LIMITED EDITIONS

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I work at a movie theater where they show No Country for Old Men. I saw it once. Everybody loves this movie, I even heard a man say that once every five or six years a movie comes along that changes the way you feel about life and that this was one of those movies. My thoughts on the movie were, well... It took two hours and ten minutes to keep pounding home the point that violence is an unstoppable and omnipresent force in the world. I live in a city that has more murders in a year than there are days. I don't need a movie to tell me about evil.

I tell someone the movie gets its title from a William Butler Yeats poem. He looks at me and I know he doesn't know who this is. Who gives a fuck? Who even gives a fuck about the book? It's directed by those dudes who did Fargo and The Big fucking Lebowski. I can see all this in his eyes including the number of times he'll say fuck because he doesn't know any other adjectives.

The other day Heath Ledger went out like Elvis. Earlier I was reading a newspaper with Heath Ledger on the cover, there's a lot of downtime working in a theater, when a man comes up to the concession stand and a sees the front page. He tells me groups of churchgoers are protesting Ledger's funeral. He thinks this is good, because like them he is full of Christ's love and Heath was pro-faggot.

I'm stirred from my thoughts as a man comes up to me and orders a large popcorn. I ask him if he'd like butter on it. He looks around for whoever he's there with, but doesn't see whoever he is looking for so he asks me how women usually like their popcorn. I want to say something, but I just think this is no country for anyone.
You know how a leaf clings to a sidewalk after the rain…. Well, I likewise, cling to you, until your wind picks me up, tosses me into the air. I sometimes land on unfamiliar cement squares. Or I land on a car and I’m barreling down the street clinging to steel and glass.

I fall to the black road where I cling yet again, this time to a tire going round and round. Again, I end up at the curb after the joy ride. Your wind takes me to that place, the place I come from. I am lonely there, among the many leaves.

You know how in nature everything returns to its source…. Well, this is where I go. I dry, crumble and decompose, only to become a leaf again, clinging to a wet sidewalk.
“Looking out on the morning rain…” began the old, but fondly familiar Aretha Franklin tune, “Natural Woman.” It was blaring from the apartment next door on WTDW - The Station for the Nations - as I was doing just that. Perched on my bedroom window sill, I peered out at the city lights straining for recognition through the heavy morning rain. I had called out sick from work today. Frankly, “natural” was a feeling eluding me at this time. I lit another cigarette and took a slow, deep drag. I squinted my eyes toward the sky; there was no sign of letting up. I hadn’t slept all night, and even now it wasn’t exactly knocking at my door. I tried to recall the previous day’s events, but much of it was too hazy. My neck was hurting, a hint of crusted blood I thought I’d washed away in the shower last night remained under my nose, and my left ear was still throbbing from the blow to the side of my head. I had a black eye.

I stayed late at the office yesterday evening helping my boss to prepare for the start of his trial the next morning.

“Well, it’ll mean over-time for ya,” I heard a secretary holler back at me as she passed below the EXIT sign and out to the bank of elevators. “You should feel lucky.” However, what she didn’t know was that luck and I had fallen out years ago.

I took another drag on my cigarette and closed my eyes. From what I could piece together, I’d managed to have dinner ready and on the table a little after 7:30 p.m., only one hour later than Reggie usually arrived home from work. I remember our apartment door slamming shut, the vibration seemingly rocking the entire building. I can still hear the words “smell the food in the hall” and “lazy slut.” I was standing by the kitchen sink, my hands clasped behind my back. I gave him the brightest smile I could, not unaware of what might ensue.

“What have you been doing all day,” he scowled. I just kept smiling, but remained sensitive to watch his every move.

“I’ve been working like you, honey. I had to stay an hour or so to help prepare for trial. You know how it is. I’ve told you before,” I said, trying to remain calm.

“You and that damn office,” he said. “Makes me think you got somethin’ goin’ on with that boss of yours is what I think.” I watched him throw his hat and coat on the couch. He stood glaring at me with cold eyes.

“No, baby. No,” I said, as I started toward him to reassure him with a kiss and a hug. “It’s not like that at all. See, I –” was all he allowed me to say.

I remember his raging eyes and tight lips as he stormed into the kitchen. I remember a bowl of steaming hot corn flying from the table toward my face, but I had ducked in time, allowing it to splatter on the wall behind me. This only fueled his anger. I didn’t bother to ask why he was late. I remember a large body quickly maneuvering around the kitchen table toward me and a meaty hand rising above my head. That’s all I can remember...before the pain.

