# PSYCHOPOMP MAGAZINE

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*Julia Carey*

# HEART ON A SLEEVE

**Echo**

Mac has her heart on her sleeve. She was born that way, the organ pumps outside of her chest, the veins and arteries stitching her left arm to her torso. Mac can't lift her left arm as a result. Her embraces are limited to only one side of her body, so she only gives half her love at one time. Her momma had carried twins, and when they cut her open to get them out, found them tangled together, Mac's arm scooped into her sister's chest, as if she had reached in after life itself, to steal what she needed. And her sister clung back, trapping Mac's arm in desperation, as if to beg her not to leave, or take away her core. Even in utero, Mac fought, grappled, for what she was afraid to lose. And she won.

The arteries and veins are calloused, worn ropes pulsing with fluid, some violet, some bright red. There is a layer of skin over the muscle, just enough to protect it, but translucent. Each chamber clenches in rhythmic spasm, a soft whoosh of fluid passing through. A silent room does not stay silent when she's there. The thumping and swishing is audible from several feet away. And then the whispers follow. She does not go to church, or libraries. Mac can't hide what's in her heart. And I'm the only person she's ever let touch it.

I pressed the pad of my index finger on the left ventricle, hoping to both maximize my experience by touching the strongest part of the heart, and spare her any threat or discomfort. Her heart bounced with thunderous and

frightening power. With one beat, I felt a shock and pulled away immediately, as if I had caught a spark from static cling. Terrified, I worried I had in fact brought electricity to our relationship, jolted her in a way that would reset her heart, or worse, stop it. By shuffling across a carpet, I could become her defibrillator. It was not the way I wanted to get to her, slay her boundaries, lower her defenses. It took years for her to tell me that no, in fact, I was her pace maker. I made everything even for her.

**Cardio**

In P.E., while the rest of us ran laps around the shellacked wooden stripes of the basketball court, Mac paced between the two keyholes. She kept the sleeves of her t-shirt rolled up to her shoulders. By high school, she ripped them off at the seams, creating a tough look that started a school-wide trend. Her legs, so pale that they were almost translucent, took leisurely strides, reaching goal after goal. The heart, a badge on her tricep, warmed the skin of her arm, flushing it a light pink. At the right angle, looking at her from the side, it seemed an elaborate and incredibly accurate tattoo. For the prom, she let me write with a washable crayola marker my name, an arrow piercing it.

She wasn't supposed to live to see a year old. Then three. At six the doctors told her the heart couldn't grow fast enough to keep up with her all the way to adulthood. Her momma bought an urn for her ashes, and it now holds Mac's father instead. Mac became accustomed to being called a miracle. Told how lucky she was to be alive. What kind of luck, she asked me, is it to be alive when no one will let me really live?

**Gram**

An adult female human heart weighs about 250 grams, or 8 ounces. Mac spelled the word "ounce" incorrectly until middle school, thinking it was "o-w-n-c-e," since she was constantly asked if the heart on her arm hurt her. On the playground as a child, I would sit on the sidewalk next to Mac and carve cities into the dirt with sticks. We would pick leaves from the bushes to landscape our imaginary towns, and carry water in our hands from the water fountain to sculpt walls and roads.

Mac and her "ouchie" were not allowed on the equipment, or in games with balls or running. For a long time, she thought "ouchie" was another person, her imaginary friend, perhaps the twin she conquered before birth. Soon she got tired of carrying Ouchie, and told her to walk on her own, screamed at her to leave her alone. The vision of another little body next to her would fade then, but the heart would stay, pounding in the place where the chest would have been.

The teacher and I found her screaming hysterically behind a tree at empty space, her right arm above her head in a tantrum. We came just as she raised her left arm in anger, and tore a hole in her aorta. There was so much blood, and she missed the rest of third grade. Through that summer, her mother tied her arm down, lashing a soft cord over her elbow and around her waist, and then covering it with a sling. It soon became clear that Ouchie was a weight she would have to learn to carry for as long as her heart chose to keep her alive.

**Angiography**

I know Mac inside and out. I have injected myself into one

vein, and followed the path of her. I have been her vessel of friendship. Of protection. Of honesty and anger. I have carried her angst, circling until it diluted and faded. I have shown her what she is capable of and how she works. I have stained her from the inside out to remind her of what she is constructed, made a map of mountains and valleys and lakes of her capillaries, the refreshing pools in her skin. Approached those violent valves and been squeezed, siphoned, pressured into spaces I couldn't wait to leave before being ejected, rejected again, and flushed along the slippery slides of her arteries to bask in her breath and be rejuvenated. She has tried to purify me, filter me, cleanse me, even expel me, but I still circle, supplying and searching her life. I have braved her colon and measured just how full of shit she can be. I have trickled into her brain and watched the lighting storm of her synapses, darkened her eyes with my trail. Eventually I make a full circle, find myself back where I started with her, only in the time it took me to travel and explore her, she has changed, and I must begin again my expedition, my search for information. Circling back, I find little fragments of myself, droplets of memories, a trace of familiarity and remembrance. I convince myself that I am re-collecting myself, picking myself back up with some sort of magnetism, so I won't feel so dispersed, so spread thin. But I soon realize I can't carry myself anymore. Whatever I pick up causes me to drop something else, and I leave a trail behind me. Besides, if I become whole within her, collect and clot in total cohesion, I will kill her. This is the way we are meant to be.

**Ablation**

Mac works at a residential home for people with developmental disabilities of various kinds. Down Syndrome

is the most common, but there are others with Klinefelter's or severe fetal alcohol syndrome. In the fall, she helps them to harvest the pecans from the acres of orchard surrounding the property on the outskirts of town. They rake the leaves, scooping the jewel-toned discards into trash cans, and carry them to the compost piles to be resurrected into fertile soil. Hours will pass while they walk the grounds, jabbing into the grass a metal pole with what looks like a sturdy slinky on the bottom to collect the nuts. She loves that the residents forget about her heart, and instead of reminding them so they don't hurt her when inevitably the searches for nuts turn into horseplay and games, she wears a protective stainless steel cup over her heart. Then, when they skip or play tag or hide and go seek, she can forget about her heart too, and just use it.

Eventually the autumn turns to winter, and their fingers and toes become numb in the cold, and since Mac can't subject her heart to such extremes anyway, they work at shelling the pecans. Patiently she shows the residents how to tap the brown, veiny shells open with a cracker, and use a small knife to pull the meat from the chambers. They pile the hearts in the middle of the table, and periodically someone comes and seals them into Ziploc bags. Many are wasted in the process. Some are crushed from the residents' overzealous tapping, and the meat is ruined. Many are eaten. The residents aren't capable of blaming their mothers for their struggles, or their genetic flaws. And Mac envies them.

The facility was built to surround a natural mineral spring in the 1900's, as it was once thought that perhaps the medicinal water would help with intelligence and motor skills. The water is slightly sulphuric, and fills a swimming pool and hot tub. Some residents are responsible for scrubbing every day the line left on the tile from the nutrients and minerals in the water. In the summer, they can open the

sliding doors to the desert air and use it like a recreational pool. It is also possible for the public to buy memberships to swim there, as long as they understand and respect the hydrotherapy purposes.

Mac waits for the last class to finish, watches the residents bounce on their toes during water aerobics and sing along to the Michael Jackson songs the instructor plays while they exercise. They splash each other and giggle, and always have to be reminded not to run once they get out and towel off. With the natatorium quiet, Mac threads a string bikini through the veins and arteries of her arm, ties a bow under her other armpit to hold the top in place, tracing the same place around her torso the rope her mother once tied around her in grade school. She eases into the waist-deep water one step at a time, her tiptoes on the tile, becoming accustomed to the temperature, and then inches in her heart carefully until it is completely submerged. Beneath the layer of skin, the heart faintly turns a little blue with the coolness of the water, but throbs strongly in response. Then she wets her neck, her body relaxing into the lowered temperature, while her jugulars acclimate. She steeps herself, finally allowing the water to tickle her head, and with a deep breath, submerges.

Eyes closed, Mac can hear the faint whir of the filter circulating the water. The slap of the gentle waves against the tile. And her heart, the pumping amplified and resonating. But she can't feel it. All of her has become weightless, her face lost in the seaweed of her hair, her legs slightly crossed. Hanging, she floats still and calm, not letting even a bubble escape, until she can't hold it back anymore and has to resurface. She'll repeat this several times until she sees her nail beds have turned blue, and then will pull herself up the steps and shiver her way to the hot tub. She isn't supposed to get into Jacuzzis, but she lowers in just to her hips, and drops

only her hands in the rumbling water. This is her most private secret, her clandestine trips to the illegal hot tub. The heat thins her blood and stresses her heart, but she reasons she needs to raise her temperature just a little, and doesn't stay long. Only once has she arched her back, kept her left arm holding the arm rail, and dipped her hair, feeling the delight of rushing water against her scalp.

