

outbreath

short stories, photography, and poetry

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xviii

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editor's note

For me, writing has always mattered. Writing became an outlet for me very early on--whether I was keeping journals, writing poems, or passing notes, it was always my favored form of expression when I was young. As I have grown older, writing has also become a mode of exploration. By creating characters and sorting through their dilemmas, writing offers a way of finding my own solutions. In stories, there is always an ending, even if it is not a happy one. There is always a period at the end of the sentence.

As a result of my experience with Outbreath over the past few years, I have been able to witness my peers' own processes of 'finding out.' Whether through a photograph, a picture, or a story, I find that many of us are asking the same questions about ourselves and each other. Each piece offers its own response. Often the response is not certain; often it is indirect--but each is the beginning of an answer, as much as it is an ending.

This issue of Outbreath, as with all the others, is a sampling of the questions that the students at Tufts are asking. These pieces capture moments in time, whether through a camera lens or through the words of a writer, and ask us to question what they mean. As such, these pieces remember who we have been, explore who we now are, and glimpse who we may become.

Jenna Nissan
Co editor



a photo by meena bolourchi

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a photo by meena bolourchi

I

*Twenty-four channel board, sliders, fingertips.
Turning knobs, electric songs, silent linger kiss.
Fade it in, and trim it out, gunpowder fill the room.
Sit and stare, like stage light glare, louder than the womb.*

Fooled again! I thought. The poetry is mine. All mine. They never ask me to turn that up or turn it down, or give them MORE in their godforsaken monitors. They don't even know it's there. It's safer that way, safer in my head. You've got to protect what you own. Don't you...

-Hey! Hey you! Sound guy! You ready?

I looked up scornfully. Didn't he know that I was busy? Did he really think that I had nothing better to do than to plug in microphones and push buttons? He couldn't tell from my face that I knew his secret. He was stupid and helpless. Did you hear the way he talks? Look at him bouncing around so excited for his thirty-five minutes under the spotlight. I looked down at the coffee, my coffee, and swirled it around once or twice. I didn't want him to think that he could order me around.

I took a sip, lowered it and let the mug slip out of my fingers and wobble still. I reached deliberately towards the board and turned on the control room mic.

-Kick drum please.

I leaked the words like gas from a severed pipeline, but there weren't any matches. Not even a Bic gas-station-counter lighter. I couldn't stall anymore, it was happening.

thump...thump...thump—he responded.

The drummer was the bloody heart of the whole mess. It always started with him. All night he would beat incessantly while the others ran out like veins letting it pulse through them. He didn't even know what he was doing; he just went on pumping it through, one beat after another. He thought it was just a game, just for fun...so ignorant. He looked at me for approval, but I pretended not to see.

thump...thump...thump—he went on.

The signal light on channel eight lit and flickered. I moved the fader up to five decibels and the pounding grew heavier. At ten my temples swelled with each thump. I left it there for just long enough to taste the headache then slid the fader back to five.

-Bass guitar next.

* * *

By the time the sound check ended, the coffee was hot, black hot. I poured again. From behind the bar, the room looked different, open, flashing, not like the foggy drab that I could see from the control room,

but something different. I saw Aaron, the bartender. He was part of it. When the people came, he smiled when he slid drinks across the counter. They asked him questions about Cambridge and about his favorite cocktails and what he thought of the news or their trendy clothes. Then, they left dollar bills wedged under their empty glasses, gulped and staggered, smiled drunkenly and told him that they hoped he'd be here next time. Once the show started, he worked all night. He knew what they wanted and he knew how to give it to them, sucking them in. Then, when they were naked and exposed he bit, filling their minds with booze and his pockets with cash. He didn't try with me though, he knew better. I was too smart for that. When he saw me, he just slithered away.

Aaron pretended that he was busy dragging that dirty white cloth across the bar while I poured my cup of coffee. He wiped and wiped. Maybe, he thought that if he kept shining the bar for long enough that he wouldn't have to talk to me. The soapy rag crept back and forth, again and again, then in circles, like it was pacing. I stared hard and he just pushed his long shiny hair behind his trendy black-rimmed glasses with snobby nonchalance. He pushed two cards face down across the table. I turned up the corner of the first, just enough to read the suit. My bet first...I wondered who would last longer. It was a battle and I wouldn't let him win, not again. I started to see Aaron's reflection in the bar, but he kept cleaning. It shined sharp and beautiful, even in the dark room, clearer and clearer. Then it broke, more than a reflection, two of him and one of me, all in.

-I fold, I said aloud, no answer.

I climbed back into my booth and looked across the audience. On stage, the skinny clowns swayed back and forth as if they were on the deck of some beastly wooden ship. In tidal swell, a barrel rolled down and slammed over the gunwale, the cymbals crashed, heart still beating. A coiled line unwrapped and swirled down, down. The guitarist pulled from the other end trying to stay afloat. Unplugged, he held his instrument in the air above his head, and leaned away, then slammed it down, back to his waist and tumbled for footing. And me, the god of the winds and the sea, when I laughed, they heard thunder. I laid my fingers across all the sliders and inched them up, louder, louder. When the side of the boat hit the waterline, the sea flowed over, cold and salty. Musician legs aren't built for sailing. They stumbled helplessly down the inverted ship like marbles rolling over the edge of the stairs. The bassist slammed against the railing or the keyboard...overboard. The clouds over the stage crashed when the song ended. All of the amplifiers burst into flames then shriveled nervously. I pulled the faders down and gathered them all in greedily. The band bowed after the song was done, feeble, exhausted, tormented and the audience roared.

* * *

Then I saw her. I felt like a lightning rod, skinny and exposed, balanced on the sharpest edge of the roof. I looked down and the ground seemed too far away. I wished I were carrying something that I could duck behind and move past her unnoticed, but there was nothing, nothing except my steaming ceramic...skeleton. I held the cup of coffee against my lower lip and slowly turned it towards me, pouring the scalding liquid down my throat. It burned everything. I could feel my tongue and the roof of my mouth and my all of the tubes that connected them turning red and swelling up like tomatoes. The heat rushed down into my chest and I gasped for breath, but I kept pouring and pouring. I wished she would disappear. It burned all the flesh away, down to teeth and jawbones. Empty. The cup was empty ceramic...skeleton. I couldn't hide behind it anymore. I slipped back behind the bar.

As I measured spoonfuls of black powder grounds, I watched her from the corner of my eye. That

was all I could bear at once. She was golden, regal, like she should have been a statue, but she shimmered in and out of the people, in waves, more like a ghost. I let my eyes slide down her sides and back up her milky arms. I knew that I shouldn't watch her like this, but I couldn't stop, nothing else existed, nothing so great and terrible.

She leaned against the bar and looked at Aaron. She knew him already, that son of a bitch. I wished I could tell her who he really was; she wasn't safe there. He would pull her in and bite. Her eyes glowed emerald and her lips moved fast, too comfortable. She was singing probably, some haunting mermaid shanty. I couldn't hear the words, but I knew that if I could that they would linger in my ears all night, ringing and ringing, angelic host. I wanted to stop him, to save her. He didn't deserve to hear her song. Then it ended. She smiled and I couldn't stand it. I held the glass pot under the tap and filled it to ten.

* * *

As the show rolled on, I couldn't watch, I couldn't rhyme, I couldn't stir up the winds and throw the band over edge; I couldn't hold anyone at all with wooden cross and puppet strings. I could barely even keep the levels straight. My power was gone. I was fixed, screwed down, I couldn't even squirm, and it was all too loud. If she had made a fist then, I would have crumbled all together, but I didn't move, I didn't run. I just laid my head in her milky palms waiting. I had to change something.

When the storm had passed, the tide broke and the people flowed out. Two at time mostly, then in schools with cell phones and winter scarves, packed like wolves with cigarettes. They pulled together and pushed away, through the only door. I dragged my eyes across the crowd, then turned and ran upstream with big steps so my shadow tip-toed behind leaned up and crept over my shoulder. I wrapped the cables and broke the set, cut the power and killed the lights. It was over, another night.

For twenty minutes I was distracted. I had a job to do and knew that something different was at the other end of it. I left everything ready for the next show. I looked at the red, digital stage monitor clock. It flashed twelve-fourteen, on and off. The overtime helped, but it never stopped the pounding. Half an hour after the last chord crashed, the sound was still throbbing in my head.

thump...thump...thump—it bellowed.

I turned around in the sound booth chair nervously and checked everything again. I set the headphones carefully on the left side of the board. Then, I poured down the last half cup of bitter, lukewarm coffee, twisted off the light, and inched down towards the bar. The last climb out of the sound booth was the most terrifying. It was the beginning of the total darkness that would last all night. I had hated the people, there all night, and I waited to leave all along, but when the time came, I trembled and I wanted them back. I clutched the empty mug for all its life and reached my hand out into the dark for the railing. I was alone. Down the stairs...

When I touched the ground and slid my foot forward to prove that I wasn't climbing anymore, I felt one second of relief. Then in an instant I turned the corner and it hit me bright and blinding, straight in the face. She was still there, shimmering, a golden god. How I could have been so careless, I thought. You thought you were safe and you let your guard down. It's not over yet. I pulled back around the corner as if a shotgun had kicked at my shoulder and I fell to the ground. I put my hand out to break my fall, but missed and landed sprawled on the stairs, even though she didn't see me, my pride was stripped away.

Up on my hands and knees, I crept forward and bent my head around the corner just enough that I

could see them. It was Aaron! I should have expected it. There he was, leaning down across the bar, hiding his fangs and dirty dishrag behind his back, bar top shining. He leaned in and he smiled, then he stood up and held his hands out straight, flung the rag to the sink where it swung over the faucet and danced side to side like some frightful one man Vaudeville show. He straightened his top hat and adjusted his glasses, threw the cane aside, and leaned in again, to her, closer.