The thought of even that much made me shudder. I turned my back to the world outside and stood up. I was facing the bed. It still held the dent from his heavy body, the sheets thrown back in the same disgusted position he’d left them in before leaving early this morning. Disgusted with yet another day of work, the world and, most likely, disgusted with me. However, for me, somehow this day was not the same. I had spoken to only one person since the beating-- my mother.

“Get to a doctor,” she told me.

And tell him what, I thought. I’d let the same man beat the daylight and dignity out of me for seven years?

“I don’t think so, mama.”

“Then you should come to church service with me this Sunday. Talk to the pastor.”

And tell him what, I thought again. The same thing I would tell the doctor?

“I don’t think it’s that easy, mama.”

My mother was from the old school. Although
she knew that no man had a right to put his hands on a woman, something inside her would not allow her to intervene any more than she was doing.

“Then call one of those hotlines for abused women. I’ve been telling you that for years, baby.” Again, I declined her suggestion. It was all so degrading and utterly embarrassing.

I stood up and stretched. A day like this would keep the rats in, but I couldn’t stay here any longer. I went to the bathroom and washed my face, careful to scrub away the dried blood beneath my nose. I dressed slowly, slipping into a pair of old, faded jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. It was all I could do to keep from simply laying down on the floor in a fetal position, my body hurt so badly. In the foyer, I removed my jacket and fitted baseball cap from the closet. I pulled the cap down over my head as far as it would go, trying to cover the bruises as best I could. I locked the door behind me.

Once on the street, I looked both ways, spotted a taxi approaching from my left and hailed it down. I didn’t know exactly where I was headed. Possibly to an airport and out of the country? To NASA for a possible flight to the moon? Anywhere but here suited me just fine. No, women like her were brimming with healthy doses of confidence and self-esteem. Though the heavy finger of statistics also pointed to battered women in packages disguised as these, personally I didn’t know any.

Out of the taxicab and now standing on a busy corner, I realized I had forgotten to bring my large umbrella when my tiny fold-up umbrella surrendered to what my mama used to call God’s tears on our sin. The rain poured down on me like a thousand cap guns spray painting my body. Across the street was a drugstore. I ran for it, nearly pulverized by another cab speeding from the opposite direction. If I died today, would anyone miss me except for mama, I thought. With no real destination in mind, I started walking, my pace quickening with every other step until I couldn’t walk any faster. Who was I running from, I thought. Myself? After five blocks, I came upon a pawn shop that housed several expensive looking knives in the window. I slowed my pace, considered, and passed on, my eyes still intent on the longest of the three. Just missing a green light at the intersection ahead, I stopped short at the corner, almost slipping off the curb. A petite, well-dressed woman was already standing there when I arrived. Judging from her appearance and the monogram Louis Vuitton Pegase briefcase she carried, I imagined she was not part of my world. No, women like her were brimming with healthy doses of confidence and self-esteem. Though the heavy finger of statistics also pointed to battered women in packages disguised as these, personally I didn’t know any.

Realizing my presence, she looked up at me from under her umbrella, a smile already invading her face. The smile quickly succumbed to horror, her face twisting and lips trembling as they appeared to be fighting back words struggling for sound, questions she was too afraid to ask. Fearing judgment, I was too afraid to ask what she saw. The light turned green and she stepped off the curb first and moved out quickly ahead of me. I was tempted to ask if she would take me with her. I knew better. I watched her walk on across the street where she hailed a taxicab. She was gone in the blink of an eye it seemed.

who, for the past several months, had been making frequent phone calls at questionable hours asking for my husband and boldly leaving her name. Another memory.

Inside the drugstore, I grabbed the first cane umbrella I saw and paid the cashier in silence. I kept my head cast slightly downward and facing the direction of the door. With good peripheral vision being one of my assets, I could see the cashier attempting to get a better look at my face. Now I remembered the spot where Reggie slapped me so hard I thought I would pass out. The red mark on the side of my face was beginning to swell and was staring her right in the face. She slowly gave me my change, and I quickly left the store.

