looked out the back window at his treehouse. He didn't feel like going back out and sitting in it.

He went into the living room and sat down on the couch. He reached for the television remote and turned it on. It whined, and the picture slowly appeared. He found a replay of a baseball game from the day before and set the remote down. While listening to the crack of the bat against the ball, he stared at the remnant of the stain on his shirt. He had wiped most of it off, but it hadn't come off all the way.

HALF AND HALF

Grant Wamack

1.

Rain. It comes down hard and heavy, soaking my jacket.

“You get half now and half later, you understand?” she says.

After pocketing the oil, I say, “Yeah.”

That’s it: no goodbyes, no hellos. It’s purely business and nothing else.

Nothing else.

Midnight. I am back in my shitty apartment watching the androids on tv inject fluids into various openings. Their bodies clack against one another as they shift to different positions. I feel aroused for a moment and then dry the next.

Carefully, I fill the syringe full of black oil. I tap my vein a couple times, and then pierce it with the needle. No pain. I wasn’t designed to feel pain. Pushing down, the fluid flows into me, through me. I let out a breath and felt so much better. More efficient. For a moment it’s just me, me and the world.

Then a banging at the door, loud, unpolite. I hate people who are rude, inconsiderate fucks. I wait a minute hoping they will leave; maybe figure no one’s here. Somehow I know it isn’t going to be that easy. It never is.

I open the door; a man stood there wearing black. Black pants, black shirt,

black shades. The only thing that isn't black was his pale face and white scarf. He has the kind of face that could work with any features. A blank slate that stuck out in a crowd but was oddly forgotten in a matter of minutes. A walking paradox of sorts.

"What do you want? Don't you know it's late? People are trying to sleep," I say peevishly.

He leans his head inside and replied, "No, you don't look like you are or were sleeping." He then squeezes the rest of his body in. "You are Rick Ransom I presume."

"Yes. Why the fuck are you in my room?"

"I have a proposition for you."

"Oh, I see" I change my demeanor, become more relaxed. "You're here for business. How'd you hear of me?"

"Some of my colleagues mentioned your name in passing. They said you are reliable, and you don't ask too many questions. Is that correct?"

"Yeah, I suppose that's me, 'Mr. don't-give-a-fuck-as-long-as-you-got-the-cash'. And speaking of cash, how much you got?"

"I will offer you 10 ounces of the best oil available; it is as fine as aged wine."

I could still feel the oil coursing through my body. I felt new, reborn. The feeling would wear off soon. I needed the oil, and the oil needed me.

"You know me well. Now, I just need a few details. You know the

specifics?"

After he leaves, leaving my mind afloat with the details, I recall the first time I saw the rust. It was a small orangish-brown patch on my foot. I assumed it was dirt, so I tried brushing it off. Only problem was it wouldn't come off. That's when I began to worry. I thought maybe I was wrong, maybe I was seeing things. So I took a knife and chipped away part of the surrounding skin. I expected to see a vivid pink but instead there was more of the orange and brown. There were no maybes about it: I was starting to rust.

It makes me feel old, outdated. Was this how humans felt when they noticed their first grey hair? Did they feel death approaching? Did they spot his distinct touch?

I saw him; I saw the ugly sonofabitch on my foot. Not only did I see him, I felt him. I could feel him inside me, slowly gnawing away.

Many times I hear people say how death corrupts you. Changes how you think, how you function. The oil is the only thing that keeps death away for a moment, but a moment is all I need, all I have.

2.

Guns. That's what I need. Guns and ammo. I have to hit up my supplier, Tony. He makes only the best. Every year, he comes out with new models; sometimes he even lets me test the prototypes when I'm doing an easy job.

Tony runs his business in a crummy warehouse on the east side. Not too hard to find if you know where to look.

Today, the streets are bare; must be the weather. The humans are bundled up in layers trying to avoid the biting wind. They look like sacks of meat wrapped up to keep warm for dinner.

The warehouse is quiet. I slip inside the back door. That's when the light flashes, blinding my eyes. They're weak, vulnerable. I've been meaning to get them fixed, but I never do.

A moment later, my eyes become accustomed to my surroundings. Hulking figures lay in the darkness, my brothers and sisters. Tony hunched over one of them, melding new parts to its cylindrical body. He turns to me and says something. The only problem is I can't hear any of it; his mask is muffling his words. "Take that damn thing off Tony; I can't hear anything you're saying."

Tony takes off the mask, sets it aside and turns on the lights. For a moment, I'm blinded again. Everything's blurry, then Tony's face becomes crystal clear. His trademark smirk, his beady eyes, and the five o'clock shadow. "What's wrong Rick? You can't handle the light?"

"Fuck you Tony. I can handle your mom. Know that."

"I don't think so. She'd be too much for you to handle. And you should really buy some new eyes instead of wasting it all on oil."

"Don't get me started, Tony."

"Okay, okay. We wouldn't want to get your panties into a bunch. So what do you need?"

"What you got?" I ask trying to hold back my curiosity.

“Follow me.”

I follow him through a maze of shiny, metal cables hung from the ceiling like vines in a jungle. You can't walk a straight line without running into something. The area finally clears out into a space full of boxes. Without turning, Tony says, “Here we are.”

“Do you have anything that won't be too messy? Something sleek and silent, like a panther.”

“Hmm...sleek...silent...panther. I think might have a little something over here.” Tony opens a box and pulls out a black gun. It glints in the light. Right there and then, I know I have to have it.

“This gun is a new model, already tested by another one of my clients. It delivers a clean kill, little or no mess guaranteed.” Tony tried to pull off his best salesman grin.

I play along, acting like I'm interested. The gun calls out to me. “Let me hold it.”

Tony hands me the weapon. It feels light, but it also holds that certain weight that every gun needs. With my fingers I feel along the edges, nice and smooth. Then I open up the chamber and close it.

“Interesting.”

“Well, that honey is a solid twelve hundred bucks.” He looks at me, trying to figure out what I will say.

I look at the gun for another minute and flex my acting skills, frowning

my brow in deep thought. Then, "Okay this looks like it might do."

"Might? It most definitely will." He took the wad of cash out of my hand and stuffed it into his dirty overalls.

"I'll see ya around." I said.

He patted me on the back before saying, "Don't be scared to come back now."

I waved on my way out. Outside, a few more people were walking down the streets. The world was beginning to wake. That meant it was time for me to do the opposite.

3.

I sat on my bed surrounded by bottles of oil glimmering in the light. The oil flowed through my body. This was paradise.

Then the bottles began to explode. Bullets were flying left and right. I jumped off the bed and scrambled under it for cover. The oil began to flow down the sheets and onto the floor. I clutched a couple of bottles to my chest. With my free hand I pulled out my gun. I had no clue what kind it was but, like a snake, I knew it was ready and willing to strike.

Abruptly, the shooting stopped. A few shards of glass chinked loudly as they hit the floor. I felt nervous; it could have been the oil in my system or my nerves on edge or both. I tightened my clutch on the gun.

The door burst open. I could only see feet and ankles. They shuffled into the room. My room. I grew angry. My oil was gone, soaked into the carpet and

the bed. They took my life. And I was going to take theirs.

I shot a black boot, the closet target. The man yelled and fell. I rolled out from underneath the bed shooting. Shooting into fuckers I already killed.

They stood waiting for me. Their bodies were still decomposing but somehow bullet wounds from years ago were still bleeding. My finger never let off the trigger. A man in a business suit stumbled into a small table and both of them toppled over. Two women clutched each other like lovers as they fell.

The walls were decorated with holes that spoke of smoky death.

I finished off the writhing man on the floor with one shot in between the eyes. Then I shoved a new clip into my gun and shot round after round into the men and women that came through my door. Feeling exhausted and fresh out of bullets, I grabbed the boot off the floor with the foot still twitching inside. I shoved the boot into some bitch's mouth. She jumped on top of me choking as I shoved it in deeper. Drool dripped onto my face. More of the dead joined in, clawing at my body. The weight was too much, the overwhelming power of numbers. They clawed at my body, ripping me open so I could drown in my oil. Rivers of it.

Paradise.

4.

I woke up drenched in sweat. Images of the dead rose in front of my face. Their eyes were full of accusations, accusing me of wrong when I felt right.