She curled under him, smiling and batting her long eyelashes, reflecting light in all directions. She didn't know that she was more than him. She didn't know that she was in control. People never know how strong they are. If she could only see from here, she would see how small he was, standing, balanced behind the bar on a plastic milk crate, tip jar clanking, claws concealed, flashy black glasses covering years of shameless theft. If only I could tell her, she would know. He was a wolf and I had to save her. I couldn't let her be his prey. Aaron pushed two drinks across the bar, locked the register, and slid around the end of the bar and up onto the stool next to hers. I couldn't watch anymore.

* * *

Outside, the air was cold. It stung my cheeks, cut through my coat, and wrapped around my waist. I felt real. I turned the key to the stage door and leaned back up against it and let myself slid down my back to the sidewalk. The bottom of my coat slipped up a little and I felt the metal door against my bare skin. The night was not still; cars and taxicabs and nightwalkers rushed around frantically and stumbled back and forth across my sightline. The storefronts all the way up Mass. Ave. still buzzed with neon. In Boston, the winter is redeeming. I knew that it was time for change.

I didn't have to wait long. They came out quickly, stumbling predictably. She swayed towards the street, and Aaron grabbed her arm possessively and reeled her towards his body. She let her cheek press against his chest with her whole weight and the moved slowly up the street. When they got to the end of the block, I pulled my body up off of the door. My back was stiff, and I let my shoulders creep up around my ears, squinted, and shivered. My throat was dry and my eyes were a little watery, but I could still make out the incessant howling, all the wolves were out.

It took them half an hour to walk all the way down the bridge, and I followed closely. It was dark, and I knew that they were too numb with drunkenness to get the sense of being followed, so I didn't try too hard to hide. They stopped at the top of the bridge and looked out across the water. That's when I saw it for the first time, reflection rippling over the water, red and blue, weaving in and out.

Citgo, it proclaimed, the giant billboard heart beating over the city. I looked at the heart it started to beat, enormous, pulsing red and it pulled me in, over the river. I couldn't stop it now.

thump...thump...thump—it beckoned

II

When I woke up, it was eleven-forty-two, but it was still too early. My head was in a vice, metal clamps fused to my temples cranking tighter and tighter. Everything was black and covered in fog. I looked at the window and the sun burst around the edges of the plastic blind like an apocalyptic eclipse. I tried to close my eyes, but it wouldn't stop. It was too late, I was awake.

-It must have been a long night at work, I thought. I wish I never opened the fucking door.

* * *

When the vice loosened and the darkness started to lift, I found myself riding a subway train. I had walked from my apartment on Prospect Street down two blocks then over one and underground to the station, and now I was headed to South Station.

I was reading, but I closed the book at MGH since I missed my stop last time. I looked out the window when the train came out from underground.

black...

black....

black... then flash! The train heaved up onto the rickety bridge. Outside, the water wasn't dark like it was supposed to be, but sharp and white. It came in the window, circled round, and smothered me. Then, from the middle of the illuminant blitz, something less divine emerged.

Citgo, it flashed, scrawled in blue blood over the huge red prism jetting out of the light. I knew I had seen that billboard before, but I didn't know when. I wanted to forget it. I wanted it to die. On and off, on and off, I ducked my head and put my arm across my face, pretended it was gone. I waited, and when I knew it had disappeared, I looked up again. Buildings, apartments, bricks flew by, then the hospital, full of people on stretchers being rushed down the hallways, flat on their backs, blood pouring from their chests. Then, the train dove back into darkness on the other side of the river.

-Park Street, the conductor announced in monotone. I have always wondered if he actually said that every time or if he played a recording. I have to assume the worst. He says it out loud. He pushes a big red button on the dashboard and says it, every time. I thought that I should have recorded all the names of the T stations and brought him a CD. There is nothing worse than monotony. I knew that too well. Maybe he would appreciate a little help, something to stop the empty blur. Maybe I could save him from it. I could stop it.

Most of the audience changed at Park Street. When I'm working, I'm supposed to count the audience.

-For booking, they say, it helps to know.

So, whenever there's a big crowd around I think about counting, but I never get around to it. I get distracted, stuck on one person and I can't look at anyone else, let alone count them! The audience after Park Street was worse than last night at the club. They watched attentively. I wanted to disappear. I crushed the empty cardboard cup in my hand and held it nervously, drips of coffee leaked through the cracks and the plastic cover cracked abrasively.

Across from where I was sitting, a heavy set woman with a plaid purse over her shoulder and under her arm was reading one of those grocery store novels with a mildly pornographic cover. She noticed me looking at her and bent the book in half at the spine and sighed, irritated, and I heard the sound of the breaking paperback cover right through the roar of the subway car. Down the bench, a man was looking at this romance novel woman steadily, but she didn't notice him. She looked back at me as she turned the page even though it was hard with the cover folded over. I liked this woman more than the others. She was only thinking of her own guilt. Not mine.

Farther down the bench, another man was propped uncomfortably against the pole near the end of the section. Then he leaned forward. He stretched his fingers first, then his arm, then deliberately pulled himself

off the pole and laid his hand over some scattered newspaper on the ground. Then, as if something had changed and the desperation of the situation increased suddenly, he gathered all of the papers together with both hands. He looked at his new acquisition like he owned it, then quickly folded it and hid it under his arm. He felt threatened by me. He was glad that he got the paper first before I did. He had seen me eyeing it greedily, he thought. He shifted his weight to the right pulling the tails of his jacket up from under him, then leaned back against the pole, satisfied.

The pole was one seat from the end so that with someone leaning on it, it was impossible for anyone to sit in the last seat. A man in a suit standing above looked aggravated. It could have been about the seat, but more likely it was his wardrobe.

The man by the pole adjusted the newspaper carefully as if he had been assigned to guard it and see that it made it safely to the other side, wherever that was. The man above him reached shuffled around in his pocket and fished out a shiny cellular phone. He nervously squeezed the outside of this metallic creature with his thumb so that an obtrusive blue light carpeted his face.

The blue light reminded me of a place I had been. It seemed far away and I didn't recognize it. I was sitting, outside late at night, close to the ground with my shoulder up against a metal dumpster. I was in an alleyway looking up. In front of me, there was a window blinking on and off, in that same electronic blue. Only here, it meant that the television was on, but somehow I doubted they were watching it. I must have spent an hour crouched outside by the dumpster. It was cold, but it didn't matter. There was a greater urgency about it. Then in an instant, the light flashed on, the window filled with gold and someone walked across the window frame, a stranger, a beautiful woman with bliss-like light rushing out all around her, then someone followed her in blacked out silhouette. When he turned towards the light, he seemed familiar, but my eyes were foggy and adjusted to the darkness and before I could decide who it was, he turned away. Then, right in front of my eyes, he closed in. He walked closer and closer, then grabbed her. They sunk into each other and the light was gone.

thump...thump...thump—it echoed.

The newspaper guardian adjusted the paper carefully, and the man above him checked his phone again, then he bent down and pushed his briefcase under the bench at the side. The man on the seat leaned away, irritated that the briefcase had invaded his space. The ensuing tango sickened me. Luckily the doors slid open then.

-South Station, the driver announced in painful monotone.

I climbed up two flights of stairs to the newly tiled station lobby skipping steps. Then I stopped to catch my breath and went on more slowly. In addition to my apparent lack of physical conditioning, I was afraid that moving too quickly would make me look suspicious. I gasped for breath.

I passed another newsman, this one selling copies of *The Globe* from a plastic milk crate.

-Bus Explodes in London, he screamed, Two Dead in Beacon Street Apartment.

Then, I passed a cart with a popcorn machine and a flock of candy bars. A Milky Way bar took flight off the metal cart like some kind of gull flapping its wings at my head or a hornet buzzing incessantly in my ear, but I swatted it away. It fell to the ground and the attendant chased after me and bent down to pick it up, screaming something in a language I couldn't understand. English probably. I didn't look back. I walked down the tunnel and up the first escalator. Then I weaved in and out of the people with less urgency than me, until I had made it across the food court and outside to the bus terminal. I looked at a big sign full of times and places as I inched up the escalator. Then I turned around and looked up to the top. It was getting longer and longer.

Every second that I rode on the damned machine, more stairs appeared. If I just stood here and let it happen I would never make it to the top. I couldn't afford to wait. I pushed someone aside and ran up to the top.

Nine-twenty four.

The bus to New York left at nine fifteen, so I bought a ticket to Albany instead.

-Nine-forty-five, the ticket man said, twenty minutes.

I sat down and slid my bag under a bench. Then I stood up to go to the bathroom. A voice came over the loudspeaker.

-Please do not leave your bags unattended, all luggage left unattended will be removed and searched.

I went back to the bench and pulled my green duffle bag over my shoulder and turned back, towards the bathroom and held it in front of me to push the door open. I knew they were watching now.

I washed my hands and splashed some water on my face. The paper towel from the industrial plastic dispenser left a light brown paste across my cheeks and forehead. It stung my eyes. I couldn't see it in the mirror, but I could feel it. I washed my hands again and tried to wipe away my face with my sleeve. It didn't work. I looked in the mirror. I was sure they would recognize me. I looked at my hands. They didn't look like mine. Something was wrong with them. I hid them in my pockets.

I smelled coffee, dripping and pouring, scalding black. I could hear it drip across the room. The donut franchise kiosk stood looking at me, appropriately impersonal, and I inched closer. Step, step, step, and then I stopped. The man in line was too familiar. I couldn't risk getting too close. He might talk to me. Do you ever wonder if that woman sitting across from you reading cheap grocery store fiction or the man in line to buy coffee at the bus station is going to recognize you, and for no other reason start talking to you, and things will escalate, and you'll meet again, on purpose this time, and then, before you know it she'll become somebody important, someone that you can stand to lose, and then when she walks off down the street and the wolves will run after her frothing at the mouth and you won't be able to save her.

-I couldn't save her, I mumbled. I couldn't.

The kiosk worker looked at me suggestively. I was at the front of the line.

-Small coffee...black.