With no real destination in mind, I started walking, my pace quickening with every other step until I couldn’t walk any faster. Who was I running from, I thought. Myself? After five blocks, I came upon a large drugstore, perhaps the one from which I had just fled. A petite, well-dressed woman was already standing there when I arrived. Judging from her appearance and the monogram Louis Vuitton Pegase briefcase she carried, I imagined she was not part of my world. No, women like her were brimming with healthy doses of confidence and self-esteem. Though the heavy finger of statistics also pointed to battered women in packages disguised as these, personally I didn’t know any.

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I could not move. The light turned red again, and I turned on my heels and started back in the direction that led me this way.

I knew I could not spend all day out here. At some point, I’ll have to face that place again. That man. Those memories. The pain. Or do I? I caught a cab on the same corner at which I exited the first. I watched the rain drops slither down the window pane as we roared back to my dreary existence. We pulled up to my apartment building and I sank deeper into the seat. The driver looked over his shoulder waiting for signs of life.

“Hey, lady. You all right,” he asked. He made a grimace like the face of an old man who’d just knocked back a shot of whiskey.

“I’m fine,” I moaned under my breath. Life was there, but the light had been beaten out of me. I slid up on the seat and passed the driver the amount due and a tip. Without hurry, I opened the door and forced myself out slowly, one leg at a time. I had barely closed the door before he swiftly pulled off, splashing water from the gutter onto the bottom of my jeans.

I abruptly stopped just inside our apartment doorway just realizing the mess Reggie and I had made last night. Why hadn’t I seen all of this before I left, I wondered. Why hadn’t I even remembered? Maybe I had blocked it out. I hung my jacket and cap on a hook beside the hall closet and stood in the midst of the chaos. I figured I’d start with the confusion in front of the coffee table. As I picked up the last of the magazines, a long telephone number written on a small piece of brown paper bag fell from between the pages of one of them. I reached down and scooped it up. It was a hotline number for victims of domestic violence, one of several my mother had given me over the years. I walked around the table and sat down on the floor by the side of the couch. I bit my lower lip and let a tear fall onto the paper as I gripped it tightly with both hands. With trembling fingers, I reached for the phone on the side table.

Oddly enough, in the adjacent apartment, Aretha was at it again, only this time with a song aptly titled “Respect.” I suddenly realized why this day was not the same.
Regret, December 1939

by Marion Mitchell

Walter’s eyes drew every woman’s attention. This, Mayta had known about her husband for years. Crystal clear, silvery-gray, almost colorless, like the transparent, tinted water of the Baltic Sea. It was their unforgettable clarity that attracted such interest; they betrayed his soul’s sincerity. How could she bear to part with his eyes?

Since war had begun, Mayta’s thoughts during quiet moments had turned sentimental, more tender than ever before. It was difficult to imagine life without Walter. He had been part of her life forever, it seemed. In every significant memory he lurked, woven into the intricate fabric of her being, more like a brother or cousin than simply her husband. A presence so tangible that her attempts to separate him from her thoughts seemed an impossible task.

Vivid pictures of Walter’s face as it matured with each passing year were etched into Mayta’s memory. She remembered the pudgy, freckled face and toothless grin of his boyhood. And she remembered his teenage face, which had stretched from its young roundness into a decidedly oval shape. His freckles had faded and his hairline was high on his forehead, a feature that steered one’s focus to his unusual eyes. By the time he had married Mayta at age twenty-two, his jaw line was set on a man’s face. Strong, it matched the tenacity that Mayta had grown to both respect and, at times, despise.

Mayta inhaled deeply from her recline on the sofa, her cheek nestled against the claret-colored velvet cushion, her legs stretched out, comfortably crossed at her ankles, and her stocking-clad feet sunken slightly into the supple seating pillows that conformed to her shape. Years of spliced-together childhood reminiscences played through her mind’s camera. She smiled at her little-girl memories of her hometown of Heydekrug and its marktplatz, the community’s gathering place, and her playground. The shops of the marktplatz fit snugly into ten buildings that had grown up around the horseshoe bend in the Sziesze River in the shape of a giant “U” mirroring the river’s natural curves. A well-worn cobblestone walking path lined the fronts of the shops. It began at the docks of the fish market, and ran past the brewery, bakery, dairy, and grocery stores, the candy shop, luncheonette, cobbler, shoe store, and the inn, just beyond which the path ended.