5.

The man lived alone in an apartment. Not much different from myself. He had an addiction. Alcohol.

According to the Intel, he used to have a wife. She was taken by cancer. A natural form of corruption—one that wasn't self induced.

I looked down at my corrupted foot. Then I kicked in the door. I paused, listening for movement. It was quiet. No dogs barking, no lights on. I stepped into the darkness.

Sticking to the walls I raised my gun, finger itching to pull the trigger. I moved into the kitchen, staying on the balls of my feet. Something glinted. An ocean in a bottle. Must be alcohol.

I paused. Something wasn't right. I could feel it in my gut, pure instinct. Out of the corner of my eye something else glinted. Not a bottle this time, a metallic bat. Instinctively, I pulled the trigger, and the gunshot was the last thing I heard.

6.

My eyes opened. Five light bulbs swirled around in a circle and converged into one hanging from the ceiling. My head felt wrong. No pain, just a slight irritation, an annoyance.

A bat sat on the table. Immediately, I tried to grab it but I grabbed nothing. Instead I felt ropes dig into my wrists and ankles as they held me in place. I was forced to sit. "What the hell?"

"That's what I should be asking you." A man walked into the room and closed the door behind him. He was old, about fifty, but in shape. Underneath his stained wife-beater, muscles bulged. I didn't notice what he had in his hand until he began to unscrew the cap from the glass bottle. He brought it to his lips and drank. The whole time his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. After wiping his mouth he said, "I needed that. Why did you break into my house?"

I decided to give him the truth, "To kill you."

"To kill me? Well it doesn't look like you're in much of a position to kill anybody."

"It's all a matter of perspective."

"Don't give me that bullshit. I hold the bat and your life in my hands." He gestured, putting his free hand out, palm up.

He had a point, a good point. Tied up, there was no way I could grab my extra gun attached to my ankle. I had to figure out a way to distract him. Get some time to think, to plan. I had a job to do, and I planned on finishing it.

I stared at the bottle sitting on the table. Inside, the liquid sloshed slightly. Maybe I can get him to drink some more, get him drunk enough to pass out. It shouldn't be too hard.

The man bent close to my face. I could smell the alcohol on his breath—strong and heavy. "You don't want to talk huh? That's alright with me. I'll do the talking." He took another drink; it dribbled down his neck and onto his chest.

“Let me tell you a story. Would like to hear a story?” He paused for a second. “Guess what? I don’t give a damn if you want to hear it or not.”

I stared at his sagging face. He had that look in his eyes, the same desperate, slightly pathetic look that all addicts shared. I could almost see myself sitting across the table. Almost.

Out in the hallway, I could hear little footsteps. Before the man could start his story, the distraction I prayed for padded its way into the room. Careful to avoid to me, a Chihuahua skirted around the edges of my chair and ran to its owner.

“Hey, Gore. What’cha doin’? You hungry boy? You hungry, huh? I bet you are.” the man said in a high pitched voice. The dog’s tail wagged in reply.

The man got up and started for the hall. He looked at me and said, “You better be here when I get back.”

I nodded my head. I had to find a way out of this chair, and I had to do it now. I looked at floor for anything sharp, but there was nothing but a few empty bottles, dirt, and dust bunnies—all of them useless.

There was a window, though. Only if I could find some use for it. Maybe the bat.

I tried to move the chair. At first it wouldn’t budge, but after a few seconds it began to slide inch by inch. It seemed to scream every inch of the way. If I had a heart, it would be pounding right now. Luckily, I wasn’t built for compassion.

I ripped the ropes off my hands and quickly untied my feet. I grabbed the bat and slammed it into the center of the window. It broke easily. I imagined the man would break just as easy. Shards flew in and out the window. I heard feet running down the hall. I slipped into the shadows holding the bat by my side.

The man stumbled inside holding a bottle in his hand. He looked everywhere but the window. "Where the fuck are you?" Then he took a step towards the window, feeling the wind chill his skin. He looked out at the city. You could almost hear it take a sharp intake of breath in anticipation.

After a few minutes he turned around, took another drink and doubled over vomiting chunks onto the floor. I made my move. I took the bat and smashed it into the center of his face. Jackpot. He flew backwards, holding his face. His back arched. It was if he just ate an uppercut. The man fell on his back; blood began to flow out his nostrils. I slammed again and again till I could hear his breathing slow to a ragged gasping. He coughed up some blood.

I walked down the hall grabbed some beers from the kitchen and emptied them in the sink. I came back and set them down on the table. It would give the scene some authenticity, a touch of the real. Just another drunk suicide in the city. Carefully, I shoved shards of glass into his face. Then I moved his body closer to the windowsill and laid him down on his back. I noticed a bulge in his pocket. I dug in and pulled it out. My gun. "If you don't mind, which I know you don't. I'll be needing this. Thank you." I shoved it into my back

pocket. I took the beer that he dropped earlier and carefully positioned it three feet away from his right hand. It's the details that count.

I sat down in a chair and pulled out my cell phone. I sent a text to the saved number: "it's done."

7.

Sirens wailed in the distance. The cops. What the hell were they doing here?

A gun and the flash of a bat flickered in my mind. The gunshot. Someone must have heard it, a neighbor or a passerby.

Shit. There always has to be a good citizen to fuck things up.

I looked out the window. Blue and red lights were flashing a couple of blocks over. That gave me hardly any time. But any time was better than no time. I had to make do with what I had.

I hurried out the front door and heard wheels screech to halt. As I ran down the alley, I could hear car doors slam. Shouting. All of it made me quicken my pace. It gave me the drive, the motivation to haul ass. Just when I thought I was out of the clear, a cop darted out of the shadows.

The cop was overweight. He held his gun steady as big drops of sweat rolled down his red face. I thought about making a run for it. I knew the cop didn't have a chance in hell of catching me but the bullet more than likely did. I waited and let things play out.

A drop of sweat slid down the cop's eyelid into his eye. He went to wipe it

away with his free hand. In a fraction of a second, I whipped my gun out and let off one shot. It hit him right between the eyes. He fell backwards and his finger inadvertently pulled the trigger. A shot rang out, alerting all the cops to my position.

I ran.

I ran like hell. Darting in and out of shadows. The whole time I listened. I kept listening to see if I would hear footsteps catching up but all I heard was the cold silence that dogged me every inch of the way. It was almost worse than the cops. Almost.

As I walked up the steps to my apartment building, I considered buying some oil. It would calm me down, cool my nerves. I decided against it. Sleep. Rest. Whatever you want to call it, that's all I wanted. The oil could wait. Right now I had my mind set on sweet dreams and nothing more.

Nothing more.

ADDISON

Paulina Guzewicz

The first few notes of “Silent Night” floated from the radio. The sound bounced off the metal walls behind the two front seats of the stripped van my father used to deliver antique furniture for his restoration business. I hated the way the music echoed like that, unless the back was packed or the car was in motion. I shuffled forward on the seat and reached out to turn down the volume to see if the quiet from inside now matched the stillness outside. When only the soft murmur of the engine could be heard, I leaned back, nestling against the cold leather upholstery, and waited, trying to hold my breath until it warmed up because I hated how the condensation looked like cigarette smoke. It reminded me of the Marlboro Reds that had caused my father’s lung cancer a few years back.

Staring at the front of the house, I watched as the Christmas lights twinkled on the tree peeking through the front window of the brick slit-level. The car engine hummed a sleepy tune.

A screen door slammed in the distance, directing my gaze toward Dianca who was now emerging with my father leaning on her shoulder. He stumbled out the door laughing loudly while trying to hug his friend Stanley goodbye. Dianca said she would drive, but he refused to get in the car with her claiming

that she was not sober enough.

I sat in the passenger seat and watched as they argued out under the falling snow. Dianca was inching away, trying to avoid a larger argument. This scene was all too familiar to me. I only wished they would get in the car. I opened the door and jumped out, placing my hands on my hips. "Dad, can we go already?" Without a definite response, he said something to my stepmother under his breath and turned toward the van. He got behind the wheel while Dianca got in toward the inside of the passenger seat and I slid in behind her squeezing myself between her and the door, both buckling ourselves into one seat. As the car backed out of the drive things seemed to calm down so I leaned forward to turn up the music, hoping it would help me fall asleep on the long ride home. My eyes drifted to the window and were again glued to the falling snow and the white street ahead before beginning to droop.