**Diastole**

After any period of intense activity, the body naturally wants to rest. It sinks into the bed or chair. The muscles release away from the bone, soften, making space. And into that space, the soul refills, replenishes the will to move again. The need to fight. Curiosity.

Mac resists rest. When she is told to take it easy, to stretch out and relax, her eyes narrow to judging slits. She has a surplus of curiosity. Her motivation is overfull, a result of years of rest. Mac loves me because I tell her to run, I tell her I want it faster when she grinds into me, because I squeeze a handful of her hair and pull hard enough to force growth, stretching her fibers from her. I let her exhaust herself, enjoy the sanctuary of being spent, the sensation of walking into a darkened church an hour after Mass and feeling the residue of confession, song, and supplication. If the body is a temple, hers lingers with the smell of just-extinguished candles, the complicated heaviness of confession and absolution, the persistent quest to know why we are here, and changing answers. I know the delicate balance of pressure in her body. When to resist her, let her rebel against me, when to refill and comfort her. I protect her without coddling, carefully guarding our pace.

She wanted to hike to the summit of Guadalupe Peak, the

highpoint of Texas at almost 8800 feet. When I asked her why, skeptical, she said she wanted to know thin air, what it felt like for other people to be on the edge of the world, a different view of terrifying, imminent death that could occur from a slipped step or lack of common sense. What it was that scares other people.

We drove to the trailhead before sunrise, an hour in the car spent licking cinnamon roll icing on our fingers and sipping coffee out of thermoses. Our feet crunched onto the gravel just as the sky cracked open, a deep blue punctured by stars. Mac led the way, stopping only for sips of water from her canteen and to let a rattlesnake cross the path. We were passed by more athletic and ambitious hikers out to prove something. Most would give a "how you doin'" as they puffed past us, all of them glancing at the shiny cup on Mac's arm reflecting the sun, her ripped-out sleeves. I swear I could hear her heart thumping against the metal.

The trail became steep, and instead of scrambling with two hands to the ground for balance, Mac's calves flexed, pointing into the top of her hiking boots while she vaulted herself in spurts with her right arm. An action carefully calculated, aiming each burst at a certain landing spot before her. Her right foot lost traction against the graveled grade, and she fell just short of the place she looked to grab. I put my arms up instinctively, whether to catch her or protect myself, or both, I'm not sure. Mac pedaled her feet in panic, clawing at the limestone rocks, spraying my eyes with dirt and pebbles, so I too lost my grip and began to fall. But her left arm remained locked to her torso, and using it like a fulcrum, she restored her balance to a tiptoe, and slapped her right hand with determination to a stone that could hold her. She hollered down to check if I was okay, and waited for me to blink my eyes clear of debris. We caught our breath. The ease

with which I supported myself on all fours felt like cheating. With her in front, she had nothing to live up to, which she preferred.

As the trail evened out, she squatted without warning and yanked me down with her, pointing to a family of deer to our right. The buck stared at us with one eye, the eight points of its rack sharp with warning. The doe and her fawns, small with youth but no longer babies, trotted away behind him. With only a slight rustle, he turned and ran, showing us a horrendous scar across his hindquarters. Mac stood and watched after them until they were lost into the desert mountains, weaving between the sage bushes. Sandy veins scarred the far hills, the ghosts of runoff from summer rains and winter snow, breaking into smaller branches farther down into the valley, eventually absorbed.

A canopy of pine trees was thin, lasting only a few dozen feet, a mere gesture to the altitude. The wind carved around the trunks to slap at us. We broke through to the stark and craggy bareness of the summit, a place of harsh wilderness, and met the full force of the gales. Boulders stacked along the ridge, and only an occasional ocotillo poked its thorns through. My shirt clapped in rapid applause over my back; any words I had were carried off in a rush of noise. Mac stood with one leg propped on a rock, leaning into the currents of air, her hair blasting away from her face. Clouds streamed along in a rolling lake below us, filling in the valleys, hiding their faults. The scenic panoramas promised by the visitors' center remained camouflaged by the intrusive weather. We could only see land at the horizon, New Mexico to the left, Texas to the right, but Mac did not seem disappointed. There were other borders to mind.

I placed my hand between her shoulder blades, and she leaned her weight into me, eyes closed, face upturned in a

peaceful smile. Another pair of hikers poked through the cloud layer to our pinnacle, made a lap around the marker at the summit, high-fived while popping open a can of beer, and turned around to begin their descent, not once stopping to rest. If Mac noticed them at all, she did not even flinch. Instead, her weight relaxed further and deeper into my hand, so that soon I had to use both arms in support. Her arms hung loose at her sides, palms up, and her chest, a wind tunnel of lungs, lifted in an open sacrifice of the space between her bones. I couldn't tell if she was offering what poured out from her, the light from her cracks, or if she was absorbing, refilling.

I imagined my arms pressing through her, reaching into her, just as she had her twin in utero. My hands cupping her clavicle and lifting her up and out from the inside, my triceps trembling from her weight, my life made of her. ♦

*M. Brett Gaffney*

## NAMING THOSE YOU'VE NEVER MET

The mechanic takes off his shirt and you blush because his chest is pale and it reminds you of hours spent with bodies on slabs. It's been six months since you left the university but you still carry them with you, the countless cadavers. Especially Johnny. You named him Johnny. John Doe. The smell of soap and blood fills your nose even here.

You're here to get the oil changed in your car and he says it'll take awhile. They don't have the right brand in stock. So you wait in the cramped office, beside the garage. The floor is cluttered with old tires and parts you'll never be able to name. You hate doing things like this. The little errands. You hate interacting with strangers, especially the nice ones. The ones with names you know you'll remember. Like this guy: he looks like he works here and he's sitting beside you, telling you his life story, but he's hard to understand because his words slur from some southern drawl. Johnny was from Maine and he didn't talk.

The guy's name is Ray and after ten minutes of listening, that's all you really know. That and he's got a wife. She went to Golden Sun Nursing Home so he can't eat those sandwiches anymore. That's what he says but you're not sure what it means. What sandwiches? And why can't he eat them? What's wrong with his wife? Does she know his name or did she start calling him Charlie months ago? Charlie because that's what you imagine her brother's name to be. She confused her husband with her brother. You don't even know her but this is what you do. You create lives for them

even if you don't want to. Johnny had one kid and a fetish for slasher flicks. His ex never knew about Olivia. He named his daughter Olivia. She was twelve when he died in the motorcycle accident and you cut out his liver on your second day in class.

You took the one with no name because you thought he'd be quiet, because you thought this time you could dissect something that wouldn't reveal a story, that didn't ooze photographs and handmade quilts and days spent filing for divorce. You wish you could stop, it's a problem, a misfiring in your brain. The counselor called it something you can't remember now. What you can remember is the day Olivia was born, before the nasty settlements and custody battles. Johnny pressed his face against the glass, peering in at the little thing swaddled in a pink blanket. Everything then was bright and hopeful.

Ray keeps talking but you're not listening anymore. You're still with the damn sandwiches. You decide they were tuna. Maybe mayo too. She likes mayo, the wife, the one in the nursing home who calls Ray Charlie. You decide she calls him Charlie. And all she eats is tuna and mayo sandwiches and Ray eats them too but he hates it now like he hates reminding her to call him Ray. When he goes home at night he fixes himself things like steak and potatoes, tacos, frozen pizzas. The bread molds in its bag on the counter.

You try focusing on an object, a wrench balancing on the edge of a toolbox. If you concentrate hard enough you won't think about them. Ray keeps talking. He asks you a question that you only half understand.

"Yeah, just moved back home," you say because you're pretty sure he just asked where you're from. He didn't ask where you'd been which was up at medical school bringing the dead back to life—in your head, anyway. But now you're

home with Mother who asks you to do things like getting the oil changed even though it's your car. After this you'll stop by Kroger and pick up dinner: rotisserie chicken and a box of macaroni and cheese. And then she'll ask about the car and you'll tell her about Ray, the guy you're not even listening to anymore. In fact, you're sure you've crossed over into rude customer by now, so you attempt conversation.

"How long have you worked here?"

"Owned the place for 'bout nineteen years," he answers. "Getting so old now, I'm just glad they still let me work a little." You can see missing teeth in that crooked mouth and when he laughs, his whole body jiggles and shakes. His overalls are covered in oil and grime.

Nineteen years. You think of Ray before that, skinnier, handsome with black hair and a fedora because he looks like one of those guys. Not like Johnny, who was fonder of sweaters. It's cold in Maine. You've never been there but you know it snows because you've seen pictures. Johnny's skin was cold when you touched him for the first time. You wanted to take the gloves off. You wanted to see if he felt different. You wanted to make sure he was real.