The man in line was the man from the T, the one with the cell phone. He must be following me, I thought. I set down the coffee on the floor between my feet and pushed my duffle bag under the bench and took out my book and bent the cover back so that he couldn't see.

-Albany, gate 12.

* * *

When the buzzing floor crescendo peaked, my ballpoint pen slipped nervously from the cup holder on the back of the gray, uncomfortably carpeted seat, and the empty water bottle that had wedged it in place rattled back and forth. The sun stiffly slid a diagonal line down the aisle as the long window moved past the sun. It was too hot to breathe, but I had already unscrewed the vent above my head and no air was coming out. I put my forehead against the window and the thin layer of sweat chilled to frost. It must be cold outside. It helped my headache.

Ludlow, Chicopee, Springfield. Only two hours out of Boston, maybe less.

I stumbled to the back of the bus leaning heavily on the head rest of every seat along the way. They were moving, the headrests, as if they didn't want me to touch them. I wouldn't want me to touch them. The floor

jahn sood

rushed towards the front of the bus and I drove my knees up over it. I was swimming up stream. I swayed back and forth. The bus pulled in the opposite direction.

-How dare you defy me, the bus cursed.

I bumped someone's elbow and he woke up startled, then looked at me scornfully. His cell phone buzzed and the blue light swept across his face, then behind me, towards the front of the bus another phone rang, then another and another. People started talking loudly, uncomfortably loudly, and all their faces were glowing blue.

-Be quiet, I'm trying to sleep!

-No cell phones

-Park Street, the voice said.

-Citgo, it flashed.

thump...thump...thump—it pounded.

Outside the windows, the sharp white light came back, knocking at the windows. The light knew everything.

* * *

-Go away, she said, I don't know you.

-You have to let me in! Don't listen to him, I screamed, and I gasped for breath at the top of the stairs. He's a wolf; he'll bite. His claws are sharp. Why don't you know! Run, okay! Get out of here! Aaron, I won't let you do it. Not again!

Aaron pushed her aside and stepped forward, chest in the air. He swung the door in my face, but I pushed forward so it couldn't close.

-How did you get in here? He interrogated. Nobody invited you!

-Just make him leave, she whispered.

-I will, I screamed, panting, I'll save you! She didn't hear me.

-I will, he said calmly, looking her straight in eyes. She believed that!

* * *

The white light burst into yellow flames, the same color as the kitchen window, then red like the beating heart over Boston.

-Black...small coffee, black.

They were all strangers. The woman from the T looked up and shook her book in the air like it was some kind of brimstone Bible, and her eyes rambled on about Hell. Then, the man with the cell phone threw his coffee on the floor and they were all glowing blue. Blue like TV glow in living room windows. Blue like sirens on the top of racing police cars.

I fell through the door into the claustrophobic bathroom cell and the door slammed itself behind me. Alone, I turned on the water. It was cold and it came too fast. I scrubbed and scrubbed and the water flowed out in all directions. It was too cold to stand, but I couldn't stop, not until it was gone. I scrubbed my bloodstained knuckles and scarlet palms, I scrubbed my eyes to make it stop beating, but it went on and on, the billboard heart pumping high over the city and the endless pounding in the foggy club. There was barely room to breathe in this little box. The floor was moving and the water was cold. I shivered violently.

It was coming up, up to my knees, then my chest, then I was drowning in it, and the door flew open. I stumbled out into the hall outside her apartment. She lived on the fourth floor, and I ran around the stairs taking half flights at a time. I lowered my shoulder and pushed through the door at the bottom, cradling something in my arms, and I was running. I ran towards the sign. I ran with beating heart, to the beating heart. My hands were hot and wet, pouring red. It was pounding, and squirming and pulsing on, but I clutched it tight. I held on. You've got to protect what you've got. It was mine. He'd never take one of them again. He'd never take anything again. The wolf was dead. I ran up onto the bridge and stood for just a minute.

thump...thump...thump—it moaned.

I held her heart high up in the sky and showed it to flashing prism above, then I pulled back my arm hurled it into the river and ran.

I ran for the train. I ran for the bus. Then the bus peeled away and I was running, alone, in the middle of the highway looking at my bloody hands and their blue faces and their beating hearts, strangers.



a photo by benjamin taylor

generation

kristen surya

it's Saturday morning and
there's a pocket scratching my chest
Cups of strong coffee
cup to bowl to cup to bowl
just the way Tata did it
toes curl under the table
And thick blankets to boot.

This house smells like curry
Fried chillis make us cough
The lights are on and bare feet
Rough, calloused
a lying heap of legs and arms
and feet and limbs and you and
Me and him.
On the sofa and telling stories
that no one sees
between the silences of breath.

Hey, I cried a little
The sound of three sisters
strong voices shout and laugh,
their stories lull me to sleep
and brothers whisper secrets.
In the darkness of the night,
we're almost the same.

They've been through the world
Three girls on a plane
I'm the daughter digging her toes
into the carpet
Nine views from three mouths
but I hear every word:

Take naked strolls
lie on the sand in the beach
and let the water w(ash) up into your
hair.
The day he died
The rest is on its way-

Big clothes big shoes
Electric blue toes in old Indian leather
A red and blue plaid shirt
Tata-

We have so much to say
We have so much to say.

home

victoria petrosino

The depths of the lake
support me as I lie on my back,
and ripples, moist like your lips,
wash over me.

Before you,
I was a vagabond bathed
in the comfort of anonymity.
I wore tired eyes and only smiled
when the rain erased my footprints.

But when the heat of the summer
silenced the crickets, and the lake—
like a mirror—rested,
I let you hold me
and I forgot my transience.



Alexanderplatz

a photo by Zach Witlin

drawn from life

an excerpt from professor jonathan strong

Drawn from Life will be published in March 2008 by Quale Press. The novel traces the aesthetic and erotic development of an artist, in over a hundred short chapters, from age two to his late fifties. In the following excerpts, Pete (a Midwestern suburban boy) is fifteen, it's the summer of 1960, and he is on an adventurous trip hiking from Machu Picchu along the as-yet-unexplored ancient Inca Road.

Pete was surprised to be the first to reach the ridge. He saw before anyone else the vast landscape of countless green mountains and deep valleys and puffs of cloud passing below him, rising, dissipating, and far in the distance the highest snowy peaks of all the Andes.

Here came his new friend Talcott up the stone staircase of the Incas to join him. The other two boys and their Ancient History teacher, whom they now called Jerry, were dawdling below, maybe even resting. "It's a lot cooler up here," panted Talcott. Pete was suddenly aware of everything about him—how sweaty he smelled, the deep breaths he was taking, the way he swung his long arms to cool himself off. They looked almost alike in their leather hiking boots with leather laces, their baggy dusty chinos and white T-shirts wet in the armpits. They were only reconnoitering for the big trek tomorrow, so they had left their identical fifty-pound rucksacks down in camp. "What a kick, man," Talcott said. He grabbed Pete's soft bicep and squeezed it in his excitement.

Sharing a pup tent, farting from the odd things they ate and drank, sleeping beside each other in their down bags, then waking in the dewy mornings and looking over at the brown head on the light brown arm, Pete did not know how he could still keep what he felt inside him, but he knew he had to. He did say, philosophically, "Being way up here makes me somehow love the whole world."

"Man," Talcott whispered, then he shouted, "Yeah, I love even you!" and leaned his head over to smack a brief exuberant kiss on Pete's sweaty cheek.

"You're such a weirdo," Pete said as he was expected to when Talcott went into his beatnik act, but Pete's heart was shaking in his chest. This was the Talcott he had surreptitiously watched from across the classroom and down his row of first basses in chorus but never talked to. Then Talcott's parents, who seemed to know Pete's parents, had convinced them to sign Pete up for this amazing trip. Mom and Dad told him they thought it would help get him over his timidity and of course would be good for his art. And in the spring they suggested he bring Talcott out to Gramma's so they could get to know each other better before Peru. There the two of them had driven the tractor up the rutted road and all around the meadow, Talcott steering wildly on purpose and Pete standing on the hitch behind with his hands on Talcott's waist to keep steady. The sensation had lasted for days in Pete's hands. He had drawn the scene many times in his private sketchbook. Now he

jonathan strong

would be drawing this scene too, a couple of high school boys way above clouds on these crumbling overgrown stone steps over five hundred years old. Pete had been lifted out of flat suburban Illinois to this Peruvian mountaintop and been kissed on the cheek by someone completely unlike himself in every way.

In the ruins of Machu Picchu lying under the stars in their sleeping bags Pete and Talcott had been talking in soft voices, heads inches apart. The others had camped on a lower terrace, but not being sleepy yet Pete and Talcott had climbed higher up. Talcott said it was too cool a thing to be in such a place at night and sleep through it. The next day they would be leaving over the mountain on the unmapped Inca road carrying what they needed on their backs like explorers.

For a while Talcott explained Zen Buddhism to Pete, and then he got talking about the Blues versus Rhythm and Blues. Then he wanted Pete to define Cubism and Dada and Abstract Expressionism. Talcott said what had come to matter most to him in life was being able to express things completely at the moment he felt them. That was Zen, that was Blues, that was modern painting too, wasn't it? So Pete softly touched the back of Talcott's hand resting there in the stubbly grass of the terrace and said, "I guess then I meant to say up on the mountain that I loved you too."

Talcott's hand jumped away. "In the cosmic sense like we were saying. You said you loved the whole world."

"Then you said you loved even me."

"Yeah, and then you said I was such a weirdo." He was looking at Pete's hand still there in the starlight unable to draw itself back. "But I didn't mean I wanted us to make out, man," Talcott said.

"I didn't say anything about making out," Pete said but knew he had already shown it in the way he had touched the cold skin of Talcott's hand. Now Talcott was looking at his face with penetrating eyes lit by the stars. "I didn't mean I wanted to make out," Pete said again. Talcott turned and looked blankly up at the sky. He made a frustrated sound with his lips.