This night hadn't been bad. It was one of the better ones. At least now we could retrace our steps and get back to the city without getting lost like we had on the way to the party. My father didn't ask for directions. He never admitted when he was lost. But the night was fine if not even a little boring and now everything was OK. I was OK. Tonight had been different. It hadn't been like most of the other times. No fighting. No fighting had been nice for a change.

But something didn't feel right at this moment, and my eyes kept fluttering open at the distraction. We couldn't have gone too far because the van still had not reached the town's main road. It was sliding around on the road and even

though my father was driving very slowly, it was clear that he didn't look good enough to be behind the wheel. The road was slippery because of the ice and snow, but it was more than the road that was affecting his driving. I reached for my stepmother's hand but found it to be lifeless. Dianca again offered to drive but was denied, this time with a firmer tone. My stepmother then tightened her grip on my hand. My father's head was bobbing from side to side, and his hands were slipping off the wheel. This was not good. He began singing to the radio, and I reached over to turn it down. He hadn't noticed.

It wasn't until we were about six blocks from Stanley's and passing a McDonald's that I became convinced we were in more trouble than I had thought. I wiped my palms against my coat and began taking deep breaths trying to count the lamp posts as they passed by. When we had passed a sign saying Business District I knew this was not the right way. The highway was in the other direction.

"I think we're going the wrong way Dad," I said. No response. I hadn't actually gotten the words out and tried again, "Ummm. . .D-Dad. I think we might be lost. This isn't the way we came. . .we. . .we need to turn around." The only response I received was a tighter squeeze from her stepmother's icy hand. My father continued to mumble angry remarks under his breath as he tried to steady the car.

Seconds, maybe minutes passed, and I could only sit in the front seat paralyzed in a daze. There was a rhythmic thumping in my head as I began

biting the dry skin on my lower lip. We had now passed about twenty lamp posts, each covered with red-bowed garlands and white lights, but I couldn't keep count of the exact number. There was another Business District sign coming up. Or is it the same one? I didn't know until the van drove by the same barred windows of Tony's Liquor for the third time that we had been driving around the block. From a distance I heard Dianca convince my father to pull into a gas station.

The gas pumps were abandoned except for a small red sedan sitting at the pump across from us. My father put the van in park and fumbling for the door handle, stumbled from his seat onto the pavement a couple feet below. My head moved automatically as I followed him into the convenience store and my eyes brushed passed the red car that revealed a man emerging from the driver's seat. A frizzy haired woman sitting on the passenger side motioned at him and he reached down by his seat to pull a lever before getting out.

He walked to the trunk and dug around in the back for a while before pulling out a worn blanket with a pastel pattern of the Cabbage Patch Kids on it. Shutting the trunk he walked over toward the front of the car and opened the back door. Two little kids were spread out on the grey cloth seat: a red haired girl in pig tails and a boy wearing a black floppy-eared hat leaning against each other for support. The man shook out the blanket before covering them. He carefully tucked in the edges around their small shoulders and legs, patting them both on the head.

My father was talking to the clerk and waving his hands around when I looked back toward the convenience store. Maybe he had gone to ask for directions but when he came back out seconds later he was holding a fresh pack of Marlboro Reds. He could barely walk straight, and it took him three times to hoist himself back into the van, but he remembered to buy his cigarettes.

I peered over at my stepmother, who had loosened her grip and was now sitting passed out next to me with her head drooped to one side. It was just me and dad now. I watched as he fumbled with the keys, trying and missing and trying again to fit the right one into the ignition. He switched off the radio and cursed at the sky. After a few attempts the van jerked into motion. We pulled out of the gas station driving along the sidewalk for several feet before he maneuvered the car back into the street. The light ahead switched from yellow to red, and he slammed on the brakes making the wheels screech through the slush as the van came to halt in the middle of the intersection. It was quiet. The town was empty and still except for the flashing red and white lights of a cop car stopped on the side of the road a block down from the van. I gripped the door handle, sliding my sweaty hands against the release. I needed out. But how? When? He looked so angry, and I didn't dare say anything now.

The van began moving again, slowly swerving around on the road and coming close to hitting a lamppost along the way. We stopped again at the next intersection where a blue sign indicated the entrance to I-294, and I stared

transfixed at the glowing red stop light. The gaze was broken only seconds later when a squad car rolled up next to us in the far left lane. This was it. This might be my only chance to escape. I loosened the neck of my jacket, still rubbing the door handle with my thumb. My fingers were tapping against it as my eyes shifted nervously from the squad car to the light and back again. I ran my hand anxiously over the belt buckle and then heard it unclick.

The sound amplified in the silence. Dianca stirred and shifted her position. I looked over at the cop car then back at the light, weighing my options once again and debating my next move. It has to be done. I took one last look at my father and then bolted out the passenger door.

My feet carried me around the front of the van and across two lanes to the side window of the squad car. "You have to help me," I yelled while knocking on the window. The policeman inside looked stunned and was delayed in rolling down the window. "M-m-my father and stepmother are both really drunk, please help me. . .he can't drive." I didn't know what I was doing, but it felt like my only option. The cop looked from me to Dianca, who had now gotten out the van and was demanding to know what I was doing. The cop picked up his radio and called for back up through his transmitter as he stepped out of the car and walked over to the van, just as my father slumped down from his seat into the snow.

"Good evening. Is there a problem here?"

"No sir wir jus tryin ta get hum," I couldn't even recognize my father's

voice. The officer continue to ask questions, and I watched my father respond but my hands and face were so cold now and the drone from the highway was becoming louder that I couldn't understand what was being said.

Two squad cars pulled up at that moment and as both the policemen walked over to survey the scene, one was asked to take care of the little girl. He gently took my hand and guided me into the back seat of his car, shut the door and got into the driver's seat. He turned around to look at me, and his leather jacket made a squishing sound against the fabric of the seat.

"I want you to know that you're safe. You did the right thing. Now, you're going to have to take a deep breath for me so that I can ask you some questions. Is that OK?" I focused on the shiny rectangular badge he wore on the left side of his jacket then nodded, inhaled deeply, and began answering the officer's questions.

I told him my name, that I was twelve years old and that I was visiting my father for the weekend. When he asked if there was another family member he could call, I said my mom and then tried hard to remember the number. All I could do was reach into my coat pocket and hand him a laminated card with a list of emergency numbers on it. I tried to stay focused on the officer's conversation with my mother but only heard him introduce himself before I slipped away again, repeating in my how much I wanted to go home. I began humming to "Silent Night" and looked at the flashing lights of the squad cars outside as they blinked. Red. Blue. Red. Blue. I tipped my head from left to

right along with the lights.

Fluffy, wet snow continued to fall all around, softening the sharp lines of the deserted town. I watched as the officer took out a glistening pair of handcuffs and, standing behind my father clasped them tightly over his wrists. I saw him wince slightly as they snapped into place and looking up he stared directly into my eyes. He shook his head. He was never wrong, I thought, and now he was shaking his head at me. The officer guided him and Dianca into the back of his squad car and drove off with us following in the car behind them.

As we turned the corner the Addison Police Station came into view, and I now understood why back up had been so quick to respond. The officer I was with parked his car in the front and escorted me into a vacant waiting room as my father and stepmother were taken in through a separate entrance at the back of the building. The officer pointed to a seat and asked me to wait a minute until he returned.

I sat in a large room with a tall ceramic molded ceiling and a black and white checkered tile floor. It was silent except for the soft buzzing of fluorescent lights. I took a seat in the very middle of a row of chairs and stared straight through a pair of glass doors down a long corridor and waited. There were flyers posted up on a bulletin board across from the chairs. Some were acquiring about missing people and others were warrants for arrest. I wondered if my father had ever done anything bad enough to get his picture

up on a board like that one. My fingers began tapping on the plastic seat next to me at the thought.

The officer returned a few minutes later and asked to help him fill out a police report. The story was told once again. I was trying hard to remember what had happened even though much of it didn't feel real. All the while he encouraged me to speak by telling me I had done the right thing, that I had saved three lives that night and should be proud of being so brave. "Your mother is on her way. I have to go take care of this paper work, but someone will be by soon to check on you," said the officer. "Are you gonna to be alright sitting here for a bit?" All I could do was give a small nod. He then got up, and I watched as his squeaky black boots squeegeed the tile floor as he left.