"Your phone," Ray says. You look down at the blue plastic clam cradled in your palm. It's been vibrating for awhile. You can tell because your hand is numb. It's Mother. She learned to text when you left home. *Where are you? We need mustard. Call me back. Are you still there? Mari, have you left? Your father called. He's going to be late.*

You know she's mixed up her meds again. It's hard to remember them all. For you. For her. There's eighteen bottles in a box on the dining room table. One's for depression, one for pain, and one brings Dad to dinner. *Where are you?*

You ask Ray how much longer it will be and he shrugs, huffs and stands, yelling to the mechanic who yells back.

*Fifteen minutes,* you text her. *Okay. We're waiting.*

At the grocery store you try to hurry but it's crowded with other shoppers who are also hurrying because it's the week of Thanksgiving. And you're getting a chicken and macaroni and cheese. And mustard. And beer because Dad likes Blue Moon and she'll ask where it is when you come home. You'll pour it out when she goes to sleep. You lean on the shopping cart as you wait in line. A child screams behind you. She looks a little like Olivia or at least Olivia at five. She's got to be at least six now. A year makes a difference when you're that small. You don't remember when you were five and neither does she. Where are you?

She's waiting for you on the front porch when you pull into the driveway. In her nightgown. You're pretty sure she hasn't gotten out of bed until now. Her dark underwear shows through the thin cotton. She follows you into the house and watches you unload the bags on the kitchen counter.

"Did you get the mustard?" she asks.

"Yes." You set it in front of her as proof. She stares at it while you take out the chicken and put a pot of water to boil for the macaroni.

"Your father's upstairs taking a nap."

"Okay," you say.

"He brought home a pie for dessert."

"Okay." You open the fridge to store the beer, leaving the space where she imagines the pie to be empty on the middle shelf. The cold hits your face and makes you sick. You remember how Jake and Dylan and all the rest locked you inside, how you screamed for help, wondering if Johnny could hear you—of course he couldn't but you screamed anyway until a janitor let you out.

"The chicken's cold," she says. You put it in the microwave and set the table.

Dad never ate at the table but instead sank into his armchair by the window and in front of the TV. You and Mother curled on the couch, trays full of lukewarm Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes. She always scraped the gravy from the bottom of the tray. She still does with her cheese. She's finished the chicken and your dad's not there because he's dead and she doesn't know that because she took a few pills this morning, the ones that are the color of embalming fluid.

She asks you about the car like you knew she would and you tell her about Ray, about his wife and the sandwiches, and you know she's listening but her eyes are somewhere else, somewhere you wish you could go but no, you're sitting here with your mother in a kitchen that stinks like burnt popcorn and you're carrying on a conversation by yourself because she's really not listening. Johnny always listened. You tried telling her about him once, over the phone, about Olivia, but she told you to stop it, said it was wrong for you to carry on like that.

"Your father's upstairs," she says.

"I know."

The backdoor light flickers as you pour out the beer. You hate the way it smells but love the sound of it hitting the ground, soaking the dead grass. You've got a job interview in the morning. You think you might skip it. You're tired and your mother's asleep but she won't be in a few hours and then neither will you. No, you'll stay here and tell Mr. Bilwater that you found an opportunity elsewhere but you really appreciate his offer and you hope he finds another suitable secretary, except you won't say secretary, you'll say office assistant or

something like that. You'll say no because you can't imagine yourself behind a desk shuffling papers. You can't imagine yourself with Johnny anymore but that's different.

The empty beer bottle feels light like plastic in your hand but when you squeeze it doesn't break. You use both hands and try again and then wash them in the sink. The blood slithers down the drain and you wish you could cut yourself open and see what's inside, then make the necessary changes. You wonder if you'd work better with pills, little things meant to correct the aftermath of wrecked adolescence. But they don't help her so why would they help you?

The cuts aren't deep and they stop hurting after a few minutes. You hold the dishrag and think about Ray's oil-stained pants. He's easier to figure out and sitting next to him was more comfortable than dinner tonight. Your mother is dried up, all her stories have been told and you don't like any of them very much. And you can't change them. Her door is closed when you go to take a shower. The hot water has gone cold.

You stopped dreaming about autopsies a while ago but that doesn't mean you don't wake up thinking about Johnny, thinking about him lying beside you beneath the thin cotton sheets. Of course you'd never be with him like that, not after the night the janitor let you out, your face blotched red with tears and screaming. They called you strange, Jake and Dylan. And Allison. They called you strange and talked about you in the locker room, said you were crazy, said your mom was crazy. They didn't know your mother but they heard you answer the phone one afternoon, listened as you told her to calm down, told her that Dad was dead, told her Dad was dead and that she needed to calm down and take her medicine. Because of that they thought you needed some too

so you wouldn't fantasize about the cadavers. They called them cadavers and you shivered out of your scrubs, feeling dirty. You call them cadavers now too.

Once you make sure your mother has gone back to bed you grab the keys and leave the house. The sun is too bright and you don't have sunglasses so you squint your eyes behind the wheel, leaning back in your seat, arms stiff. You drive like this down the service roads towards Mr. Bilwater's office just like you said you wouldn't. But really, what else are you supposed to do? What could be further from dissecting flesh? And you need to be further. Maybe then you won't think so much. Paperwork leaves little for the imagination, you tell yourself, and you believe it the more green lights you pass, until you're pulling into the driveway at the Golden Sun instead of Mr. Bilwater's office. You park and drop your hands to your lap. This is where Ray's wife lives, the one who calls him Charlie and eats tuna fish sandwiches. You aren't sure how you remembered the name or why you're getting out of the car instead of back on the road. The automatic doors open and the smell on the inside crawls into your nose and you forget about Mr. Bilwater altogether because you're eighteen again and Dad's gone and Mom's in the hospital. They called it a psychotic break. You didn't know much about medical science then except that a bottle of Benadryl can't be good for the body and thank goodness, thank God you found her in time, they all told you, the nurses, the doctor who treated you like an adult when you felt like a child. She fell asleep in the bathtub with his razor in her hand, her legs soapy with shaving cream. When you shook her awake, her mouth opened and closed like a fish. You called an ambulance. Thank God.

"Can I help you?" You look at the receptionist and blink. She's a short lady with glasses falling down her nose. You are

twenty-something and Dad's still gone and your mother is taking prescription pills now.

"Ray's," you say, "I'm Ray's niece." The woman's face floods with realization, a complicated expression of relief and sadness.

"Erin's asleep but you can sit with her if you'd like." Erin. It's not the name you imagined. Ethel, maybe, but not Erin. It shakes you a little more than you like but you follow the receptionist's gesture down the hallway until you see the name, Erin Shalwat. Ray and Erin Shalwat. The door eases open to your touch.

Just like the woman said, Erin is asleep and sunken into a hospital bed. You know it's a hospital bed despite Ray's attempts to decorate it with quilts and pillows and plastic flowers. She looks dead, a gray body surrounded by bright fabric and you wonder if she's donated that body to science, whether or not she's decided to offer herself to fledgling students with clumsy scalpels. Maybe she's talked about it with Ray and he won't let her. Or maybe he will. You move closer.

Unlike Erin, Johnny looked good when they rolled him in. He looked good because he died of a heart attack. You imagined his motorcycle wreck like you imagined everything else. Along with the sandwiches, you thought Ray's wife liked Diet Coke and peppermint candy. You're not sure about the candy but the only drink in the room is a sad Styrofoam cup on her side table. It's half full of warm water. Your mother's hospital room was littered with cups like this. She was always thirsty. She sucked on the ice and picked apart the cup once it emptied.

Even if Erin does drink Diet Coke the cup of water is still here and eventually it will become stagnant and refilled. Not

Coke and not coffee either, which is what you thought Ray drank but now you're not so sure. Maybe he buys beer to get the tuna taste out of his mouth. Except you can't smell tuna anywhere inside the room. Nothing but urine masked by vinegar and baby powder.

You hold onto the bed rails for support, breathing in deep the layers of dust, leftovers of human skin, dried and useless and caking the antique furniture. Erin still sleeps, snores, and no matter what you've conjured up inside your head she'll still be here, in a place you can't pretend is anything but a low income nursing home. And your mom did attempt suicide and no matter how hard you try, Johnny will still be a corpse and for three hours on a Friday night you found yourself locked inside a cold drawer beside him.

Your phone vibrates in your pocket. *Where are you?* Coming home. You let go of the bed, back away, turn for the door.

"Ray?" Her voice is everything you expected and you leave before she says another word. In the elevator you think about her calling you Charlie instead. You hold onto the raspy cadence and mouth the name with your warm, dry lips. ♦

*Letitia Trent*

# THE BEAR

The Mother and her two sons lived far away from the town, down a long dirt road, down a long dirt driveway, in a valley between two mountains.

In summers, when they were both small, the boys would run around in the front yard, shoeless and shirtless, their bodies streaked with dirt by the end of the day, hair and hands sticky. The Mother would watch them play through the window and then, when it was time to sleep, give them their baths together and seal them up tight between two clean sheets in the same bed.