All afternoon Pete had been imagining kissing him tonight. He and Dirk sometimes kissed when they wrestled. He and Marc even kissed a few times during their beat-off sessions. With Wayne it had been only kissing along with feeling each other up. But Talcott seemed older than any of them, not because he was already sixteen but because, even though he acted like a beatnik, he did not ever act like a kid. Pete turned on his side to stare into the wall of stones rising beside them to the topmost terrace.

"Hey, man," Talcott said, "we don't have to get into this." He put his hand on Pete's shoulder and pulled him back so now Pete was also staring up at the stars and the sky in its blackness. "We both know it's normal to have homosexual feelings, they're part of the stage we're at, but we don't have to act on them. I bet what you really feel, Pete, is homesick," he added in a calmer voice.

"Maybe I just love you as a person," Pete said quietly.

"I love you as a person too," Talcott said. "Now let's get to sleep."

Pete thought for a while. They had a long trek ahead up over the mountain and beyond the ridge they had climbed that afternoon and down across the knife edge, as Jerry called it, into those

dry green forests. They would have to hack their way through the vines and creepers looking for the half-buried stones of the ancient road. They would go as far as their oatmeal cakes and dried fruit would take them.

Now Pete was remembering the night on the bus when the Indian ladies in the seat opposite had taken up a song to pass the slow time on the high dark plain before descending to the lights of Cuzco. Peruvian music had a strange quality. In market places it bounced along strumming and tootling, but to Pete's ear the tunes were nonetheless sad. When those ladies with their long skirts and bowler hats had sung without the happy instruments to keep them going their melodies hung mournfully in Pete's ears along with the fussy clucking of a hen on the overhead rack and the worried snuffling of a piglet amid the sacks piled in the aisle.

On the ashen mountain, lost, where there was no map, no human footprint, Pete was not afraid. The other boys were. That morning they had taken a ridge that ran not above the Urubamba valley as they thought but further off into the unknown. The intermittent steps of the Inca road had misled them. And then leaning out to cut a sapling to replace his lost canteen cap Jerry had slipped down the slope and sprained an ankle. He was still hobbling. And smoke was rising up from smouldering fires, spontaneous combustion burning off a mountainside of dry undergrowth. The five of them were safely above those creeping little flames, but the summit loomed over them with daylight fading behind it fast.

Jerry said they needed to gain the next ridge and follow it down to the river. He said his ankle was fine. Ed and Farley were complaining at every step, and Talcott had joined them now and left Pete to his silent slogging. Ed's whimpers and Talcott's cusses floated down to slower Pete, who felt inwardly stronger than they were. It was a matter of lifting one foot and then the other and not complaining.

When they gained the ridge the going got easier and sunnier. They stopped to eat their last oatmeal cakes and drain their canteens. They had one hour of light to make it down. But the ridge descended too sharply and came to an abrupt precipice. With not enough time to climb back up they made camp on a rocky shelf ten feet wide as darkness came on.

No one was talking now. They lined their sleeping bags perpendicular to the edge, and Pete lay next to Talcott for the first time since their midnight talk in the ruins. He soon heard the steady breathing of Talcott's exhausted sleep. It was suddenly very cold.

Why was Pete not afraid? He had thought about it and knew for sure he was not. He had been scared the first day on the knife edge, but that was because the bright void on either side had dazzled him. Now he was on a sturdy ledge with darkness all around and no stars because it was beginning to spit a freezing rain. Farley was sniffling on the other side of Talcott.

Pete knew he would get home to Illinois or at least was not imagining otherwise. What he was afraid of in his life had turned out to be that he still wanted to touch Talcott lying there beside him and that Talcott was not even in the deepest corner of his brain thinking of Pete now but probably dreaming of girls.

38th parallel

Chaeyeong Yoo

I.

Father found them in the mountains,
palm-sized propaganda notes scattered about,
hiding and popping their damp bodies
from scads of leaves
like spring mushrooms.

After three years of war, rice was scarce— and people, too.
“We went over the hills,” Grandma tells me.
The Hills of Hunger: the swollen bodies, red heat and mosquito bites.
The children learned that certain flowers could be eaten,
that certain grass is sweet between their swallows,
that certain people are not people.

Autumn trees, patches of color casting shadows—
the hills and mountains, where North Koreans, the red goblins,
used to hide, swirled about the village—
the countryside of grass houses, bearing too many children,
persimmon trees, tall and crammed bodies
of the front yard, bowed to the thatched roofs,
the branches heavy with unripe fruits.

Back then, winter was Father
popping the fresh snow into his mouth and licking the icicles
on the sills. This winter would be less hungry than before:
he thought about the food stocks, red fruits
cold and sweet against his tongue—
reminded him of spring: all the candies for propagandas,
as many as he could find.

II.

Turn it off.
Again and again, they will repeat
themselves too many times.
I turn off the television and forget
those commercials.

I see a small girl singing
their national anthem. Red rouged, she repeats
the name of her dear father many times.
I watch two small boys
picking the cold noodle bits
from the cement floor of the market,
their protruding stomachs still hungry.
Through the computer screen, I see the families
uniting from both Koreas, clutching each other.
Wordless, they hold on until the annual event
is over.

What did the newspaper say?
They still want to unite or don't? I can't
quite hear what the interpreters are saying.

Mother, I will remember to feed my parrot
and not to e-mail. I will remember to water
the garden and change the baby's diaper. I will
remember
that television is only a “Stupid Box”—
again and again,
I will repeat myself.



a photo by jillian russo

the waking

Serena Crosina

I'm seven and in my sleep dreaming
of sleep.

The tree, an old and laddered beech,
gives a great green bellow
and settles its rugged arms
into a cradle, rocking and alive
with darting sunshine.
I feel the tides invisible,
the so persistent tug at those
big roots, and my long hair mottles
in the wind.

It's golden summer coming,
sings the tree through the tiny
red throats of the cicadas,
and I am now awake
in my dreaming of sleep.

Here they lie, and lying they say
that the world is a serpent of colors
and the spin of a hydrogen atom
along the bark of this
universe-tree.

I roll over, and
curl around my little heart,
beating.

Sometimes I imagine a place where there are no fathers or mothers or friends. It's hard for me to imagine what this place looks like, because I think it would be different for everyone—for me it might involve a snowy lake and a cabin, but for my mom it would involve beauty parlors and make-up, and for my dad there would have to be computers. What I know about this place is that everyone there is happy. And some people sit and think and don't talk to anyone, and other people exercise or work at math. And no one is expected to need anyone else. I think I could live in a place like that.

I don't remember my first home, because when I was four my dad got really good at his job, and his company sent us to New York City so he could make a lot of money. But I like to look at pictures and pretend that I still live there. Our old home was in New Hampshire, and there were lots of mountains and lots of snow, and in all the pictures Mom and Dad are smiling and standing close. There was a front porch with a rocking chair and a firepit in the backyard. Mom says I had a blue room on the second floor and kept X-men action figurines on my bed. I picture myself sleeping next to a window that looks over the mountains, with lots of action figurines to go adventuring with in my dreams, and I know I must have been happy then.

When Dad told me that we would be moving again, he told me really slowly and carefully, like I would be upset or throw something or say I wouldn't go. He sat me down, each of us at one end of the big oak dining table, and looked at me very seriously across the many feet between us.

"I know it's a hard time for a boy your age to move, Jeffrey," he said. "You've got your friends and your whole life here in the city."

He waited like there was something I was supposed to say, but I didn't know what it was, so I just stayed quiet.

"It's a hard time for all of us to move. But your mom and I have agreed it will be for the best. If I take the job in Pittsburgh, there will be a lot more opportunities, for all of us."

I heard a dish shatter on the floor from inside the kitchen. Dad flinched and glanced over his shoulder.

"They have some really nice middle schools out there. You could go to private school," he said. He bit his bottom lip. "What do you think?"

"Public school will be fine," I said.

"Oh. So you're okay then, about the move?" He clasped his hands together without waiting for me to answer. "We'll have a backyard," he said. "And a neighborhood. I know you've always wanted that."

"A backyard," I repeated slowly. I thought for a moment. "Yes, that will be nice."

Dad stood up and walked down to my end of the table. He placed his hand on my shoulder. "You're very mature, you know that, Jeffrey? Sometimes I forget how mature you are."

He took his hand from my shoulder and straightened his tie. After he left the room, I walked down the hall to my bedroom and closed the door. I thought about Pittsburgh and my backyard and the things I could do in it, like sit and read and think without being bothered. And I thought how I could eat by myself in the

lunchroom without the librarian coming to sit with me and telling me about her two grandsons and her family picnics, while I just sit there and say, “That’s nice,” over and over because that’s what you are supposed to say to people like that. And I thought that in Pittsburgh, it would be all right with everyone else that I didn’t have friends, because I would be new, and it’s hard to make friends when you’re new. And then maybe Mom wouldn’t look at me with concern and tell me to invite John from next door over to play video games or tell me to join the basketball team.

“You’re very tall for your age,” she always said. “You’d be good at basketball.”

Yes, I decided. Pittsburgh would be nice.

Just then Mom knocked twice on the door and came in without waiting for me to answer. I was sitting on my bed, and she sat down next to me and put her arm around me.

“I know how you feel, Jeffrey,” she said. “I’m leaving all my friends behind, too.”

She rested her cheek against my shoulder and hugged me a little tighter. “I was upset about leaving my job at the hair salon, but your father said I could find another job out there. He said he’d look into it.”

“That’s nice,” I said.

She sighed so heavily I thought maybe she had been holding all her breath for the past few minutes, like one of those people that trains for the Guinness Book of World Records. “I suppose,” she said. She pushed herself off the bed. “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, and by the time she left the room, I was already thinking about what kind of world records there are, wondering if there were any I could beat.