There was screaming in a room somewhere in the building, but it was difficult to make out what was being said except the words liar and drunk. I knew that voice. It blared again and again through a door to my right only a few feet away, but the sound echoed about as if it was from far away. I sat with unflinching gaze, staring through the glass doors not knowing exactly how I should be feeling. I looked down at my Minnie Mouse watch through swollen eyes; it looked blurry. I waited and stared. The room was cold, and the only time I was able to move was to tuck my hands under my legs to keep them warm. My legs dangled from the seat as I continued staring checking my watch when I thought enough time had passed. My mom still had not arrived. No one had come by in the last hour to check on me. I began counting floor tiles.

"THUMBS ^" 2 < TXTING

Christina Donnelly

☺ hey! omg u will not believe what i heard today! heather went out w/some guy @ the game yesterday. And she has a b/f! Her b/f is so sweet. y is she 2timing him? that is so wrong. :-/." Does that type of writing look familiar? If it doesn't, what rock have you been under for the past ten years? Text messaging has officially been around since the 1990s, though teenagers did not begin to discover it until the 2000s¹. Now, both young and old are text messaging on the way to work or school, during school hours, at lunch, in the middle of movies, and even in the middle of the night.

Text messaging affects everyone and everything including relationships, people's lives, the media, and even reality. Never mind how irritating it can be to listen to people clicking away. The average person believes it is another way to simply communicate. Well, that is not all it is about, just like driving a car is not only about transportation.

... Text messaging is literally taking over people's lives. Some people barely stop to breathe. We might as well add text messaging to the list of common addictions. My roommate, for example, has become a text messaging addict. Every time I turn around she is clicking those buttons as fast as her fingers

1. Kalliokoski, Matti. "The birthplace of text messaging" *Breakthroughs - 90 Success Stories from Finland* (2007): Virtual Finland. Apr 2008. Finland's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, New York. 1 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.finlandun.org/netcomm/news/category.asp>>

can go. She wakes up in the middle of the night when her cellphone signals another text. Most of the time I have to tell her the next morning that she was messaging, again, in her sleep. Her mind has adapted incredibly well, so that she may only have a faint memory of the action. Multitasking could be her middle name.

Any task she performs is always accompanied by text messaging. She will stand in her robe, fresh from the shower, text messaging. As I find her unlocking the door, she is text messaging. I do not know how she can get through school. She always needs to stop and take a break from working and begin messaging. I would think the interruptions would be hard to handle, especially over a continuous period.

The point is text messaging needs to be reduced. So, I propose this: each time someone is found text messaging, a single finger will be forcibly and publicly removed. Begin with the fifth finger, also known as the “pinky finger.” And now, kiss goodbye to your inclusion in high society. You will no longer be able to hold a cup of tea in the proper position with the “pinky finger” pointing outwards.

For a second offense, one’s ring finger will be forcibly and publicly removed. You might think, “Oh no big deal, so they lose a finger;” however, without a ring finger how will one marry? Where do you put the wedding ring now?

After a third offense, the middle finger will be forcibly and publicly

removed. No more “flicking off” someone who cuts you off on your way to work.

And now, if you are still foolish enough to text, you lose your pointer finger. How do you expect to “make a point” now? Then again, in order to make a valid point, one usually shows a certain level of intelligence. If one is on his or her fourth offense for text messaging, one’s intelligence level could be called into question.

The grand final punishment will be loss of the thumb. When the thumb is removed, well, “Thumbs up” to less text messaging!

Although my proposed schedule of punishments might be severely criticized as unethical, one must admit that accidents occurring as a result of text messaging are not ethical either. Take, for example, the train accident in Los Angeles on September 12, 2008. A Metrolink engineer appeared to be text messaging two teenagers about their local television station during operation of the train carrying 220 people. His train collided with another when he failed to stop at a stop signal. The engineer was too busy text messaging. As a result, 25 people ended up dead due to his carelessness. Worse yet, about 70% of the passengers were either hurt or killed all because of some guy who wanted to text on the job. As we continue to text message, we are simply disregarding these deaths. After this incident, The California Public Utilities Commission prohibited anyone from even using a cell phone on the job².

²“Commuter train engineer didn’t apply brakes in fatal crash” CNN. 17 Sep 2008. Cable News Network. 1 Oct. 2008 <[http://](http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/09/16/california.train.collision/)

www.cnn.com/2008/US/09/16/california.train.collision/>

In addition to finger removal, each offense should be a matter of public record. A TUI (Texting Under the Influence), TWI (Texting While Intoxicated), or TWW (Texting While Walking) could be cited. Text messaging while under the influence is just as dangerous as operating a car or machinery while under the influence. Walking on the sidewalk, while messaging, could cause one to weave in and out of traffic, therefore possibly causing harm to oneself and others. Messaging while roller blading, biking, skateboarding, or even surfing should be considered a violation. Three or more offenses should result in required attendance at a Texters Anonymous (TA) class to learn the appropriate boundaries for the use of text messaging. Each class would consist of expressing each participant's dilemmas involving text messaging as well as informational videos about the effects of messaging with poor judgment.

The easiest way to avoid this completely is to message less and call more. However, the media continues to encourage text messaging. We have known for generations that the media always gets what it wants: to make people purchase unnecessary products or services so they can make money. As a result, people are not only spending more money, but they are also losing their desire to personalize letters, phone calls, and everything else that once held a personal touch. "In the olden days" or rather ten years ago, people would want to pick up the phone and call their best friends to brag about meeting their celebrity crushes. Receivers had a better understanding of their feelings. However, text messages have a tendency to be misinterpreted. Why not just

make it easier on everyone and contact people the old fashioned way? Let's just skip the guessing games and use "real" communication.

Speaking of games, what about the "secret text messaging" game in the classroom that professors are supposed to be oblivious to? At least a quarter of the class is text messaging their friends about the Friday party that got out of hand. And students participating in this act are always participating in this game in the back of the room. They think that by shifting to the back of the room professors will not realize they are playing on their phones. Well, I have news for them, the professors have not been isolated from modern technology. They may not make it apparent, but they do know when you are and are not listening. They lecture hundreds of students each day who do the same thing, hence text messaging has been added to plagiarism and cheating policies. Text messaging was not even mentioned in any academic dishonesty information until recently.

Why not eliminate distractions by putting into play my solution? How can one text if one has no fingers? People would definitely think twice about text messaging their best friend about the guy that backed up into the port-a-potty with his pink, vintage Bug. This solution may seem harsh at first glance, however it would definitely prevent future text messaging. And if people learn to message less, then no one needs to lose any fingers. Hopefully the threat alone would decrease the number of times anyone feels the need to text. However, if it does come down to carrying out this punishment, everyone will

learn soon enough that an old fashioned phone call might not be such a bad idea.

Clearly, the government would never allow this. No, they would rather see severe train wrecks occur left and right. In order to save face with the government, I have created three alternative solutions that may or may not be applied already.

First, laws can be passed to prevent people from text messaging while driving any sort of machinery, including those powered manually (bicycles, roller blades, skate boards, etc.). People will become aware of what is happening around them and react appropriately when necessary. Anyone violating these laws will be required to pay a fine, similar to any other violation.

Second, cellphone companies can enforce limits on the length of a text message. People have no need to write pages of texts at one time. If they do, then they need to be educated on how to simply pick up the phone and call. Limiting the message duration will cause people to stop, look up, and pay more attention to their surroundings. Without a limit, their heads are always angled downward, which could potentially cause them to walk into someone or something. Not only would a restricted length of correspondence be beneficial to the customer, but it would be sent through the system much faster. Just as with email, sending a lengthy message or attachment delays the arrival. Creating a length boundary will satisfy both the texter as well as government

officials.

Lastly, the government can require a surcharge on text messaging.

Thus the price of messaging is increased so a set amount can be sent to the government. The government will then use this money to fund classes and increase awareness of the effects of text messaging. This would not necessarily have immediate positive effects, but it may help in the long run. For example, once the government became more aware of cigarettes, they required students to be educated about it early on. Once they figure out that text messaging has become harmful, they will require students to be educated on the issue.