In the wintertime, they would bundle up in snowsuits and run the paths she'd shovel. They piled balls of snow together, hefted them on top of each other, and called them snowmen. When the snow blew stinging and heavy, they stayed in the house and drank tea and watched the snow gather until it almost reached the top edge of the windowsill.

The two boys had loved their mother and she loved them, though she knew that she would lose them.

It was happening already. Both could speak now and both could talk back.

All mothers lose their boys eventually.

One winter day, the Mother heard a strange sound along the side of the house, a sound like an enormous serrated blade running back and forth across the outside wall. She opened the front door and stepped out, holding her arms together against the cold.

A brown bear rubbed its hide along the siding. The bear's hide was spotty and matted, with clumps of hair scraped away. When it saw her, it rose to its hind legs and yawned. The Mother's mouth made a large O. She stepped inside and shut the door as it fell to its feet and moved toward her.

She locked the door and turned her back to it, waiting for the pounding, the animal's nails worrying the cheap aluminum front door. Nothing. She breathed in and out and closed her eyes and counted to ten.

There's a bear in the front yard, the mother told the boys. They were playing cards, maybe Go-Fish or Hearts, the only games that the Mother knew, so the only games that they knew. Such is the way of children and mothers.

The big brother dropped his cards and looked at his mother. The little brother squealed. I can see your cards! He said, and wiggled on his knees.

What are we going to do? The big brother asked. His eyes were large and his lips pressed together. He was old enough now to understand danger. The Mother pressed her lips together, too. The boy's thick, black hair stuck out like a pot scrubber bristle.

We'll wait, she said. It might go away on its own. You never know.

The boy nodded, but his mouth did not smile. This was not new: he no longer smiled at her in return to check and see if she was happy, to make her happy. The little brother still did. Just checking to see if Mommy is happy, he'd say. If she didn't seem sufficiently so, he'd put his fingers in her mouth and pull the edges up into a split-faced smile.

During the night, the snow fell and piled. It didn't squall and the wind didn't shake the little house, as most winter storms did, roaring around them as if angry. When the Mother

looked out the window at night, the snow seemed to be falling slowly. While they slept, it fell steadily. When the small family woke, the snow had breached the window lines—a blinding skitter of sunlight knifed off of the new snow's icy surface.

Look what happened, the little brother said, still in his pajamas, the plastic feet slapping against the linoleum. He touched the window where the granules of snow were smashed and piled, and then pulled his hand away, as if it hurt him. It's cold out there.

The Mother nodded and touched his head. They'd run out of food if she couldn't leave the land and get into town soon. This meant she'd have to go outside and shovel the snow from the porch, from the driveway. Twice she started to do so—she found herself looking for her snow shoes, her heavy jacket and gloves with the fingers exposed, heading for the door. Then she would remember: the bear. Then she'd be right back where she began.

The older brother watched her as she puttered, picking up twisted, dried tea bags, cups with dried cocoa in the bottom, boys socks and shoes and underwear slung wherever they shed them. She didn't mind picking up after the boys. That was her job now.

What will we do about the bear? The older brother asked her as she scrubbed the inside of the teapot. The pot was beginning to smell like dirt and leafmash, like the forest's floor. The water came out yellow and rancid even before she dipped the teabag in it.

We'll wait for him. She smiled and he did not return the smile. The boy's eyes were brown and his hair was black and his skin was thicker than hers—he hardly ever bruised or scarred. He hardly looked like her at all anymore. She could only see a little something around the mouth, how it set in a

line when he was angry, and that was all.

We can't wait too long, he said.

She nodded. I know that.

He went back to his bedroom. The younger brother played with his trucks in the living room, crashing them together over and over.

Oh no, he said aloud, you don't think you can get away, can you? I'm the law. You can't get away from the law ever. I'll chase you down. I'll get you.

At night, the Mother visited the boys' room to see if they were still breathing. She'd done this when they were babies, and she had never grown out of the habit.

The younger brother still kicked his covers off, restless in his sleep, and still held a stuffed animal, a frog, close to his chest.

The older brother slept deeply, his arm flung over his eyes to keep out the halo of light from his brother's nightlight (a winter scene in a tiny snow globe—the sweet-faced moon illuminating Santa and the reindeer flying through a black sky).

The older brother was shirtless, in only his white, sturdy, boy's underwear. A slight shadow of hair shot from the waistband of his shorts up to his navel. The line was so light, so downy and alluringly tactile that the Mother wanted to run her hand along its length. Same with the thick, dark hair on his arm, his deep sideburns, his legs, the hair ending mid-way up his thigh like a garter. She had not seen his body since he'd insisted on taking baths on his own, without his brother, without her.

It was strange that she didn't know his body, something she had made, that it had become completely foreign to her and could surprise her. The little brother murmured and held

his stuffed frog closer to his chest.

The falling snow muffled the usual winter sounds: frozen tree branches exploding, snow sliding from the roof in sheets, cold birds landing on their porch rails, pecking at the icy feed she left them. She listened for the bear and heard nothing.

Rarr, Rarr, Mommy. The little brother held a picture up to her face as the Mother stared forward, bobbing her tea bag in the water. It was only breakfast (jam and toast), but already the Mother was worried about dinner. Tonight they would have chickpeas and the last of the bread. A pauper's meal. The older brother hadn't spoken to her since the day before. It took the younger boy a full minute of yelling, of thrusting his picture into her hands, practically into her tea, before she noticed him.

What is it, honey? He climbed into her lap. She pushed her tea away and made room for his picture. He spread it out with his hands, careful not to run them across the middle, where all of the figures were clustered, a thick margin of white all around them. He pointed to a scribble of brown. This is the bear. He pointed to a blue square with a triangle on top, a snake of black scribbles emitting from its roof. This is our house, he said, pointing to the square. The scribbles were smoke coming from a chimney. They didn't have a chimney. The Mother wondered where children learned about chimneys and why every child's picture of a house had one.

Where are you?

The boy pointed to the house. I'm in the house, looking out the window. And in one window, the Mother could see two black dots for eyes and a smile, both uncontained by the boundaries of a face.

And where are Mommy and your brother? He pointed to the house. You're inside making cocoa, he said. He pushed his

finger against the drawn door, as if to open it and find her.

And where is your brother? She asked again. The boy put his fingers in his mouth. He studied the picture.

He's behind the bear. Hiding behind the bear. He pointed to the brown squiggle.

Won't he be cold, out there in the snow?

He shook his head. He has hair. He's hairy. He's wearing shoes too. The boy slid from her lap and took the picture with him.

Do you know what I'm gonna draw next?

The Mother shook her head.

The bear eating our house. Grrr Grrr Grrr! The boy pretended to nibble at her shoulder. The Mother laughed and patted him on the head.

The Mother heard something fall. The noise came from the older brother's bedroom.

It's nothing! He called, before she could say anything. I can fix it myself.

When the Mother came to see if he was all right, she found him reading in bed. He held a book called Captains Courageous, a boy's book, in paperback. It had sailors—men in blue jackets with jaunty hats—on the cover, water splashing around them, the sky a heavy shade of grey.

Are you ok?

He nodded. Dropped my soccer trophy. He motioned toward it. The metal boy's head had snapped off. It lay by the trophy, upright.

How awful, she said.

Yeah, the boy said. She waited for more. She could feel it coming, like animals can feel storms approaching.

Why don't we call somebody about the bear? He asked. We're gonna run out of food. We could starve and die. Why don't you call? He was angry with her. He pressed his hands

against his mattress as if he had to hold himself back from standing up to her, nose to nose, shouting these things in her face.

We won't starve, she said. We'll look later tonight, see if it's gone. Me and you together. She crouched down by the boy's bed and put her hand on his bare knee. He wore shorts in the house all of the time, even in winter, as if real, adult clothes hurt him. His skin was smooth, but the hair above it was rough. She patted his knee lightly. He did not remove her hand or move his knee.

Ok, he said. As long as I can help.

When the Mother entered the living room again, it was empty. The door, which had been closed for days, was open, and snow filtered in, spread along the Welcome mat. She stood in the doorway, staring out into the whiteness, barely feeling the cold.

It was beautiful. The snow had not been touched besides in a ragged path around the house. The bear's tracks, she thought. The sun revealed the millions of glittering, frozen blades of ice in its mass of white.

She looked behind her, to tell the younger brother not to open the door, to most definitely never open the door again until the bear was gone. He was not in the room. She called his name into the small living room, the bathroom, the kitchen. She looked outside, at that big empty pile of white.

Honey! She called. Mommy is worried! She screamed the boy's name until a pain in her throat made her choke.

What's wrong? The older brother stood by her shoulder in his shorts. His hands were fisted at his waist. He leaned into the outdoors like a hungry cat might lean for its food dish as you set it down on the floor.

Your brother. She grabbed the older boy's arm and pulled

him toward her. Your brother is outside.

As she held him, the boy's hair grew. His body bristled, sending shoots of hair beneath her palms, which pricked her. His muscles contracted away from her and then both tightened and expanded, rocking him back and forth on his feet. He grew an inch as he stood. He gave off a sour, but sweet familiar smell—grass clippings left in a bag for two weeks. A pile of fallen leaves.