In my new house in Pittsburgh, there is a little old Asian lady that lives across the street. Every morning, she sits outside on the stoop in a hot pink jacket on a little chair with wooden legs. It is a small stoop, and she doesn’t keep pots of flowers or little ornaments on it. She doesn’t drink tea or read a book. She just sits for hours, looking across the street. She is the first person I see when I wake up every morning. It’s nice knowing there is someone else like me, who just likes to sit and think.

We moved in a few weeks before school started, and Dad enrolled me in the eighth grade of Elmer Academy, even though I told him public school would be just fine. I thought I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone because I’m new, but all the kids here approach me like I’m one of those immigrants I learned about from Europe, and they’re trying to teach me their language.

“You’re new here,” a girl will say. She’ll smile in a way that says she’s proud because she’s being kind and charitable like her parents always said she should. “I’m Tiffany.”

And Tiffany will ask me where I’m from, and when I tell her, she’ll say how New York City must be exciting, much more exciting than Pittsburgh. And she’ll say she wants to live there one day.

“That’s nice,” I’ll say.

And the next day I’ll meet Brittany, and Brittany will tell me she moved here too, when she was eight years old, and she understands how hard it is moving and making friends.

“You’re tall,” she’ll say. “You should join the basketball team.”

And I’ll tell her yes, maybe I will, because that is what I always tell my mom, and it seems to make her

happy.

And then when I see Brittany and Tiffany and Claire and the boy Sam with the glasses in the hallway, they smile and wave at me like we're good friends. And when Mom says, "Did you make any friends at school today?" I can say, "Yes, I met a girl named Claire," and this seems to make her happy.

Mom isn't making friends yet though, and most days when I come home she is sitting on the floral couch in front of the television, watching one of those shows where someone's father is also their brother and the people always get pregnant or divorced or die. Mom used to tell me about the ladies that worked at the hair salon with her, and about the customers and their families, but now she tells me about the people on the television.

"Danielle and Mr. Million are getting married," she says.

"That's nice," I say.

Dad is making friends though, and I met one of them last week. When I came home from school, his friend was sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea out of the mug with the purple flowers. There was a bright pink ring of lipstick on the rim of the mug, and she was wearing a business suit like Dad's, except with a skirt instead of pants. You could see her long, freckled legs. She smiled when I came into the kitchen.

"Hi there," she said.

Dad turned around from the stove and smiled too. "There he is," he said, and pulled me into the crook of his arm and rocked me around a little like we were wrestling buddies. "Jeffrey, this is one of my business partners, Kathleen. I brought her here to see the new house."

Kathleen stood and offered me her hand. "It's a lovely house," she said.

"Thank you," I said and shook her hand. She wore a silver necklace with a heart charm that settled in between her breasts. The whole kitchen smelled of rose petal perfume.

Dad invited me to have tea with them and he poured me a cup before I could answer, so I sat and listened to them talk about figures and computers and things I didn't understand. Kathleen asked me how I liked my new school and if I was making friends.

"Yes," I told her. "Lots."

After a little while Dad told me he was going to drive Kathleen home, so I went into my room and looked for the little pink lady, but she wasn't there because it was almost evening. I went into the backyard instead, and lay down on the grass and looked into the trees, counting how many shapes I could find between the leaves.

Last week Mom started working at a nail salon, and Dad says that she is making friends. But Mom told me when Dad was at work that she misses home, and that the nail salon isn't half as good as the hair salon because a lot of the ladies that work there don't speak her language.

"What language do they speak?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, and sighed, heavy like a Guinness Book of World Records breaker again. "Chinese, or Korean, or something. It's hard to understand."

This made me think of the little Asian lady across the street, and I wondered if that's how she spent her afternoons, painting little flowers on people's nails. I guess Mom finds Asian people hard to understand, but I

think I understand the little lady that lives across the street better than I've understood anyone my whole life.

Now that Mom is working at the nail salon, she drives me to school on her way to work, and this is nice because I don't have to share a seat with someone on the bus. The other boys always throw things across the aisles like food or footballs, and the girls always talk to me about movies and birthday parties and their annoying little brothers.

"That's too bad," I say, about the brothers.

In Mom's car, I stare at the yellow lines on the black pavement and watch as they blend into one, and she listens to the news and says "tsk-tsk" when she hears about something bad that happened like the store that burned down on Main Street or the soldiers that died overseas.

"Have a good day at school," she says when we arrive. Sometimes I see Tiffany or Brittany or Claire when I leave the car and they wave and say "hi," and this seems to make Mom happy.

Yesterday when I woke up, I looked for the little lady in the hot pink jacket, but she was gone. At first I thought I was mistaken, and I blinked twice to fix my eyes. When I saw for certain she wasn't there, I felt angry, like she had betrayed me. Then I thought maybe she was just a little tired this morning and would be out in a little while. But then I thought how in the two months I'd known her, she had never been too tired to be on time in the morning, and I started to worry. I brushed my teeth and put on my clothes and sat in front of my window and waited.

Mom knocked twice on the door and came inside without waiting for me to answer. "Jeffrey? You'll be late for school," she said. She was drinking tea out of the mug with the purple flowers on it.

I didn't answer her or even turn around because I didn't care about school just then.

"Jeffrey?" she said. "What are you looking for?"

"The little lady that lives across the street," I said. "She didn't come outside today."

"Oh," Mom said. She paused. "Yes, I've seen her too. Well, it's getting cold. Maybe it's just too cold today."

I thought about this, but I didn't answer. I didn't want it to be too cold.

"We really have to go to school, okay? I'll be late for work and you'll be late for classes. Come on, now." She placed her hand on my shoulder and after a minute I got up and followed her out of the room.

I thought about the little lady all the way to school, wondering whether she had a nice warm place inside where she did her thinking in the winter, or whether she was tired of thinking, or got too old and died. I tried to imagine her room in her house, and I wondered whether the walls were hot pink, or if she kept dolls on her bed to go adventuring in her mind with. I was still thinking about this in homeroom when Brittany tapped my shoulder.

"Jeffrey?" she said. She thrust a piece of paper into my hands. "The homecoming parade is coming up, and the whole eighth grade makes a banner and a float every year. We're having the meeting on Friday after school. You should come."

I looked down at the flyer, which had a picture of a sheep pointing its hoof at me. "We want EWE!" it said.

Brittany smiled. "It's a great way to get involved."

"Thanks," I said, and put the flyer in my backpack.

When I got home from school, mom was sitting at the kitchen table, and her eyes were all red and

veiny, like someone had colored them with magic marker and done a bad job at it.

“Your father won’t be home for dinner,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

“He’s working late,” she added.

I stayed in the doorway of the kitchen because I felt a little nervous about sitting down, like Mom would start crying or yelling or cursing, and I wouldn’t know what to do. I could smell pot roast in the oven. Finally, my backpack was feeling too heavy, so I put it on the ground.

Mom noticed the flyer sticking out of the zipper and the sheep’s crumpled face. “What’s that?” she asked.

I took it out and handed it to her.

“Oh, Jeffrey, this looks like fun!” she said. “You should go!”

I said I would, because I knew it would make her happy, and I didn’t want her to look so sad anymore.

She wiped her eyes and came and put her arms around me. “I’m so glad you’re making friends,” she said.

She walked past me into her bedroom and closed the door, and I thought I heard her start to cry, so I went into the backyard and looked at the trees. I could still hear her crying through the window, so I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes and hoped that the little lady would be there again in the morning, but she wasn’t.

For the past few days, I’ve been dreaming of ambulances and fire trucks and sirens. I wake up in the middle of the night and think the little old lady has died and that no one realized it for a little while because she hasn’t talked to anyone in years but that maybe it’s started to smell so someone called to have her taken away. And this makes me really sad, and I feel even as if I might cry when I wake up thinking this. But the sirens are always just part of my dream, and when I look across the street the yard is still and quiet. I wake in the morning and wait for her by the window, but it’s been five days, and I still haven’t seen her.

Today on the way to school, Mom kept the radio off and talked to me about the homecoming meeting.

“Do you have any ideas for the banner?” she asked.

I didn’t know what sort of ideas I was supposed to have about sheep. “Not really,” I said.

“Well, you’ll probably need cotton,” she said. “For the sheep’s wool on the float. You tell them I can help buy the cotton, if they need it.”

I thought it would be better if Mom went to the meeting because she was much more excited about it than I was, and she really liked making friends, but I knew that’s not the way things worked.

“Okay,” I said.

“It says the meeting goes until six. I’m having dinner with a friend from the nail salon after work today, so Dad will come get you at the school, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

Except that in homeroom, Brittany told me the meeting was postponed until next week. “The PTA couldn’t get enough cotton for today,” she said. She was chewing bright pink bubblegum. “But next week, be there. And bring some ideas for the banner.” She blew a slobbery bubble and then slurped it back into her mouth and winked at me, as if it was a secret.

So after school, I took the bus home like usual, and I thought about things like how many

colors there are in a school of fish, or if the moon really looks like an old man up close, with wrinkles the size of the Grand Canyon. When I got off the bus, I stood outside for a minute and looked across the street, but I couldn't make out what was inside the windows. I started to feel sad thinking about the old lady, so I went inside.

When I walked into the kitchen, Dad was standing in his underwear, pouring a glass of water. He turned around, and he had the same look as when he walked into Guiseppe's Restaurant and saw all his friends there for his birthday because Mom invited them as a surprise.

"Jeffrey," he said. He cleared his throat. "I thought you had a meeting."

"It got postponed until next week," I said. I scratched my elbow. "There wasn't enough cotton."

"Oh," he said. "Well, one of my business meetings got cancelled, too. I was just about to get in the shower." He looked down as if he was apologizing for his underwear.

"Why don't you go in your room and put on some music?" he said. "I might run an errand after the shower."

"Okay," I said.

He stood leaning against the counter as if he might say something more, but then he turned and walked quickly past me to the bedroom.

I walked back into the living room to go to my room, and I saw a fur coat lying on the floral sofa. It was long and looked quite soft and heavy so I picked it up and rubbed it against my cheek. It smelled of rose petal perfume.