You might ask, how can such a small thing have such an effect on us? The answer is as simple as the issue. We, as customers, are allowing text messaging to manipulate our way of life. Text messaging is an addiction, a drug. We cannot get enough of it; we eventually overdose, or rather exceed our limit each and every month. Continuous exposure increases our tolerance which then begins to affect our sense of reality. No one wants future generations to wake up to TWW or TWI. In order to eliminate that possibility, our generation needs to create boundaries. Too much of anything is never good.

The editors would like to republish last year's Editor's Choice Award winner for Nonfiction, 'Letters from Thailand,' as it was misprinted in the 2007/2008 issue.

LETTERS FROM THAILAND

Lionel Newman

May 21, 2007

Dear Universe,

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

toothless roadside vendors selling chickens, hairy purple fruits, and fake gold teeth—multiplied by the combined emotion of all my dreams from the last seven years. I feel Thailand.

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

I had trouble entering paradise. First, I had to wait in line at Customs among hundreds of people. When it was finally my turn to see the middle-aged brown man at the desk wearing flat glasses filled with a demanding glare, he asked to see my Immigration Card. I hadn't filled it out to be honest, I wasn't

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

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

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

"Pick one," he said.

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

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

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

feel my Thai half shining.

Sincerely,

Singto

May 25, 2007

Dear Humanity,

I believe that you began as one mind. There was only thought and emotion. But the mind split into two, and then the branches continued to grow. Here came the need for an absurd activity, insufficient by nature--to express the mental and universal with the physical. That is, using a word to represent a concept. In this inherent subjugation of the infinite to the finite, thoughts and conceptions had to be bound and packaged into neat sounds and syllables for the reception of other minds. But this diverging was inevitable because everything follows that pattern of splitting, separation, and development into separate things. Thus, different planets form, different species evolve, different languages develop, different civilizations rise and conflict, a boy asks his mother what a word means, a bird in Montgomery sings the same song as his cousin in Tiananmen in a different dialect, and ultimately each mind sprouts a different perception. We're happy with the things that bring us back to singleness: the glimpses of universality. Music, art, literature, the supernatural--they all unify us by breaking down boundaries between ideas, digging back to the roots of a whole that is far greater than the sum of its individual parts.

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

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

“My Humps,” on a stage adorned with hanging strobe lights and girls wearing tight clothes dancing in unison. She’s by far my best friend here (alright, my only friend).

A couple nights ago Jas took me out to eat with her friends. Friendship is sacred in Thailand. The first time I saw two girls holding hands crossing a busy street caught me off guard. But when I began seeing it frequently, I realized that friendship is an intimate bond—a mother will refer to her daughter’s friend as daughter (the same goes for sons) and men walk around with their arms hanging heavily over each others’ shoulders, like brothers. Jas took us to my favorite restaurant, Fuji, a Japanese place with high, blue glass walls embedded with streams of black and neon red; we took off our shoes before sliding into the soft cushions of the black marble booth that reflected the bright lights. Jasmin and her friends buzzed and radiated the way Thai people do when they’re with loved ones. I sat on the same side of the table as my cousin, at the far end next to the wall. Leaning on my elbow, I picked at my spicy papaya salad while thinking about my friends back home, having already given up on trying to keep up with the Thai conversation relentlessly firing across the table. The papaya salad was good.

Thai fruits are fantastic. And it’s the rainy season so there are plenty of them. My favorite one is mankute, which foreigners call mangosteen--a small purple ball with green leaves that feel like plastic, and soft white wedges inside like an orange. There’s a funny story that native Thais tell each other about

the name that foreigners call it. Supposedly, one day an explorer came here and happened upon this fruit. He asked a native what it was called, and the Thai answered, "Mankute."

"What, mango?" inquired the explorer.

"Mankute."

"Mango?"

"MANKUTE."

"Uhhh, mango?"

"Mango? Sahteen!" answered the Thai angrily.

And so this swear "sahteen," which means something to the effect of "I'll kick your fucking ass," was dutifully recorded by the white man.

I feel guilty laughing at this story, though. It's true that the more insider information I get, the more I feel like a true native Thai. But I find myself sympathizing with that oblivious foreigner on his conquest for the exclusive truths of Thailand.

Until the Future,
Singto

June 9, 2007

Dear America,

After eating some ridiculously spicy food last night, and foolishly trying to eat the leftovers for breakfast this morning, I feel obligated to keep you from

making the same mistakes. As such, here is my Comprehensive In-Depth Study on the Consumption of Thai Food:

Water – will temporarily relieve both tongue and stomach

Plain White Rice – will relieve more permanently, but require copious amounts

Sweets (custards, pastes, sticky rice) – will preserve the burning (note: avoid until meal

completed; do NOT resume meal after consumption)

Milk – will relieve tongue but kill stomach

Coffee – will kill both tongue and stomach

Alcohol – will kill you

This scientific study was conducted by the method of trial and error.

A couple weeks ago I met a friend of Jas, her name is Poy. She's a rather glamorous girl, wearing black high heels and the latest designer purses to match them. They compliment her straight black hair and fierce bat eyes that point sharply down toward her nose and expand outward and up toward her ears, like a hawk's outspread wings. When the three of us had lunch together, she looked at me and frequently made giggly comments in Thai that forced my cousin into fits of food-spitting laughter. Apparently she's a very dirty girl, one of those outgoing types whose bouncy personality seems to fit nimbly in her small body. But the only way we could communicate effectively was

through my cousin, who stared at the two of us from across the table with the same wide anxious eyes as a housewife watching the latest episode of *Days of Our Lives* (or whatever the Thai equivalent is). And as you know, I speak the international language of *Body* almost as badly as I speak Thai. But maybe it's better that way; Jasmin tells me that she's "dangerous" when it comes to men, whatever that means.

Jas introduced me to another pretty friend, Nida, who I've become quite close to after many trips and dinners together. But her charm, under-appreciated by Thais, lies not in glitter and glamour, but in the rare consummation of dusk's opaque grace—her mass of black wavy hair, roasted-cocoa skin, thick black eyelashes, and the softness of her face. As a reporter for a popular English newspaper called *The Nation*, her English is quite good, and she's very friendly. In her dark, exotic accent that resonates in a minor key, she offered to help when my attempts to open a bank account proved too difficult with my inability to speak Thai.

A few days ago I took the bus to a temple called Wat Mahatat to study meditation under the only English-speaking Thai monk in the city. The buses here are almost dilapidated—they're rusty blue and grey school buses that spew enough thick black exhaust to force those who ride them to hold their breath at the longest intervals possible (but they only cost ten baht, about thirty cents). People stared at me as I boarded the number 60 bus to Ta Chang, but I don't blame them. A foreigner riding one of these local buses, not taking a

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

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

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

Until the Future,

Singto

July 23, 2007

Dear Home,

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

I think there's a certain edifying effect that ancient places have on the mind, no matter where they are. This city has been internationally recognized as a monument to "world culture," but what does that mean? It means more than simply "This place exemplifies an old civilization." World culture. It sounds unifying, as if hinting that, although there are many cultures, there's

perhaps human culture—that is, the culture of being human. Going to the roots of Thailand, I feel a harmony with humanity. It's a reminder that everything has a single origin and branches out. And looking back in towards the trunk from those branches, we see something strangely beautiful, a part of ourselves and a part of everything. I felt like I could see humanity, or the soul, or God. I think that's what this entire trip is all about. Does that make any sense? Maybe not.

Sincerely,

Singto

July 28, 2007

Dear Friend,

Last night I went out for a night on the town by myself. In the early evening I left my house, slid the metal gate shut behind me, and walked down the alley toward Sukhumvit Road past the dark-skinned taxi drivers watching a small television outside by their parked taxis, the group of five or six young women standing outside a massage parlor beckoning people passing by, and the dirty outdoor restaurant where I once saw a brown baby elephant giving rides. After walking up the cement stairs on the sidewalk to the elevated train station, I paid for my ticket and boarded the sky train to Siam Square.