I knew it, she thought. I knew it would happen.

I'll find him, the older boy said. He didn't seem to notice the change, though his voice coming from his throat sounded like the sound a radio would make if under a foot of gravel.

She stepped away from him, from his bristling body in her doorway.

I can't let you go out there. Her words didn't come out with any force. He didn't even answer. He shrugged her away and bent down to put on his shoes. They no longer fit, so he threw them aside.

You'll freeze like that, she said. She said the words that mothers were supposed to say, but did not feel that they made sense anymore. He was wearing a thin T-shirt, his shorts, no shoes. In the glare of the sun bouncing of the snow's slick surface, the boy was now larger than she was, hirsute, flexing his hands open and closed. He kept growing in the slanted, cold sun.

He shook his head. I won't be gone for long. Shut the door after me.

The Mother nodded and stood aside. She shut the door.

The boy had been gone for five minutes when the mother realized she'd been standing at the door, staring through the small peephole, looking into the white circle. It was broken anyway, probably cracked somehow by the cold, but she

could see if a figure was at the doorway—anything on the porch made a blurry grey smudge against the white.

She stepped away from the door. No sense waiting there, getting in the way if the older brother had to rush in with the younger slung over his shoulder, crying, maybe bleeding.

She pulled down the newly washed teapot and filled it with tap water. She took her most delicate tea-cup, a cup so small and impractical that she rarely took it from the shelf, and set a tea bag inside of it. The tea smelled like oranges and vanilla and had the word "calm" in the title. She laughed; as if tea could make a person calm.

As the teapot's whistle grew louder, the Mother listened for the sound of the bear. She heard nothing.

Mommy! I'm wearing this big shirt! The little brother ran from the hallway and collapsed in her lap, swaddled in fabric. The older brothers' sweatshirt had a cartoon devil on the front, something about a sports team.

Where have you been? She shouted in the boy's face, shaking him, her hands tight around his wiry upper arms. Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you! She held the boy's flesh so tightly that he tried to twist and wiggle away from her.

His eyes filled with water. The water spilled down the lush slide of his lashes.

Don't yell at me, he said and began to cry in earnest, in hiccups. I wanted to surprise you.

But where were you? she asked. Why did you hide? The boy didn't answer. He pressed his wet face into her lap. The teakettle screamed on the bright red burner.

Let Mommy get her tea, she said. The Mother rose, her hands shaking, and poured the tea into the tiny cup. Only a couple of mouthfuls. The water was too hot—it would make the tea bitter. She bobbed the bag absently and listened to the

outdoors. It had been fifteen, no, twenty, minutes.

Where's brother? The small boy ran a small plastic car along the edge of a chair and sniffled away the last of his tears.

He went outside for a while, the Mother said.

She finished her cup of tea, squeezing the bag into the cup to finish the last dregs. A half an hour.

Do you want some pancakes? Mommy will make you some pancakes.

The younger boy cheered and scrambled up the tall, wooden kitchen chairs. He sat down, the tabletop reaching just below his chin.

I want blueberries in them.

The mother nodded and took all of the ingredients out. Butter, eggs, flour, milk. A tablespoon of sugar. She didn't have blueberries, but an old bag of frozen strawberries. She set them out too. He wouldn't know the difference.

Mommy's going to check on something before she gets started.

The Mother opened the front door just a crack. Outside, the sun was even brighter than before. She had to blink repeatedly before she could see clearly. An expanse of white.

Sweetheart, she called into the white. You can come back inside now. Her words didn't echo back—they were absorbed and flattened by the bulk of snow.

She shut the door and placed her hand on the deadbolt. She rested it there, her eye at the peephole.

She clicked the lock in place.

She turned to her son. You must never, never open that door again unless I tell you that you can. Do you hear me? The boy nodded and eyed the pancake ingredients.

We aren't going to open the door for anything. She looked at him, holding his eyes for longer than normal. I want you to

understand that. We're not opening it for anything.

The boy nodded, his little hands fisted. I'm so hungry.

The mother nodded, touched by the so, that little intensifier.

They'll be done very soon, honey.

As the Mother mixed the butter and sugar she thought she could hear the faint, familiar sound of scratching. Scratching at the siding, at the back window, claws tapping. ♦

*Rae Bryant*

# YOUR LIFE IN FOUR WHOLE FRIED CHICKENS, FOURTEEN EASY LESSONS, AND A DERRIDA

You never take drugs in high school but you drink a lot of Old Milwaukee and Boone's Farm and Peach Schnapps. You learn to hate Peach Schnapps and Boone's Farm. Your mother sits you down one Friday night before a bonfire beer party and asks if you are snorting cocaine. The room is dark and the snow has piled at the bottom of the window frame behind her. Perfectly flat against the glass. The television noise low and insignificant. Her legs kick out beneath the quilt stitched in wedding block pattern. It has been in the family for years. She speaks with attitude. She says, Maybe you're snorting smack. You say, No, of course not. And you almost say, Are you? You want to say, Your boyfriend is, can't you tell? But you have learned many lessons by then. She says your nose is red and sniffling and you explain in a calm voice that the month is November and you have a cold. Then you make a joke about being John Belushi's daughter in another life and admit you've been snorting Derrida again. I need help, you say. I can't stop. She smiles, canine caught in a pound, working for food and love and affection and a home. And you give her a fix because you know for certain she might die otherwise. She loves you that much. She sips from her wine glass and she is happy and you are happy and you go to the beer bonfire party where the football team burns a live chicken in rival effigy. The chicken squawks and flaps and

makes disturbing grunting noises. Girls huddle. One girl smacks another girl in the face to calm her. You had no idea chickens could grunt like that. And a boy with Kurt Cobain hair lets you cry on his chest. Kurt Cobain is a genius.

Derrida says life is a multitude of binary oppositions. You read this when you are six or seven, when you have no idea what binary oppositions are but you know it sounds good and true and mathematical. Like knowing pretty girls have pretty posture. You correlate posture to linear and linear to pretty and develop a theory in straightness. You learn to read Derrida. You learn ugliness and that no one will ever want to deconstruct you. Your mother's boyfriend says your spine has pretty potential and pretty potential is better than ugly. It is a binary opposition. Pretty potential / ugly. You name the boyfriend Derrida.

This is a common fantasy: John Belushi sitting patiently on a bed covered in floral duvet and striped dust ruffle. Combing John Belushi's sideburns with a Barbie brush. Braiding John Belushi's hair in short, tiny braids and clipping the ends with plastic doggie barrettes. You and John Belushi writing poetry while sipping hot, herbal tea. Poem topics: Penguins, Smurfs, the proper and functional length of shag carpeting, fried chickens, snow bunnies, Ronald Reagan's hair, He-Man's Battle Cat, an ode to Anwar Sadat as a George Romero zombie, a villanelle on the proper outfitting of a bomb shelter.

In your closet, you make an altar of chicken bones and toast crumbs, a pair of Ray-Bans, a black tie and a fedora. You love that shit. At your mother's table, you sit tall, spine straight, and order four whole fried chickens and an orange Crush—because you like orange Crush better—and you pretend your

mother is Aretha Franklin, only white and skinny. You call her Aretha in the morning and Aretha in the evening and she serves you scrambled eggs and Peanut Butter and Jelly and Fritos and milk instead of four whole fried chickens and an orange Crush. She squints each time you sit at her dinner table, wearing black Ray-Bans and a fedora. When Derrida criticizes your fashion choices, you break into song: "Minnie the Moocher."

You are a constant exercise in obedience and love. You learn to be still as he folds his arm over you. You smile when he says he loves you and you feel loved and safe and happy. Aretha's hair is blond and lighted from the window behind her. She looks a little bit like Debby Harry and you swear she is an angel. Sometimes, when you are out shopping with her, she buys you a can of orange Crush.

This is a common activity: Writing letters to would-be adoptive parents such as John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd. You mail the letters to *Saturday Night Live* in New York City then watch every Saturday night for some mention of your letters. In preparation for the impending adoption, you study random affects of Blues men, including but not limited to Cab Calloway, Lightnin' Hopkins, Robert Johnson. You study library books on guitars and drum sets, postmodernism, travel speakers, the big ones roadie protocols, how to set and tear down stage equipment, the best and most economic diners in all the major cities, mending black socks, black hats, black suits, the most efficient way to fry a chicken and how to toast bread over a campfire. You will earn your keep on the road.

You have a brother who is four years younger than you. He is

soft and little. He is scared, too, sometimes. If not for him, you might run away. You name him Little Fucker.

Derrida is a dog lover. He loves dogs. He says, Dogs are God's creatures but they need discipline because they are only dogs. Derridean dog discipline:

- Beat the dog when it pisses on the floor;
- Beat the dog when it doesn't come;
- Beat the dog when it shits in your shoe;
- Be quiet, good, obedient, respectful;
- Always urinate and defecate in the proper places.