I put the coat back down on the sofa and went into my bedroom and closed the door, but I didn't put any music on like Dad said, because I don't like music and don't have any of my own. A few minutes later there were footsteps in the hall, and then the engine started, and I heard wheels against the pavement. Except Dad never took his shower, and I was afraid to leave my room, so I put my hands over my ears and pretended like I was underwater, where there are no sounds or sights or smells.

This morning I woke to sirens again, except this time it wasn't sirens, and it wasn't just in my head. It was Mom's voice, only much higher and louder and wailing, the way ambulances wail to let you know something's wrong. Dad was yelling also, and there were loud thuds against my wall like bombs. I heard Dad say to stop throwing things, but then there was an even louder crash that shook my feet, and I thought maybe the ground was caving in. Mom's voice got louder and louder, until it didn't even sound like her anymore, so I put my hands over my ears, but I could still hear her, and it made me shake and shiver, so I walked into the living room.

There was broken glass on the floor from a picture frame, and the fur coat that smelled of rose petals was still there, only there were clumps of fur all over the living room, and scissors laying by the television. Dad cursed loudly from inside the bedroom, and I felt like I was inside one of the shows with Danielle and Mr. Million, and how if Mom were watching, she would say, "Mr. and Mrs. Tompson had a fight," and I would say, "That's too bad." And then I started wondering if Dad was really my brother, or how much cotton it takes to build a sheep, and the yelling got louder so I couldn't even think, and I was breathing really heavy, so heavy I thought I must have broken a record. And I thought of the little pink lady, and how Mom had said, "Maybe it's just too cold." So I picked up the fur coat, and I walked outside.

I walked across the street even though I was still in my pajamas, and the fur coat was so long it dragged across the pavement. When I reached the old lady's door, I rang the doorbell, and it sounded like a music box, and I closed my eyes and wished and wished that she was still alive and still sitting and thinking and that I wouldn't smell her dead body. And then the door opened, and a little old lady was standing there, only she wasn't wearing her hot pink jacket, she was wearing a sweater and blue jeans, so at first I barely even recognized her.

"Hello," I said.

She smiled and lots of little wrinkles formed under her eyes.

"I live across the street," I said. "I came to ask where you've been."

She didn't say anything, but it wasn't like what Mom said about the ladies at the nail salon, because I don't like to say much either. We spoke the same language.

I lifted up the fur coat and held it out in front of me for her to see. "I brought you this," I said.

She reached her hand out and ran her fingers over the fur. I held it further away from my body, and she squinted at me and took it from my hands. She brought it close to her chest and hugged it, and little tufts of fur poked between her fingers.

"Well, goodbye," I said.

She said something in Chinese and bowed her head and smiled. She closed the door, and I sat down on her front stoop, and from there I couldn't hear the yelling, so I closed my eyes and imagined I was in one of the photographs from New Hampshire where Mom and Dad are smiling and standing close, and there are mountains like marshmallows, and a bed full of action figures, and a room with blue walls.

blank

Scott Newton

Light shines down on the blank white paper.
My mother's image, strong and clear, makes its mark
For ten perennial seconds. Then it is gone.
The paper floats in the murky liquid while
Heavenly beings unlock the power within it.
First, the big, sparkling eyes staring back at me.
Then the thick, knotted curls that I once played with.
Finally, the infamous smile bursts through the paper,
Soothing my soul as I watch the transformation.
Ten more ticks of the clock and I'm peering down
At her loving countenance. My lips part and I smile.
She smiles back.
The paper traps my mother in its iron grasp
And she is stuck, trying to jump out and hug me.
She begs for immortality, and I oblige.
Her image floats into another bucket of liquid, this time clear.
My legs tremble as I pick her up, about to place her in the
Final bucket, the great fixer of eternal life.
Someone flips a switch, the universe explodes, and bright light
Pours onto her face.
Her curls turn gray, then white, then disappear.
A tear rolls down my cheek as her smile is erased from existence.
In a mad dash, I throw the paper into the bucket,
Thrashing it around, hoping that some part of her will remain.
Her last tooth runs off the paper as I beg God for mercy.
My eyes perceive the paper, ghastly white and featureless,
No longer trapping the soul of my creator.
A picture is supposed to tell a thousand words,
But this blank monstrosity only represents my bleeding heart.

the dim day

Serena Crosina

It was for me
the sweeping swallow calling,
falling between buildings
tall and grey with dusk-lines
and the virgin grim
of city life.

I remember it; the
screech of birds so
haunted so
enchanting and my
grounding, grinding
conflict. You,
high walls winding up
and up against you,
leaking dank dark hurt
beneath the swollen cut
of chimneys.

It was the city from the evening
news, not slick polyglot guidebooks
expounding the utility of art. I
was sitting crouched and coiled,
an urban gutless snake on
lukewarm tile.

Eighth floor, the drop of coins
and marrow down to
concrete bases growing
weeds like blunted chisels;
the single time and moment
when I, in silence,
felt the daring light go out.



Raw
a photo by Celeste Codington-Lacerte

I see them now, Father and Mother, without me. They are sitting on the bed in the room facing the street. It is summer, and so they are sweating. The lights are off because of the mosquitoes. His face rests in the trough between her neck and her shoulder. The coarse grey bristle on his chin bothers her, but she says nothing.

Father used to be one of the lower officers in the Railways. Mother was a school teacher. He earned seven hundred rupees every month and got free tickets once a year to visit any place, by train, in India. In the summer, when she had time off, they would go to the Vaishnu Devi temple in Jammu and pray for a son.

She wears an orange sari. The pallu has fallen to the side, and the upper part of her chest is naked. The folds of skin on her neck ripple onto and over the gold chain she has worn since marriage. That was fifty years ago. He is retired now, and she has quit her job to cook him food and wash his clothes and listen to his diatribe against the Congress, and his faithful justification of the Shiv-Sena and the riots killing and raping Muslim women after the Babri Masjid case last year. In the evenings she makes him tea and reads him the front pages of the English newspapers.

Tonight he cries softly against her flesh.

She looks around the bedroom. It is dark, but she cleans the room every day and can fill in, from memory, the parts the streetlights have left untouched. There is a BSNL calendar on the wall. The month of August, she remembers, has a man in a hard hat standing in a rice field in Punjab. At the bottom it says "Connecting India." Next to the calendar is a photo of her dead parents. Next to that is a photo of his dead parents. Next to that is a photo of me. There is a mirror, too, and she can see her husband's silhouette jerk up and down in rhythm with his sobs. His shirt is bunched up, and the white underwear and the hair on his back, which is now also white, stand out in the dark.

In the corner of the room, next to the window, they keep a large steel chest. It holds old clothes and jewelry. They sold some jewelry to send me to college abroad, and the rest they kept in case I came back for an Indian wife. My father puts photos of gods and goddesses on top of the chest. He decorates it with flowers and lights incense and prays every morning after his bath.

She sees now a thin wisp of smoke crawl out of the faint red glow of the incense stick, and twist and turn its way towards the ceiling, above and beyond the window, the noise, and into cobwebs and the quiet darkness. She smells it, perfumed weightlessness, a sensory denial of the reality outside: bitter heavy coal smoke from streetside cooking fires, and black heavy carbon monoxide from busses and from bidis and from burning garbage, and the stench—black and heavy, also—of slum filth and poverty and shameless early morning rickshaw driver excrement just off the road, between the huts and the sewage behind the house.

"This is life," she thinks. "This is life, in the end... Windows open, lights off, falling asleep with the musty scent of waste lingering hidden in dark corners behind perfume and old memories. Falling asleep to the whimpers of your aging and mirthless and in most ways childless spouse, as he slobbers on your neck and

sudeep bhatia

juices, tobacco-stained and teary, mixing with sweat, find their way, now to the palette of your naked chest, now between your breasts. And now again, as your left hand holds his right hand, and your right hand around his shoulder scratches his back, your mind steps away from the present, as is normal and as is healthy, onto Rakhi next week, when you will take an auto to Janakpuri and tie the last of your brothers a colorful string around his bony green-veined white-haired frail like a twig, like papad, frail and breaking-with-a-snap wrist, as he promises you everlasting protection and gives you two hundred rupees and a hug. Everlasting protection. Everlasting protection as you protect your husband, now back to the present, from his own bitter and angry judgment and try to tell him what religion and politics and forty years of faithful service to the Indian government couldn't—that filial love, like everything, has its time, waxing gentle into a blossom before remorseless winds scatter its petals across the seas.”

“Baba, don't cry,” she says.

“I'm not crying,” he whispers back.

without an umbrella

ashley griffin

The news fell
from your lips—
like the slow

clanking
of a glass
heart to the floor.

It rained for days—
until the ground
sick with rain

spat up worm
guts that collect in
sidewalk cracks.

I waited— waded
through piles of leaves—
God's soggy cornflakes

the worms will never eat.



a photo by meena bolourchi

6 easy payments

james lin

Telescopic vision tubes and 30-second brainfucks
ABC the shit out of my CNN while my QVC is still
ESPN from a long night of C-SPANing.
alpharape.
and I'm drowning in 6-easy payments of
lower cholesterol and war and
7:00 o'clock Eastern Pacific Northern Atlantic Sub-Saharan bullshit
all brought to you by the makers of Erectile Dysfunction, the industries leader since 19
year old girls began
going wild to raise awareness for the deforestation of the tropics.
For just 25 cents a day, I'm getting a 6-pack in front of a live studio audience
so I can spit game at the
hot chick with genital _____; for 'DIABETES' text DIB to 90210 for 'HERPES' text
and apply directly to the forehead. Head-on collision on route 9,
three dead but stay tuned to learn tricks and tips on
how make the perfect crème brûlée. the father's-day gift. the stunning living room.
the sewage of new-age.
though nothing Oxyclean can't handle.
Digital cable satellite access. Neurobuzz; eyefuzz. Frizzle frazzling the monday night line-ups in my, blip.
Thank god for TiVo so I can. Blip. going wild to raise awareness for the .blip. 25 cents a day. blip and I'm
drowning in 6-easy payments of
blip, drowning,
blip, drowning,
blip, drowning,
blip, drowning,
blip, drowning
blip, drowning.

and now to our regularly scheduled programming.

sweet pea

krista morris

I am writing this for you, Sweet Pea,
But I fear that there is little left to say.
The light is dim and the air inside is warm—
But I feel the pressure as the heat is sinking,
As the falling leaves create this chill through the screen
And slow Summer's pulse.