Siam Square is a monument to the boom in Southeast Asia. Shopping monstrosities tower over both sides of noisy streets, countless people walk

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

The top floor is a luxurious movie theater with dim red and white lights spotlighting a lounge for couples and friends to eat and talk. I saw many foreigners like me with their families there, chatting and waiting by the bathrooms. I walked to the counter to buy my ticket for *Transformers*, and was surprised to be greeted by a man who spoke nearly perfect English. He showed me a computer chart of all the available seats in the theater; there were still many available, so I chose one directly in the middle. My ticket was only two hundred baht (about five dollars). I bought a big bag of popcorn and a large Coke from another friendly English-speaking cashier and made my way to the theater.

Transformers was surprisingly entertaining, and afterwards I took an escalator down to the food court. After wandering for thirty minutes around the massive complex of Japanese restaurants; Italian joints; and traditional Thai places with orange-spotted soups and headless, brown bodies of chickens hanging behind windows, I decided on pizza—seafood pizza with tempura,

shrimp, and pineapples. I also ordered the Thai staple beer, Singha (it also means “lion”), which I decided I liked. So after my meal I stopped at a 7-11, bought a pack of Marlboro Reds, a lighter, and a four-pack of Singha, all for less than five dollars.

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

Truly yours,

Singto

MOHINIYATTAM

Michael Keller

The goddesses dance on the hospital walls
and laugh at the doctors, each puzzled and stunned.

Such foolishness baffles the frolicking group,
who sees beneath surfaces covered in blood:

“The self is a mask that hides beneath masks,
the body a shell that hides smaller shells.

The mind is a toy abused and attached
to lives full of worries both idle and vain.”

They laugh at the blood, the flat-lining man,

They sing for the child whose face has turned grey.

And as the lights dim to end the long day,

They shrug their small shoulders and scamper away.

THE EVANESCENCE OF THE PAST—OF BARCELONA

James Baratta

It opens up from within—a fervent wisp
weaves through Labyrinths and hedged paths,
searching for the innocent who *will* forget,
like those of Verdaguer—who lust for the touch
of a delicate embrace from a loving wind.
It will bring them together, only to leave them lost.

In Dali's works of Lorca, were we lost?
Or was it in the strums and the wisps
of a guitar that roused scorched winds
in which we found our hearts and paths
as one? Or when we longed for one another's touch
under the sun of the Palau? Only to forget.

We walked through Barrio Gotico, forgetting
where and who we were. On the steps, we lost
the present, but we found the past that touched

Isabella and Ferdinand. How frail—the whisper
of a thought—so delicate and brisk—our paths
already fleeting, carried away by a calming wind.
From the ever-changing sea, the wind
gave us many reasons to forget
the world, to dwell upon Las Ramblas—its path
from mountain to Mediterranean. We lost
one another there. In awe, we gazed at the glowing wisps
of butterflies—lifeless, behind glass, and untouchable.

On the day of Sant Jordi, the roses touched
your heart while La Sombra del Viento
brought me back to hazy streets. The wisps
of the mist furred under Gaudi's lamps—the ones that forgot
dawn was here, and that dark would again be lost
in the sun—as we, as they, vanish from one another's paths.

There in the dimly lit cafes where our paths
were one, I drank the red wine of your fervid touch.
In Miro's patterns, we met one another—lost
in the simple moments of a weakening wind—
once burning, blazing, now cooling and nearly forgotten.
Together sundered, alone, now evanescent wisps.

We were the ethereal dahlia—touched by scorching winds
that uncovered our paths, yet buried us in forget.
It's all lost, as you are gone, as swift as chars the wisp.

I AM FROM

Olga Chávez

I am from the place
where cars are heard before they're seen,
Rolling in on tires like jewelry,
Cruising slowly, the whole car rattling Lil Wayne, Jay Z, some old school
R n B—Marvin Gaye, Al Greene, reminds me
We are just “*living for the love of you...*” The community, my people, poor people,
strong people, struggling every day.
I am from a block where the police fight you, we fight each other, we fight
ourselves—
my people have come a long way and have even longer to go still.
I am from the land of survivors,
Hustlers, prostitutes, crack heads, *elote* man,
I am from—where the pizza man doesn't come
I am from the neighborhood where you redecorate your living room
to avoid the blinking blue
light of police cameras—useless.
Bodies still dropping like white knuckles on my door,

A police uniform—what did you see?

I look at him like—aren't those your cameras watching me?

The west side where all kinds of people are stacked together

Littered like used bags of drugs decorated with teddy bears, bombs, \$, or skulls

I am from the streets where black electronic ankle bracelets contrast the smiling face, —I wave back, who am I to judge? We all make mistakes.

I know I am from a people with very few options.

I am from a place that brands you—*must be*

Because the tough skin you grow makes everyone think *we all* react violently,

I smile and say we only react that way to racist, classist remarks.

(Please believe you do not want my people to start.)

I am far from the thinking that moving will solve these problems,

Running from our people, our homes, ourselves.

I am from uplifted roots

I am from survivors that dare to hope.

INSIDE

Clare Foland

She ducked into secluded space, invited
The Earth, noticed, gave pliant way
to brown, plastic-static shoes.
She sat as he described Buffalo skins
Too heavy for the matriarchs
to carry, reassemble, move with the herd.
Now, taut canvas surrounds the man
white-grey hair, white-silver jacket
Buff sides spiral to an original skylight.

She looked up and saw leftover Summer
blue-border the green windy leaves,
and say a hushed goodbye.
Brisk air slipped around, and she wondered
could she sleep under funneled-winter?
But she knew it would be handled
Insightfully, Carl told her:
“It doesn’t matter how much blood you’ve got.
You’re Indian inside.”

ANDROMEDA

Sean R. Jensen

Her dark gown blinks, translucent and oblique
Among a starry sky with dancing ghosts.
Her mask delightfully wears a strange mystique:
A dull-bright glance igniting the cosmos.
We cherish this play. Time reminds the heart
Of ancient custom, wondering how we've thrived
As war and love annihilate and restart
Our lives with grief and laughter. She revives
Our sensate quests, rebuking bloodshed
As natural frames and forms merge into one,
Her gentle hand un.masks the face of death—
Not twisted; instead serene like the sun,
Her atoms ever burning, breaking free,
She draws the curtains, blacking life's decree.

A ROSE IN WINTER

Michael Keller

A sickly rose droops among frosted stones,
His pallid petals bleeding wine-dark tears.
His thornless stem's malformed spine stands alone
Among the fallen flakes. He knows the year's
Seasons, the temporary death, the birth
Again in spring; He trusts that Nature's laws
Show purposeful design throughout the earth,
That nothing has an arbitrary cause.
But summer's droughts and spider mites have left
Him unprepared for winter's frost. The cold
Gray stones allow the snow a stealthy theft;
Come spring, his rotten roots will have no hold.
And just as his faith has lulled him to sleep,
The vernal wind will sweep him toward the sea

ILLUMINATED WINDOWS

Jessica Larson

i make my departure
via lake shore drive,
by way of cigarettes,
slow jazz, and orange
autumnal streetlamps
reflecting off of still

lake michigan.

the skyline looks
its own galaxy in
the clear black night,
illuminated windows
forming constellations –
the big dipper,

orion's belt.

(somewhere, two lovers
are saying goodbye,
goodnight... they
kiss, touch, lips and
hands serving as a
subtle reminder,
leaving their mark.

they are drawn
together by something
bigger, a serendipitous
joining, cosmic forces
at work.)
the twinkling white
city fades to a glowing
blur in the rearview
mirror;

all roads lead me
back to
here.

LAURA PAUL

Ian Philpot

She flutter blinked in foreign languages declaring her false sense of self-purpose. There is no plan, only train schedules and promiscuously stamped passports.

A nauseous crush left her in the airplane bathroom long before the bomb threat prayer. Lola loves alliteration and the Uzbek language. Her unfinished

love in Kitob. Garbage City with its satisfied sorter civilians, and the wedding invitation initiated by Egyptians. "That's hospitality" she says as she sips

her coffee. Her clothes and hair smell of smoke with the passing seconds, replacing Herbal Essence with carbon monoxide. She's afraid of the pain

from her peace tattoo and has already begun

pseudonyms for her job with the NSA someday.