Life can be a predictable set of dog lessons.

Send a letter to *Saturday Night Live*. Address it to Eddie Murphy even though you are supposed to prefer Mr. Rogers over Mr. Robinson. Mr. Rogers is an unshakable obligation of moral conservatism. Mr. Rogers is a good guy and loves children. He goes to church. He wears loafers and sports jackets and parts his hair in a respectable way. You are a Pavlovian morality to Mr. Rogers' respectability. You are a big ass dog. But you have always thought: *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte —i.e., no one is ever that good.*

A Study of Messrs. Rogers and Robinson in Binary Oppositions:

- Sports jacket, collar, tie, flat front trousers, loafers / army field jacket, T-shirt, jeans, patent leather platforms;
- The proper position for a fork beside a dinner plate / how to use a fire escape;
- Married, middle class, white, male retiree in suburban, single-family home / divorced, poor, black man in urban apartment;

- Make believe / street survival.

Make believe can get a girl killed.

Grind the dog's food into powder and sprinkle it into Derrida's coffee, a little more each morning. Watch Derrida develop a taste for dog food. Grind the dog's dried turd into powder and sprinkle it into Derrida's coffee, a little more each morning. Watch Derrida develop a taste for dog shit. Sit on the floor and pet the dog and watch Derrida drink his coffee.

On the event of sadomasochism as an applied discipline: Remember, hold arms and hands flat across the bed. Do not look at him when he pulls the thick leather belt from his waist. This is an expression of challenge and aggression. Wait until he begins before you look at him or try to cover your skin. Looking and covering will make him more angry and the lashes will come faster and make the stinging more constant, numbing. Slow hard lashes hurt more on raw skin than fast hard lashes. This is the proper craft of a submissive. Stuff of artists.

A study of sadomasochism in binary oppositions:

- Leather belt = ♂;
- Buttocks & vagina = ♀;
- ♂ / ♀;
- Leather belt / buttocks & vagina;
- Discipline / disobedience;
- Pain / acquiescence of pain;
- Teacher / student;
- Good / bad; ♂ = leather belt,
- Discipline, pain, teacher, good; ♀ = buttocks & vagina, disobedience, acquiescence of pain, student, bad.

You read somewhere that Cynthia Chase is a friend of Derrida and is the half-sister of Chevy Chase. You wonder if Chevy Chase might make a good dad. People say he's a dick but you like his sarcasm. You send a letter to Chevy Chase because maybe he will read your letter on Weekend Update. That would be really cool. If he read your letter, you could go to school and tell everyone Chevy Chase read your letter on *Weekend Update* and his half-sister is going to teach you about Derrida and you'll have wonderful discourses and the whole Chase family will adopt you and Chevy Chase will teach you to write sarcastic jokes because your jokes aren't funny. They make people sad.

Hide Derrida's belts in Aretha's sock drawer. Look at Aretha when Derrida asks where his belts are. Subterfuge / candidness. Don't ever tell anyone anything.

Close your eyes when Aretha catches on and cover your ears when Little Fucker screams. Then watch Mister Rogers' Neighborhood with Little Fucker until he is calm again. Ignore the thick leather belt wrapped around Mr. Rogers' waist and touch Little Fucker on the arm. Smile when Lady Elaine Fairchilde takes over the Museum-Go-Round and tell Little Fucker you'll run away and take over the school playground and live there. It'll be perfect because you can still go to school and you can clean up in the bathrooms. No one will even notice. Plus, you know how to toast bread over a campfire. You tell him, Then one day, after we finish school, we'll run away to New York City and join Saturday Night Live and I'll make money so we can live in an apartment there.

Mom will miss us.

She'll be okay.

No, she won't. She won't be okay.

Nothing from Eddie Murphy, Chevy Chase, or the producers of *Saturday Night Live*. Fuck 'em. You're prettier than Dana Carvey. You / Dana Carvey. Dana Carvey would be lucky to have you.

Aretha is talking to her. You just know. And you think, Maybe she'll leave him now. When Derrida shows at the door the next day, his arms are full of presents. You smile. He says, Time for a family vacation.

Knock knock. Who's there? The toll attendant. The toll attendant who? Knock knock. Who's there? The toll attendant. Come on, Little Fucker. Say the toll attendant who.

I don't want to.

Just do it.

The toll attendant, who?

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Don't watch. Don't watch as Derrida pulls the van to the side of the road. Don't watch as he yells about coins. Collect Little Fucker and tell him it will be all right. Hold Little Fucker's face to your chest and shield his eyes. Make a bad, repetitive joke about toll attendants and whisper it into Little Fucker's ear.

You are a pop culture, postmodern junkie. There is no methadone or metronome to rhythm you. Dana Carvey sucks. Fuck Dana Carvey.

When he sneaks into your room, pretend you are Molly Ringwald. Make a runaway list and buy a box of red hair dye

and dream about James Spader because Andrew McCarthy is a pussy. Wish for a friend named Duckie.

You are a diverse set of possibilities. There is nothing wrong with you; there is everything wrong with you. You will ask Aretha if you can talk to someone about *things*. You will tell her something is wrong and you aren't sure what it is but you feel sad and scared and restless most of the time. You will take the blame the way you would with a boyfriend you want to leave but don't want to hurt. Aretha will say nothing is wrong with you. And you will get angry. You will beg. You will tell Aretha she never made you four whole fried chickens. Why didn't she make you four whole fried chickens? Never once. Not even for a joke or a birthday party. Not in all the years did she make you four whole fried chickens. And she will say, But I bought you many orange Crushes. Why isn't orange Crush good enough?

Orange Crush doesn't make a complete meal. Chicken is more nutritional. Chicken's nutritional hierarchy trumps Orange Crush.

It has natural fruit juices!

She will stare at you like she wants to kill you or understand you and she can't do either so she'll scream something about four whole fried chickens being a waste of good food. Then she will ask you to drop it. And you will drop it. It is better to drop it.

Years later you will fight over the merits of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. And you will be angry because she knows you prefer Lennon over McCartney and Lennon wrote the lyrics. Lennon was a genius. You've fought over the merits of Lennon versus McCartney many times. If she could just once confirm your preference for Lennon, one goddamn-fucking once.

You will be thankful for masturbation. It will make you forget the chickens and Paul McCartney and the belt and the toll booth. You will be thankful for the neighbor boy who teaches you how to masturbate. Masturbation / quiet reflection. You will lie in the dark in your grandmother's house, wrapped in a green, yellow, brown afghan and listen to the clock on the wood-paneled wall: tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick … You will fantasize about the boy who rides horses at the county fair. He looks a little bit like James Spader. Hair and mouth. You will wish the boy with James Spader hair and mouth taught you how to masturbate. You will dream about the boy's tall, brown leather riding boots.

This is a common fantasy: John Belushi and Derrida sit on a dark mahogany bed covered in a fleur-de-lis duvet. White canopy. They are combing each others' sideburns. On the wall are crossed swords. In the corner stands the Marquis de Sade dressed as a Musketeer. He is holding a thick leather belt. You lie naked at the foot of the bed. Belushi turns to snort lines of cocaine from your legs. Derrida whispers French in your ear. De Sade watches, holding and cracking the belt with his hands. You blame your mother for this.

Sit on the bed with Aretha and her bottle of leftover champagne. Listen as she asks if you are masturbating, because she hears this is something kids do and she really needs to know if you are masturbating. She has a pleading, fearful, concerned, loathing face. Say, No, of course not. But I am having sex with the Marquis de Sade and John Belushi and Jacques Derrida. Add John Lennon for effect. Tell her you are snorting smack and cocaine. Tell her John Lennon really

gets you off. Something about the glasses. I.e. Sarcasm / stupid fucking questions.

At least Robert Downey, Jr. is a genius.

Come home late from a beer bonfire party. Find Aretha asleep in the bedroom. Derrida is on the couch, watching *Saturday Night Live* reruns. Kurt Cobain is singing about heart boxes. And you are relieved. Derrida is not mad. This could have gone much worse. Watch Derrida pat the couch. Lie on the couch and feel Derrida's arm fold over you. Listen as he says, I love you. I love you. And there, in the dark, feel loved.

One day you will realize how funny your life is. It will be while you are watching *Saturday Night Live* reruns. A skit will come on with a rubber chicken and you will think about the chicken squawking and burning and grunting in rival effigy, years before at a bonfire beer party, and you will think about the guy with Kurt Cobain hair and how he let you cry on his chest. And you will think, at least I was never that chicken. ♦

*Adam McAlpine Clark*

# PINEWOOD REFRAIN

My brother first came to inhabit my head the day he died. That was four days ago and people have found my composure in the matter unnerving.

We were born thirteen minutes apart into the morning of a Sunday. We were perfect replicas, each a copy of the other. In the beginning, there had been a third but he disappeared into the walls of the womb while little more than a faint, red beat.