I'll light a candle for you
And burn an autumn leaf I found today:
I'll speed along its self-immolation,
Spread its rusting vitality
Through browning spokes and reddish freckles
And send it weeping to the ground.

Oh, I didn't mean it quite like that—
What I said to you when you fell.
But you did fall: from the greatest ledges of my hope
Plummeted from the very tops of budding trees, red brick
And brittle branches
Protruding from the urchined resentment and jealousy as we walked.

There is a story of a boy like you—
With sticky wings, melting as the Aegean swallowed him whole.
But we are in New England now,
Where wet grass steals your body heat
And things do not melt—
They burn.

Things grow weary, and know what must be done.
And though the air is warmer now
(Summer's last, heavy breath before its beauty slips into that awful coma
And little green things set themselves on fire,

Send themselves weeping to the ground)
It will be cold enough for you to see your own breath,
Nasty words embodied, lingering before your eyes.

You know what must be done, Sweet Pea,
For I am not jealous of you now.
And you are no longer flying as a green sail atop sturdy Birch masts, pushed by Summer's sigh.
Soon you will be falling even faster, and the ground will pull you close:
Flakes of cool dust and flurries of chipped tears will cover you;
Burry you as you burn.



a photo by krista morris



a photo by meena bolourchi

cabin fever

gabe wilson

As soon as I stepped onto the 747 the heat, humidity, and noise saturated the cabin and made me feel as though I had already arrived in Tel Aviv. About a quarter of the passengers had already boarded, and as I passed through the first and business class cabins I counted five crying babies and three possible terrorists. I'm petrified of flying and this fear was only heightened by the noise and commotion as well as by the fact that my final destination was the Middle East. The kind woman at the El Al counter when I checked in at Logan Airport had explained to me that my seat had been moved from the front to the back of the plane due to overcrowding. When I booked the ticket, it had taken me forty five minutes to get assurance from my travel agent that I would not have to sit in the last row, the only one in which the chairs did not recline. She obviously had not taken what I said to heart.

As I made my way back to aisle 52 seat C, I couldn't help remembering my indifference to my mother warning me how loud Israelis could get. Only now, confined in the plane's cabin with so many of them, did I truly begin to understand the heightened decibel level, which she had experienced living in Jerusalem for two years after college. She said it was the noise that she had experienced in numerous public places in that had caused her to lose some of the hearing in her left ear. I had always figured that Boston Jews, such as my grandfather, were loud, but this was a whole new ballgame. The majority of the passengers who had already boarded the plane were standing and not making it easy to get down the aisle, but it became more and more obvious that my seat was in the plane's dreaded last row. I passed a pretty blond stewardess who I was surprised to see working El Al; her eyes told me she had never seen a group of people board quite like this. She must have been new on the job.

I arrived at Aisle 52 after squeezing past two large Hasidic men who smelled as though they had not bothered to shower since Moses was alive. I noticed there was a middle-aged woman in my seat. She had tanned skin, a long stretched out face, and curly brown hair that just touched her shoulders. Even though she was sitting I could tell she was tall and thin. She wore beige linen pants and a white ribbed tank top. At first I assumed she must have inadvertently sat down in the wrong seat, and that if I asked politely enough, she would maybe move to the empty window seat next to her.

"Ma'am, I believe you are in my seat," I said in my most polite voice. She definitely heard me, because I was at the moment standing no farther than two feet away from her. However, she kept her head in the book she was reading. I noticed that the book was in Hebrew, and for a second I thought she might not have understood what I was saying and had chosen to ignore me rather than to let me know that she didn't speak English.

"Excuse me Ma'am," I said, this time a little louder.

She looked up from her book and looked at me with a frown on her face and an angry look in her eyes.

"I believe you are in my seat," I continued.

"No, you are in my seat," she said curtly in a thick Israeli accent.

I was utterly confused by her comment considering that she was the one sitting down and I was still standing in the aisle.

“It says here on my ticket that I am assigned to Aisle 52 seat C,” I explained.

“Yes, it may say that on your ticket, but the ticket is not always right,” she said. She waved her index finger back and forth as a sign of indifference to the seat number clearly printed on the ticket I was now shoving in front of her book.

I was utterly confused. Was her English poor or was she actually trying to explain to me that it was philosophically impossible for a ticket to be right or wrong?

“Umm Ok, then where do you suppose I should sit?” I asked.

She looked up from her book again with an angry scowl on her face and said, “You my friend, will sit where you sit.”

I decided that this problem was not going to be solved without a third party getting involved, so I made my way back to the front of the plane to see if the blond stewardess, who I was happy to search for again, would help me. I squeezed past the two fat Hassids, neither of whom made any effort to let me walk by. They continued to squeeze their luggage into the overhead compartments. This time as I passed through the First and Business class cabins I counted only three crying babies, but the number of possible terrorists had risen to seven.

I reached the front of the plane where the blond, whose name I noticed from her nametag was Adar, was welcoming the last passengers coming onto the plane. I waited for her to be done and then approached.

“There’s a women who stole my seat,” I said.

“Really? I can help you with that,” she responded in an Israeli accent that I had not noticed when she had welcomed me onto the plane.

“What does your ticket say?” she asked.

“Aisle 52 Seat C,” I responded.

“Let me see, the ticket is not always right you know.” She looked down at my ticket and frowned. For the first time during this whole situation I thought it might be me who was going crazy, not the lady who was occupying what I thought to be my seat. I began to think that maybe I was too scared of flying to think straight.

“Let’s go check it out,” the stewardess said.

We stood over the women in “my” seat. I realized a small boy sitting to her left who was not there before. He looked as though he was probably the woman’s son. He was extremely skinny and wore a T-shirt meant for an overweight teen-age girl. Emblazoned on the front in rhinestones were the words CRAZY AMERICA/JUMP HOP. The shirt must have been made in Israel and was a bad attempt at using American pop culture references as a selling point. The words Hip-Hop had been lost in translation somewhere over the Atlantic. The boy had a neon orange yarmulke clipped to his head with a bobby pin, surrounded by a bushel of thick curly brown hair that matched his mother’s. My new friend, the blond stewardess, asked me if this was the woman who was sitting in my seat when I had previously tried to sit down, but before I had time to respond, the stewardess and the woman in my seat were screaming at each other in Hebrew. CRAZY AMERICA stared at me as though I where an alien.

“Are you a Jew?” the boy asked me as soon as I settled down one empty seat away from him. His mother had finally been forced to sit in her correct seat at the other end of the cabin. The boy did not seem to be too worried about being separated from his mother. I assumed he was happy to be rid of her. However, I was puzzled as to why she was so desperate to stay near him. I hoped I wasn’t going to have to help him go to the bathroom or anything along those lines.

The boy’s question had shocked me and I did not respond right away. I had to recite it over and over to myself and consider my answer. First off, I was not sure if the boy was asking if I was a religious Jew like him, or just a regular Jew like most of the other Jews I knew in America. I was also worried that if I responded in the affirmative the boy would bother me the entire plane ride, but if I lied to him I might anger some greater power that would have control of the aircraft as it flew through the heavens.

“Yup, I am a Jew,” I finally responded.

“Jew too,” the boy said with a large smile on his face. He was much more endearing than his mother. Although the boy was obviously too young to know what he “was,” I took him at his word, the neon orange kippa on his head was also fairly convincing.

“Why do you not speak Hebrew?” the boy asked.

“Because I am from America,” I said proudly.

“Then you are not a Jew.”

“Americans can be Jews too,” I told him.

“No,” he said. “This is not the case.”

I was impressed by the boy’s rigidity, but I did not like the similarities I was beginning to see in this scrawny eight-year-old and his stubborn mother who had refused to get out of my seat a few minutes earlier. He was beginning to agitate me, so I decided to prove he could not tell me what I was and was not.

“I got bar mitzvah,” I told him, hoping that some words in Hebrew might sway the little brat’s narrow-mindedness. The kid looked shocked, and I thought I might have shut him up once and for all.

“How could you have been bar-mitzvah if you do not speak Hebrew?”

He had me there, and this time I did not have a comeback. I was not about to stand up as the 747 was taxiing to the runway and start reciting my Haftorah so I could prove to a eight year old I was Jewish.

The boy caught on that I was flustered.

“See, you are not a Jew,” he said egging me on.

We went back and forth for a few more minutes on the subject of my religion until, full of frustration and forgetting that I was talking to an eight year old religious kid, I yelled, “You’re a wise ass” loudly into his ear. He burst into tears. I grabbed a book out of my carry-on bag and hoped nobody noticed what had just taken place.

After twenty minutes of uncontrollable tears, the boy’s mother insisted that I switch seats with her, and I found myself sandwiched between the two Hassidic men I had so much trouble getting past in my travels up and down the isle. The one on my left smelled like the gefilte fish my grandmother made during Passover, and the one on the right, whose head was now leaning on my shoulder as he dreamt, smelled like burnt brussel sprouts. I couldn’t wait for the stewardess to bring around diner to give my olfactory sense a bit of a break. However, we

gabe wilson

were nowhere near that point in the flight. The captain came on the intercom to tell us that take off was going to be delayed for another two hours on account of a dead squirrel found in the left engine. I closed my eyes and pictured the squirrel climbing up into the plane's engine oblivious to the fate that awaited it, but I could not wrap my mind around the logistics of the situation.