Laura Paul. She's not tied down to her soft spot

for the Puerto Rican boy at her work for a business

casual empire, but she'd love to like him. She

brushes her hair while reading magazines offering

make-up tips she may never experiment on her

Irish eyes, but she'd love to start hobbies that leave

her finger skin alone. Prone to purple purses she

drags with her to the city that she breathes in her

lungs and loves the fumes of public transport. She

owns the Kansas City Chiefs sweatshirt that she

got from her self-sufficient mother for Christmas.

She likens her quarter-life crisis to cleansing

products. She's stuck with the offer to teach English

in Korea with hopes to let her feelings slip away

again. But what right does she have to rid herself

of personal obligation for interests purely her own?

Lola loves the allure but never stops running.

She never stops.

CANDLE LIGHT SHADOWS

Michael Wilson

dark shapes rustle in the night and
another elongates from the bottom side
as the candlelight portrays a heated light,
where intense vibes of shadows
consume the walls in sensual strides.

the touch is full of life, but can only be seen
through one eye. in the dark
a body slides up and down
among other things protruding out
and into what looked to be the shape of
a frayed tipped, sexy nightgown.
despite how intimate it looked,
there was no way to tell
and as a boy,
I was shook but so compelled
to see beyond this hole on the side
of these front row seats

to these PG-13 ranked visuals.
my mind was focused,
eyes fixated from point of entry,
until the shadows of sweat droplets
ran down the round voluptuous
dark backside of a woman
and it was so hot that even
the walls were sweating.

to discover such an early manhood
was damn good to me.
my mind strained on some positions
and I couldn't see, literally,
how such things were plausible.
but in addition I guess
those really didn't matter.
because love isn't just a shadow.
and as a boy I can look back
to see what I'd missed
before that candlelight faded
the shadows had kissed
and whispered sweet "I love you"
before the wall touched their lips