As children, we were indistinguishable from one another. We harbored no differences. On our eleventh birthday we received a pair of knives and sharpened a length of pine from the woods. Out in the woods, it was accidentally driven into my left eye, leaving the iris a violet amoeboid shape. That was our first distinction.

When we returned from the hospital that night our parents put me in the guest room to avoid infection, frightening us with a story of another boy and an old man removing a patch from over his eye each night, placing it on the bedside table.

Falling asleep that first night back, I could hear him moving around out in the hallway, back and forth in the dark. I was half asleep when I saw his body curled up by the door; his blond curls stood out white in the dark hall. I fell asleep like that.

In the morning I asked Mason about that and he started looking the way he did when we shared a secret. He told me the same story, how I'd slept there curled up like a good

animal at our door, how he didn't move.

We were quiet as our mother made us breakfast, looked at one another over cereal. I remember the sounds of my mother's hands in the sink, the clinking of our spoons upon the bowls, the clinking of her rings against a plate. As I remember these things, I can hear Mason roll over half asleep behind some fold of my mind; there is a sigh. In his dreaming, I can feel occasional echoes of sensations. The smell of pine, sap sticking to fingers.

*and the smell of sap sticks to things, sapling fingers of pine define the edge.*

*God, 'cause you know that past the edge there is the same walk in pine needles and the quality of shadow is the same. Same moment where we put our hands in our pockets, still behind the stream, and recognize the warm pommels in our hands, sharing glances. Fingers sappy and sticking to warm pommel.*

*Beneath the burnished leaves of a sumac, my left foot is half-cast in shadow. I anticipate, as I take an inevitable step forward, the feeling of the step. But there is only the knowledge of it. The fact that I have stepped. Beneath the burnished leaves of a sumac, half-cast in shadow, there is only the smell of the pine and sap that are sticking between my fingers.*

*It is always like this here and there is our path through taller pines and the floor is soft needles. Sometimes it seems like a few steps into that moment, but I have dreamt hours of walking, waiting to think, to slip my hand into my pocket. Sometimes the trees seem to repeat themselves. Sometimes I feel like we are looking at each other for so long in that moment when the warm pommel of the knife is felt sticking to the fingers, Clay's eyes still looking like my own*

Mason and I had always known about the knives. Our father

had shown them to us when we first began to ask for stories at night. The pommels were ivory or some kind of bone; on each, a pair of horses frozen mid-leap were carved with fine red lines. The thought of them inevitably came up every Christmas and every birthday, so when my father placed them in our hands, our fingers shook. There was so much ceremony in it. They were only buck knives, but they had seemed so handsome and powerful that morning. He slid the knife-blades out together, moved our hands over the steel and bone. They were smoother than the rough texture of his palms. He taught us how to lock the blades.

We spent the first weeks of that summer out in the fields and the woods. Behind our house, we had fifteen acres of pine trees. Somewhere in there, past a stream, we had found a path leading to a clearing in the woods we claimed as our own. The ground was damp and green under the shadows of thicker trees. In our clearing, we opened our knives, thumbed our imperfect reflection on the blades.

I remember we threw them into the trunks of pine trees until the tips of the blades were gummy with sap, and from the trees trickled clear and thin lineations that reflected the modest light of the clearing back to us. Mason pulled a branch down from one of the slimmer pines until the wood bowed and the green of its inner skin showed and split away from the main. I repeated the act upon another branch.

We dragged them into the middle of the clearing, stood there with our knives together. The grass was long and bent over itself in yellows laced with green. Mason and I laid one of them out and with our knives nicked at the several switches growing from the main until we had a single, rough length of wood. Those switches lay like fans of pine needles over the grass.

I stood it up on end and Mason held the base steady. I had

one hand on it. It stood up to my chin. I drew the knife up and against it in slow successions. Slim curls of wood circled the base; one stuck out from between two toes. Here it gets confused. At one point, the knife swung too high, glancing past my ear, and we both agreed to turn the blade down on it.

I drew the knife down upon the edge. I had one hand on it. The tip approached a point. Mason held the base steady. The knife came down. A slivered curling of wood pealed off. Something shifted. The knife slid down, the sharpened tip was driven up.

*of all, of all of them. This one, this is the one that could do me in.*

*It's my hands, and my cheeks are trying to blow something right out. My fingers slide down the keys. And I'm blowing something out and it's sounding into something. Blowing long like that. Sometimes longer than this one though. That's all I can really pay attention to in this one is that sax in front of me, the imperfect reflection coming back at you sideways off the curved brass.*

*No turning around, with those things showing from behind in that bronze distortion of me blowing the cheeks out like that. But seeing the lighting shift on the sax in front of me it's always obvious, how could there not be all of them and their cigarettes smoking the place and in that general hum rumbling?*

*I got this feeling between where I'm thinking and my lips, when I'm here and I can feel myself going after something, something I might almost have heard before.*

*I'm blowing it out and it's moving through these corners and stops and I can feel like there is something around some corner, like if I keep chasing it I might start playing it—and I think I can hear Clay back there in the audience—hold that bass . . . steady . . . curling—It's lost under the rolls of the crowd shifting in seats. And that sound I was almost maybe catching up to starts going out and*

*my fingers press down and the sounds are all mismatched and it seems like I've forgotten to play and that sound is just my memory of another dream like this one, where I have to wake up and am that much further from what I'm trying to play*

I can hear Mason murmur sounds like the high, wavering notes of his saxophone. I can feel him shiver for a moment. I shake under these reverberations.

We were beautiful as children and we looked like none of our relations: our eyes were too wide and held in them those stark, purpled centers; we lacked our father's small, thick frame; our mother's broad nose and hollow cheek-bones. Our uncle called us The Changelings for the disparity.

We were both quiet at that age, and private. Other children did not know our games and parents found us unsettling or, perhaps, merely strange, quixotic curiosities. It can be hard to qualify all of the various uneasy reactions.

But always, more than anything, it was the eyes—the particular violet intensity of them. It'd always been hard for people to maintain eye-contact with us; anyone who caught our shared glances from the corner of their vision and then the fixed attention of our gaze.

As my eye healed up, people began to treat us differently. They seemed to be trying to read things into it, when they registered the broken iris, the light purple contents spilled out across the white of my eye; it seemed as though they saw in the anomaly of it some gesture of the uncanny and, when I was older, something of a quiet, secret confidence, in the exchange.

It became one of our games. I would peer, not just back at them, but right into their own stare and Mason would begin to giggle and we would break from the game. It is something that makes me smile still and I can hear some crooning noise

of Mason's sounding from somewhere in my interior.

We shrugged off the difference they tried to mark between us. Our parents made no mention of this changed treatment toward their sons, or their own small changes. And with the two of us always close and talking low to one another, the effect was our further withdrawal into our private company. Eventually, we came to spend most of every day in or around that clearing, cloistered by the pines. In the uncanopied center, we drove that sharpened stick through the grass and into the dirt. I almost feel again the act of holding the wood tight, pressing my weight down, the earth giving way to the sharp point.

*never remember that that was just before and in this dream I am always just in that dodging of the knife swinging down slowly.*

*Each time I am here again the strangled moment stretches out. My hand begins loosening. I begin in the memory of having just registered a loss of control, not sure if it is mine or his or what. Clay reels back, still holding the wood tight with one hand. He doesn't make any sound in particular and just goes and bends down into the ground. He's gone limp and I have to pull him over my back. Passing through and into the trees, I hear a cough from behind me.*

*I can only just watch my foot twist under an outgrowing root and feel Clay's weight on my back succeed over my efforts, and we are both sprawled there and he is asking where we are and I am fixed in my position under him. There is no pain in the twisting of ligaments as I fall down, the act is too redundant. The clearing still feels close behind me and I have the sense, every time, of having left someone behind—unsure of whether we are being pursued or are in the act of abandoning, and my shoulder is wet with something I can't ever distinguish between blood and tears. In another dream someone has whispered their name into my ear and into Clay's ear, and we have always forgotten.*

Occasionally, we would find the traces of someone else's presence in our closed haven: vague, circling trails in the grass from where small feet had pressed the blades flat against each other. At other times, we could hear quiet movements back in the shadows of the pine trees. The presence drove us, one evening, to curl up in the center of that clearing, and wait for morning, listening to a quiet pacing around our perimeter. Mason seemed to read danger in that sound of footsteps moving through the brush.