After a long and tedious flight, during which I had ended up moving my seat yet again due to a broken seatbelt, the plane finally touched down on the runway at Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport. The passengers clapped when the wheels hit the landing strip. This was a phenomenon I had never experienced before. However, I was quick to join in with my own loud applause as I was overjoyed by the fact the plane had not plunged into the ocean as I had expected.

Standing at the baggage carousel waiting for a bag that I was ninety five percent sure was not going to show up, I admired the modern architecture of the airport. It was a large circular building with marble floors and lots of large glass windows. The kind of building I had not expected to see upon my arrival. In fact, I imagined that the plane was going to land somewhere in the desert and that I would have had to take a bus with no seatbelts to reach anywhere that mirrored civilization. As it turned out however Ben-Gurion was one of the world's most modern and high-tech airports, but this did not help my bag come any faster. I watched the belt of the carousel with no luck as the crowd of passengers who had been on my plane began to thin.

When it was finally obvious that my bag was not coming, a fact that for some reason was not the least bit shocking to me, I figured that I should find the service desk and report that it had not come. I quickly looked around for someone to ask whom I could tell about the missing bag. To the left of the baggage carousel leaning against a wall I noticed a young female soldier who looked about my age. I walked up to the girl and right away noticed the massive M-16 she had slung over her shoulder and hanging down near her butt. I was immediately attracted to her, but also kind of scared.

"Nice gun!" I blurted out, quickly realizing that this was probably the worst thing to say to anyone carrying a large automatic weapon, even if it happened to be a young Israeli soldier. She raised her eyebrows and looked at me like a dumb American. Which is most likely exactly what I looked like.

"So um, my bag never came, whom should I ask about that?" I asked, struggling to get my words out.

She shrugged her shoulders like a typical teenager who did not feel like talking. I realized I would have to search for the information desk on my own. Walking away I thought I heard her mutter under her breath "Stupid American".

The Line at the El Al information desk was long. I was dead last in it until I turned around once again to admire the building architecture and at the bottom of my line of vision saw a flash of neon orange. I looked down and standing at an uncomfortably close distance to me was Crazy America sans his crazy mother. To my surprise, I was rather happy to see the boy whom I had made cry while my plane was still on the ground in the United States. I figured if he could get over the whole me calling him a wise ass thing, he would provide some entertainment until it was my turn at the El Al desk. I got down on one knee so I was closer to the boy's height and asked, "What's your name?"

“I am Zali” he responded in the same tone that had annoyed me earlier in the day but which I now found rather cute.

“Zali, why are you in this line? Where did your mother go?”

“She is gone,” he said sadly. I decided not to push any further on the subject for fear that he would start crying again, so I went another route.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Israel,” he said with a smile.

I was beginning to get the feeling that Zali did not like giving me direct answers and once again I started to get a little annoyed with the boy, but I still was happy to have him keep me company as the line moved at its snail’s pace.

“I need to get home it is almost Shabbat,” Zali said.

I was once again surprised by the boy’s strong religious conviction and also realized when he said this that it’s almost being Shabbat was the reason that the line was moving so slowly.

“You do not know Shabbat, because you are the Not-Jew,” Zali said in response to my indifference to his making it home in time for the Sabbath.

Was it true? Was I the “Not-Jew”? The kids lack of worldliness was definitely frustrating and, probably for some “Not-Jew” reason, I decided it was my duty to impart some wisdom to him before his mother finally found him and brought him back into what I was now perceiving to be a warped world.

“Listen to me Zali, I am a Jew, whether you like it or not,” I said to him sternly. “And not all Jews go home for Shabbat; in fact, I can do whatever I want on Shabbat”

Zali looked shocked at this last comment and I imagined that I getting through to him so I decided not to let up.

“And you know what Zali? Most people in the world aren’t Jewish, and it’s not such a good idea to call them Non-Jews, even if they are, to their faces.”

He seemed startled by this fact, even if my message was completely confusing. I realized more and more how sheltered a life Zali must have lived and I began to feel for the kid.

“You can really do anything you want on Shabbat?” Zali asked still trying to fathom whether this was even a possibility.

“Yup, I can do anything I want: I can watch TV, drive, play video-games. Basically, for me Shabbat is just like any other day.” I went on, trying to hammer home the point that I could do anything I wanted no matter what day of the week it was.

Zali looked as though I had opened up a whole new world for him, he had a big grin on his face. “I want to be a Not -Jew too!” he exclaimed.

He didn’t get it. I was only trying to let him know that observing Shabbat was not the only way one could go about being a Jew, but instead I had done the unthinkable and converted this sweet little religious boy. I was petrified of what might happen when his mother came back and found out what I had done.

I was imagining the physical punishment that Zali’s father, probably an ex-soldier, would want to inflict upon me when he found out that Zali now wanted to be a “Not Jew,” when the boy, who was still standing behind me in line, kicked me hard in the back of the leg.

“Ow, what did you do that for?” I asked.

gabe wilson

“Not-Jews can do whatever they want on Shabbat?” He responded with that annoying smirk on his face. “And anyway, I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Great, so go.” I said, hoping he would leave before he kicked me in my other leg.

“You must come with me, I am not allowed to go alone.”

“Sorry Zali, I’m not allowed to do that,” I had already caused enough trouble and in any case, wasn’t eight too old for a kid to need to be accompanied to the bathroom?

“Ima says I cannot go alone, you must come.”

“Zali, you will just have to wait until your mom finds you, or just go alone. I have to stay in this line anyway.”

I told him this and then turned around to face the front of the line hoping that this had been our last interaction of the day. However, right as I turned, the little devil once again burst into tears. I decided that if I ignored him for a bit, he might just stop, but the crying just got louder and I was scared that if a soldier or policeman noticed the religious boy standing alone in line wailing one of them would come over and try and help him, and of course he would single me out as the reason for his tears. This option would have ended in an arrest and maybe even prison time. So, wearily, I decided it was good idea for me to turn around once more a try and console the kid.

“Hey Zali, what’s wrong?” I asked in my kindest voice.

“I need to pee-pee so badly,” he sniffled.

“Well I’m sorry there is nothing I can do to help, but please stop crying.”

“But I need to go- you must take me,” he said, crying even louder once he had gotten his words out.

“Fine, come with me quickly,” I said, knowing it was a bad idea.

Zali smiled and took a hold of my hand. He waited for me to lead him to the bathroom. He seemed to cheer up very quickly and I wondered if the crying had been real, but I did not want to accuse him of faking and take the risk of starting him off again. I quickly looked around the airport for any sign that might point me in the direction of the bathroom. Over near the place where I had waited for my bags I saw a green sign that had what could have been a picture of a toilet on it, and an arrow. I led Zali quickly through the baggage claim area and noticed the sign was indeed pointing to a bathroom.

“Go in Zali. I will wait right here for you,” I said.

“No you must come in with me, I cannot go in alone.”

I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible so I went into the bathroom with the kid. Luckily it was empty, and I hoped he would go quickly and we could finally part ways. Zali went into one of the stalls and I noticed from his little feet dangling near the floor that he was sitting on the toilet.

“I thought you said you had to pee.”

“I did say that,” I didn’t want to pry so I let him go on with whatever he was doing in there.

After five minutes Zali emerged from the stall with a big annoying grin on his face and I told him to go wash his hands before he grabbed onto mine again in order to be led back to the El Al service counter, which I was worried was going to close for the evening before I could inform the that my bag had not come.

“Let’s go, I must get home for Shabbat,” Zali said when he was done washing his hands.

I figured that during his five minutes in the bathroom he had converted back to Judaism, and I was happy that he had forgot about the whole Not-Jew thing.

When we walked out of the bathroom hand in hand, Zali's mother, two policemen, and three soldiers, including the girl with the M16 who had not wanted to help me earlier, were waiting for us. They were glaring at me.

"He is a Not-Jew, but he was nice, and he took me to the bathroom," Zali said to his mom.
I started to pray.



a photo by zach witlin



a photo by meena bolourchi

about the authors

sudeep bhatia is a junior majoring in Philosophy and Economics. One day he will spark a great revolution and lead the world to utopia. Till then he sits quietly in a corner in his room, flipping through his *National Geographic: Book of Portraits* and writing stories about the people he sees in there.

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victoria petrosino is a junior majoring in Economics and Community Health. She likes rootbeer, autumn, and birkenstocks and will inevitably get very lost in Barcelona next semester.

jahn sood is a senior majoring in international relations. Jahn usually dresses in disguise when he goes outside on the assumption that it is much safer that way. He recently purchased a very nice hat for that purpose. He particularly enjoys art which pertains to loneliness. When not wandering aimlessly around Boston or writing sad stories, Jahn is driving back and forth, inside and out across Amerika with his band, the Harpoons or singing songs about the circus by some backyard bonfire.

jonathan strong teaches fiction writing in the English Department. He first taught at Tufts from 1969 to 1978, then taught at Harvard, UMASS Boston, and Wellesley, and returned to Tufts in 1989. His tenth book, Drawn from Life, which is featured in this issue, will be published next spring.

kristen surya is a freshman from New York City who spent the last seven years of her life getting rid of "the acting bug". She loves Stanislavsky and Shakespeare but her guilty pleasures include Britney Spears and certain crap movies featuring Kate Bosworth. She is also proud to mention that she has broken a shelf in her lifetime- the result of far too many books.

gabriel wilson is a senior majoring in English. He hails from Newton, Massachusetts, the safest city in America 2006. He loves to take baths, write poetry, and draw. Next year, he hopes to take baths, write poetry, and draw.

chaeyeong yoo (chae) is a freshman. She's from South Korea and has lived in Seattle, WA, St. Paul, MN, and Milton, MA, for the past seven years. Every morning, she reads the most-emailed article of NYT and drinks an average six cups of green tea every day. Drinking L.A. Burdick's dark hot chocolate was one of many formative experiences in her life. She would like to thank her friends, the unlimited meal plan, and her periodic naps for making all this possible.