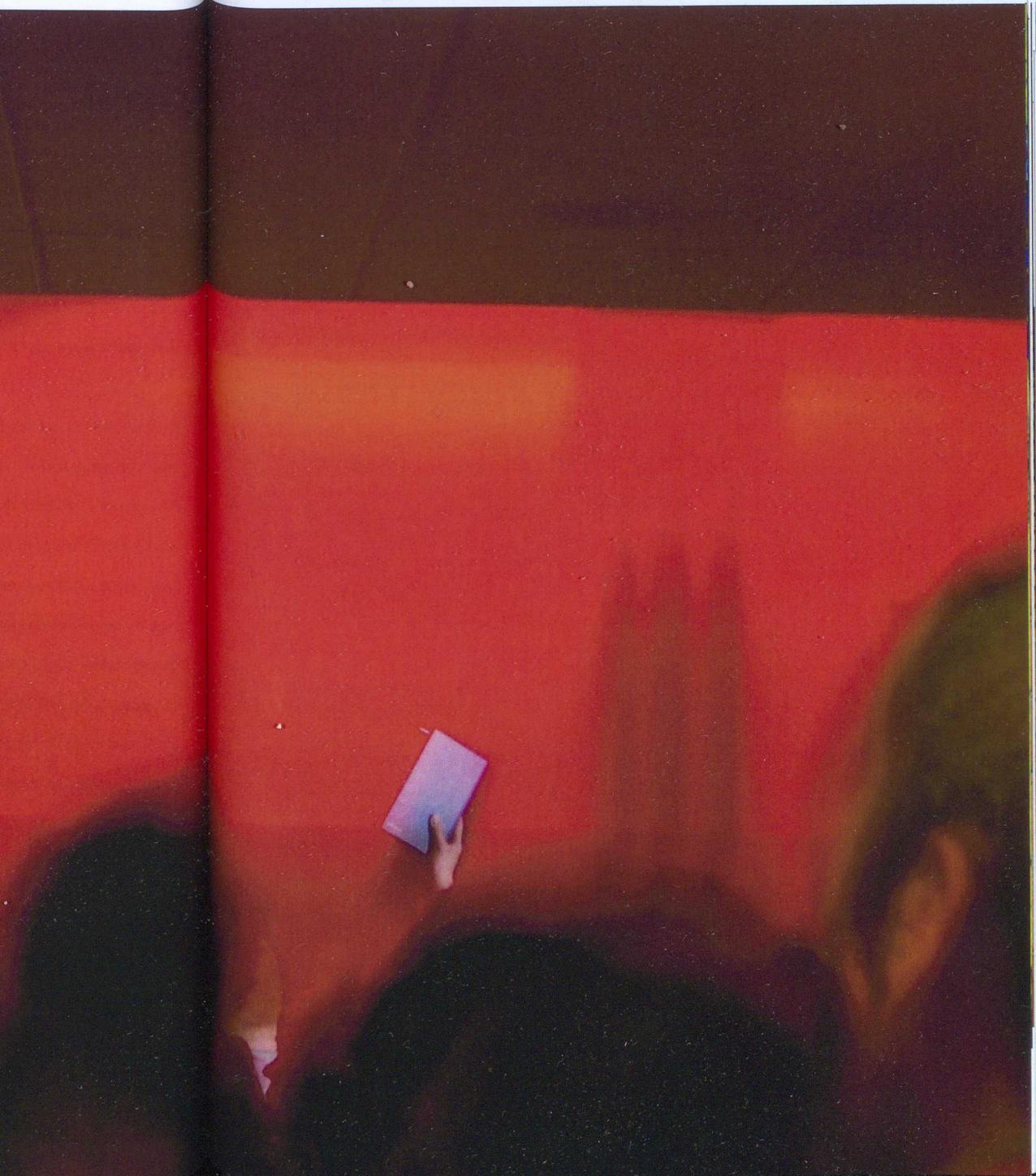
TRUE LIGHT

Tabatha Anderson

3" x 4" Digital Photo



ART





FACING MORTALITY

Devin Dion

30" x 44" Painting

ABSTRACT

Natalia Bulsza

36" x 40" Oil Painting

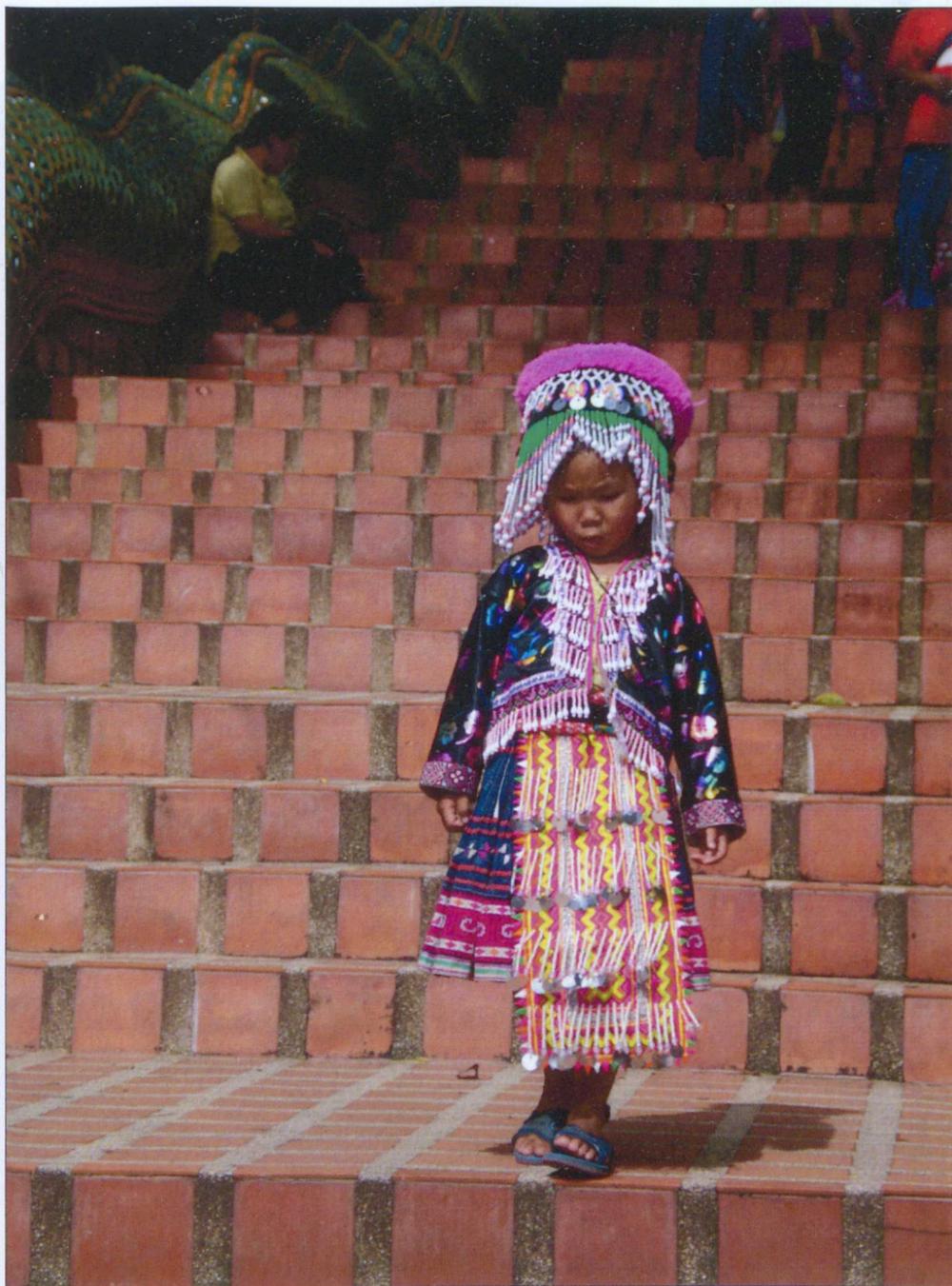


HOLYMAN

Sergio DeStefanis

24" x 32" Charcoal on Rice Paper





ON THE STEPS OF THE DOI SUTHEP

Rachel Holtz

32" x 42" Digital Photo

C

Jake Jarodsky

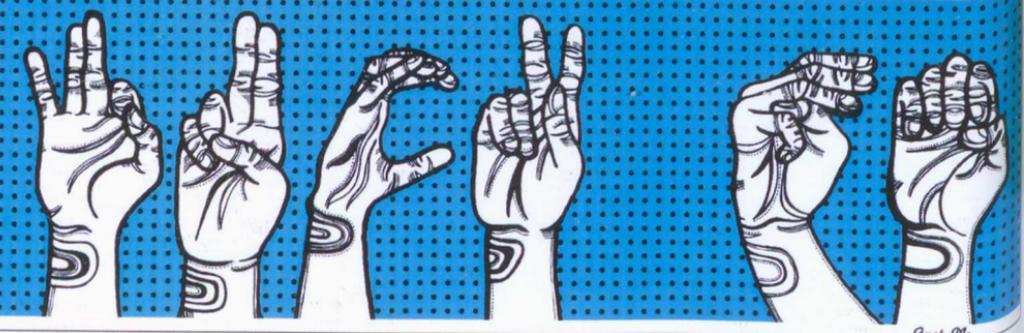
8" x 3" Ceramic Stoneware

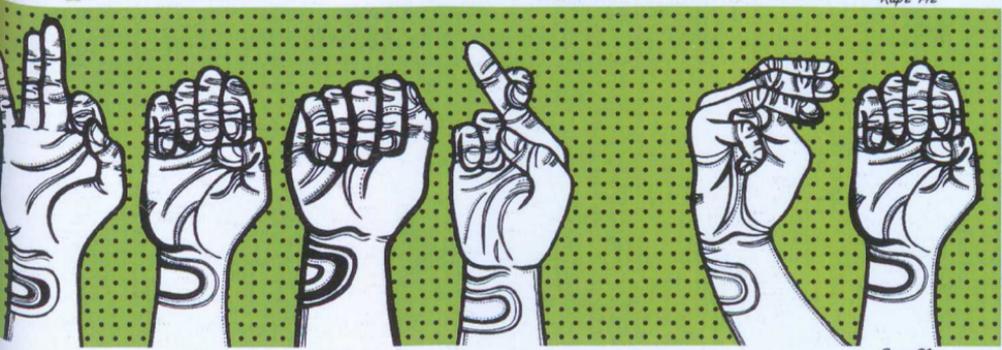
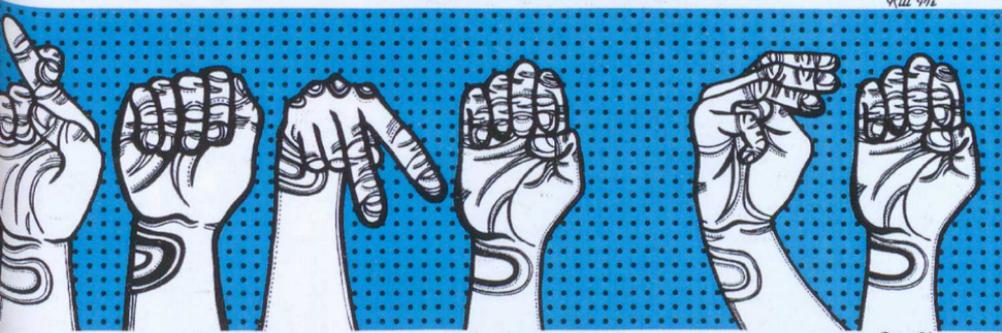


SIGN IT

Victoria Reich

11" x 17" Digital Mixed Media





IN BACK OF THE REAL

Miles Pfefferle

48" x 32" Digital Photo



LOVE AT LAGO DI COMO

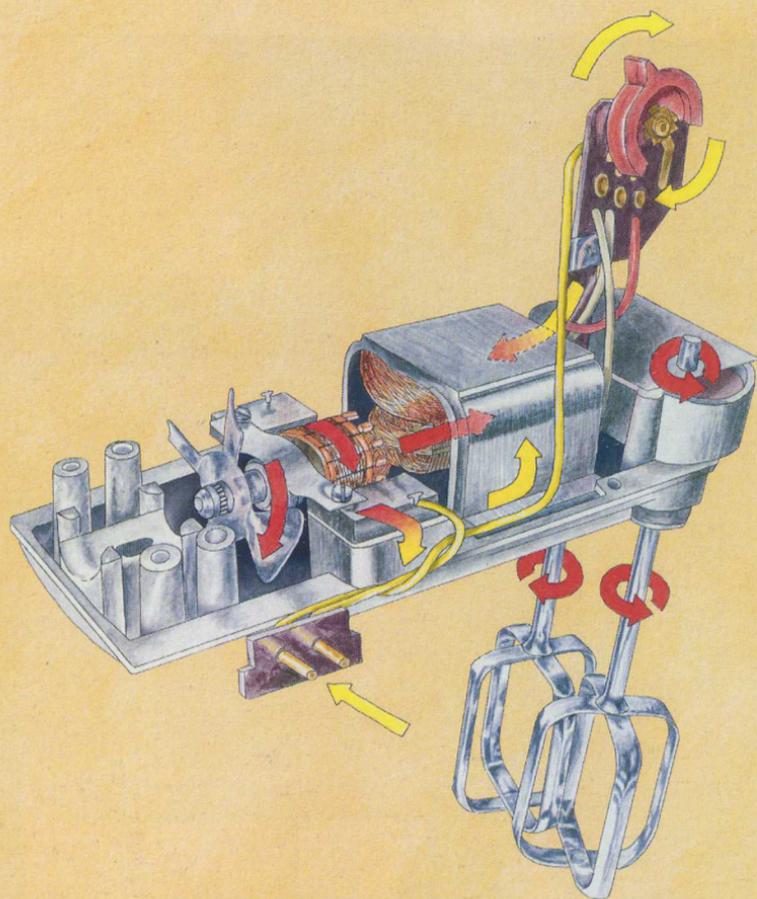
Ashley Schnabl

30" x 18" Digital Photo

PHAIR AND NAILS



LOVE AT LAST ALONG



VINTAGE HAND MIXER

Chris Renguso

10" x 10" Illustration

OF HAIR AND NAILS

Kari McDonald

Plaster



PROTEST NICE, FRANCE

Paul Spiller III

9" x 7" Digital Photo



UNTITLED

Chelsea Toth

18 3/4" x 12 3/4" Digital Photo



UNTITLED

Randi Stella

35mm Photo



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UNIVERSITY