Waking up, cold and wet with dew and the forest finally still and quiet, we stumbled through the shadowed morning dampness of the woods. A week later and we were both sent off to daily music lessons, separated for four hours of every day

*for every day, four hours. For every day, four hours of lessons separated.*

*For weeks, four hours of blowing hard on those green cheeks. Afterwards, a quiet standstill in our terms of gaze. Wanting to know what his fingers had pressed upon, pressed into ivory and ebony keys. A means I felt I knew, sore cheeks but something just starting anyway. Blowing into that horn, trying to visualize, maybe just see those keys smashing in my own warped reflection on the brassy curve of the sax's lip. So there are those keys showing in the sax and I don't know what I'm doing but I'm hitting some notes.*

*And it seemed, after some time, that we weren't losing anything for it. After some time, we played together in front*

The eye had gotten it started in a way, people shying away from eye contact, but really it was the music that set the first distinctions into motion. It wasn't really anything, those people. I was just the stranger twin to them. But when we

started doing things with those instruments, there was Clay and there was Mason and whatever the two of us may have been there was just something we couldn't say. By the time we were thinking about going off to college, I was composing and Mason was improvising. He was more than that, though. There was something in his playing, some action you couldn't quite put out there.

From somewhere behind, there is his exhale and a fleeting recollection of sitting in front of a piano on a stage, the two of us playing together.

But someone is stepping up to the podium now and people are shifting in their pews. Someone I have never met is standing in front of the podium. My parents are sitting in the front row and my mother stoops over, shakes across her shoulders. I am having trouble keeping up with his words and my mother continues to weep. Her shoulders continue to shake; my father places his arm around her. The man I have never met walks down from the stage and my father brings her up and into the aisle and people begin to search for their bags and coats from under the pews.

I lie in bed upstairs for a while, in that old guest bedroom, until the last sounds of the reception come to a close. When I make it to the bottom of the steps, I see the girl sitting at our couch with her face intermittently lit a pale blue, a white-yellow, a flashing of red from the television that dimly sounds in front of her. She is still as beautiful as I remember her being.

I had heard of Cynthia from Mason back when he had been playing regularly. I met her once at a bar Mason was playing at perhaps five, six years ago. I was in an unfamiliar city and had not seen my twin brother in months, had heard a few words. We sat together and you could see her eyes go wet

watching him up there, and my eyes were wet. I wanted to get up there and play something with him, almost did before convincing myself my fingers had grown too stiff. The piano sounded like it might have been out of tune and I didn't want to half-ass a piano.

I remember more than anything the way she spoke to me. It seemed as though she was trying to learn something about him from me. She never mentioned the obvious—the replica of this man she was tearing up over and the one clear difference of our eyes. I valued that from her, and the way she sought out particular phrasings from me, tried to catch me mirroring him. But I was not a jazz musician; I wasn't even a musician anymore, and she knew things about him I did not. I remember there was a flicker of jealousy toward him for qualities I was incapable of imagining.

Thinking of these things, how I so wholly stole him away from her that night, and seeing her here now, I think I am rousing him from his dormancy. As I walk to the kitchen and pour two glasses of water, I can hear from the television the voice of a woman describing how a lottery winner's grandchild has just been found dead. And also, I can hear him stirring in alto-rumblings.

I sit down next to her against the light of the television as a commercial floods over the screen. There is no sense of what the product is, only this strange self-deprecatory reference that's supposed to indicate something reliable. She takes the extra glass from my hand, smells of whiskey. She asks me how I am holding up with all of this, where was I the whole time tonight.

I tell her I was with my brother and her face screams quietly; she looks away from me.

She is telling me how much he spoke of me, how much the same we were and how he felt himself a dragged

imitation, how she should catch me at a piano sometime. In this opposition she is describing, I recognize a shared quality, how I'd always felt it there—the confused imitation, which has existed since our childhood; later, despite the separation by both space and time, despite our inability to apprehend difference, to conceive of it, to evaluate each other and ourselves, there was still an underlying faith in a common form which we shared. A romantic belief in an eternal return.

Mason is trying to warn me of something, but the shaping of words seems to have become unfamiliar in his deep slumber spread across the filaments of my mind. He is trying to say a name to me, whispering from within. His or mine, I don't know, but there is a heart beating skittish and fast.

We have been talking for some length of time, she has been talking, and I have been unable to register but small fragments. "He always claimed there was this thing that he was chasing after, trying to catch and something hanging behind him in its own chase. He told me once, he was lost on something or other so he talked a little, more to get the fear out of his system. He said he wasn't sure sometimes if maybe one was just the reflection of the other. He said there was a name. He tried to say it was just some kind of a jazz phantom, but that's shit. He would have nights where he couldn't be alone. Not about sex or anything . . . his eyes would water in mid-sentence." And her eyes are watering and I can tell that Mason is cowering somewhere behind me, closer.

I don't know any terms to put this in but—I don't know how, but I can feel Mason trying to have arms around me. From inside.

I am not aware of the decision, but I have just asked her to watch a home video of us as children. And her eyes are

watering as they were when we watched Mason blow his heart out that night. And there is a heart racing and he's shouting sounds at me—did you do that?—and she's laced her fingers through my hand, her palm is moist or mine is. The feeling seems familiar. She has taken the state I am in as though half of me were dead. She is crying and maybe thinking she is sharing something with me.

And then I am witnessing my left foot stepping toward the television, sliding a tape into the VCR and falling back into the couch. She has composed herself to some extent, a last finger fixing hair behind her ears.

On the television, the two of us come into focus and we are hammering in the last stakes of a tent. I have begun talking, but I am not talking. Mason is trying to whisper a name into my ear if he could just think of it right. It is then that I can first perceive this other intentionality in the shadows of my mind. He is talking to her, she wants to know about piano, how I played it. I cannot understand the words of his response.

On the television screen, at least, there are the two of us there, talking to each other in lowered voices. Mason is loosening his shoes, unzipping the door. This girl and I are still talking and my brother is shaking somewhere behind my eye. I try to concentrate upon the video. It was more than compatibility. We aren't talking, and our parents filming respect that. There is just the background conversation bleeding in here and there. Cynthia is smiling when she is not being spoken to.

In the television, the two of us are pushing our shoes under the tent and there is a cut on Mason's finger, a small spot of blood.

I reach out to see how deep it is and feel it to be only the red mud from the dirt around there. Mason laughs at me and

then I am laughing with him. As we crawl into the tent, zip up, the noise seems to settle down. We lie down. We curl up against one another, close our eyes. I curl up against my brother, close my eyes. From outside the tent somewhere, I can hear a girl asking a boy if he'd play something on the piano, it's just over there? Mason shifts his back, readjusts. I hear someone familiar tell a girl he doesn't know any songs to play. Mason's breathing falls into intervals of regularity and I put my arms around him as I loosen myself to sleep. ♦

# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Rae Bryant** is the author of the short story collection, *The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals* (Patasola Press, 2011). Her stories, essays poetry and intermedia have appeared in print and online at *The Paris Review, The Missouri Review, McSweeney's,* and *Redivider*, among other publications. Her intermedia has exhibited in New York, DC, Baltimore and Florence, Italy. She has won prizes and fellowships from Johns Hopkins, Aspen Writers Foundation, VCCA and Whidbey Writers and has been nominated for the Pen/Hemingway, Pen Emerging Writers, The &NOW Award, Lorian Hemingway, and multiple times for the Pushcart award. Rae earned a Masters in Writing from Hopkins where she continues to teach creative writing and is the founding editor of *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review.* She also teaches and lectures in the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa and *The Eckleburg* Workshops.

It has taken almost twenty years of living in New Orleans for **Julia Carey** to be able to write about the small town in New Mexico where she grew up. "Heart on a Sleeve," is part of a growing collection of short stories all set in Carlsbad. When not dredging childhood fodder for those tales, she writes poetry, reworks a novel, teaches in the Bard Early College and Xavier University English Departments, and cultivates her toddler's love of books. Her work can be found at *Mason's Road*, *Tiferet Journal*, the anthologies *New Orleans: What Can't*

*Be Lost* and *Louisiana In Words*, as well as her website, juliacarey.com.

**Adam McAlpine Clark** is a writer, artist, and social and environmental policy researcher. He currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where he builds terrariums in his free time.

**M. Brett Gaffney**, born in Houston, Texas, works as an associate editor for *Gingerbread House* literary magazine. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Medulla Review, Newfound, Ruminate, Psaltery & Lyre, Stone Highway Review, Slipstream, Wind, Penduline, Cactus Heart, Exit 7, REAL, Still: The Journal, Licking River Review, Sanitarium, Zone 3*, and *Permafrost*.

**Letitia Trent**'s first novel, *Echo Lake*, is available from Dark House Press/Curbside Splendor. Trent's work has appeared in the *Denver Quarterly, The Black Warrior Review, Fence, Folio, The Journal, Sou'Wester, Blazevox*, and many others. Her first full-length poetry collection, *One Perfect Bird*, is available from Sundress Publications. Her chapbooks include *You aren't in this movie* (dancing girl press), *Splice* (Blue Hour Press) and *The Medical Diaries* (Scantily Clad Press). She was the 2010 winner of the Alumni Flash Writing Award from the Ohio State University's *The Journal* and has been awarded fellowships from The Vermont Studio Center and the MacDowell Colony. Trent lives in Colorado with her husband and son and is a co-podcaster for the horror podcast *The Brood.*