In her daydream, she was six years old again, delighting in the smell of baking bread that emanated from the bakery and wafted through the marktplatz, tickling her nose and making her tummy rumble. The din of the marktplatz was punctuated by the clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop cadence of slow-moving horses as they lugged farmers and harvests to market in wooden carts, piled high with golden, brown-eyed potatoes, wine-red sugar beets, and apricot-colored carrots. Voices in the marktplatz were loud to Mayta’s young ears. She could still remember how odd the voices had sounded to her then -- unfamiliar sounds of foreign languages like Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian. Sounds that never became words but existed as rhythms in her mind, rhythms and tones that she could decipher. Deal, no-deal. Sale, no-sale. A language everyone seemed to understand, merchants and patrons alike, the language of bartering.

Mayta, her brother Erich and Walter would run to play in the small forest that lay beside the marktplatz. And run they did, in a field colored summer-green or winter-white depending upon the season. Mayta had loved romping in the pine forest. Its dense moss carpet yielding to each footfall, gave back a gentle bounce that boosted her step and lifted her spirits, defying, for a moment, her sense of gravity, making her feel as though she had wings and could fly. Embedded in the rich, emerald moss lay Heydekrug gold: mushrooms, die Pilze, the edible sort that the trio would pick to bring back to their mothers. Summer after summer, in memory after memory, Walter was there.

And in winter, fattened by thick layers of clothing, bunches of kids would gather at the shallowest part of the frozen bend in the river. Those who were
lucky enough to own ice skates skated, while the others played hard, imaginations and snowballs soaring until hunger, exhaustion, dusk, or, more likely, their mothers’ cackling “come home now” would drive them indoors.

Amid the bridal veil of pristine whiteness, Mayta could see the wintry antics of Walter and Erich, then mischievous boys of eight. Slipping and sliding on the ice, they fell and rolled in the snow, and threw snowballs that exploded into powder when they hit their intended or unintended targets. There was Walter, laughing and shouting in the finger-numbing cold. Winter after winter, Walter was there, in the backdrop of Mayta’s memories.

Mayta reached above her head to straighten an oil painting of Memel’s boat-laden harbor that hung over the sofa in the parlor, the painting Walter had hung at his eye level, too high for Mayta to clean without climbing onto the sofa to reach it. The cloudless blue sky on the horizon of the Baltic Sea at dawn matched the color of Mayta’s blouse, her favorite color.

Her eyes lingering on the endless sea, she touched the harbor’s frame, and her heart began to pound loudly in her ears and her chest. Thump… Walter had refused to reposition the painting for her. Thump… Thump… Her temper had flared. Fury, uncontained, had spewed words from Mayta’s mouth more lethal than a saber’s edge. Thump. Thump. How angry she had been about such a trivial thing! If only she could take back the cursed names she had called him. If only she had not gotten irritated with Walter over so many things that seemed ridiculously petty since war had complicated their lives. If only, she could have loved him better somehow. If only…if only….

Regret, a calamity of war that no one could avoid, stirred Mayta’s ire and her pulse, revealing her greatest fear. Just as The Great War had ravaged her parents’ lives, this new war was conspiring to do the same to hers. Mayta’s mother, Martha, had wept bitterly on the September day that German soldiers had marched into Poland and into aggressive combat, “I can’t live through another war. I just can’t!”

Mayta’s four brothers had been drafted, along with every other able-bodied man she knew. Soon, they would vacate their family church pews, and leave empty their places at dinner tables across Memel. Another generation of warriors, Mayta sighed. Sadness burned through her chest to her spine, stung her eyes, and melted her face into a dismal frown of helplessness. She wondered, why must we go to war?

Without Walter, Mayta would be but one-half of a whole, one-half of who she is, it seemed. How would she survive without him? Raise their daughter? Earn a living? Though she was proud of the business she and Walter had built in Memel, she had no real skills and without Walter’s strength, Mayta’s confidence seemed lost. It was Walter who had initially dreamed of becoming a merchant, a dream that he believed would transform him from a common potato farmer into a person of the respected merchant class.

In May of 1932, despite Europe’s worsening economic depression and ungodly unemployment and hunger, Walter and Mayta were married, had moved to the civility of the city and to their lives as shopkeepers.

How gutsy we were back then! Mayta prided. In that instant, Mayta understood, with the clarity of a woman married fifty years, that the traits she had admired in her husband -- his willpower, tenacity, and strength -- had become her traits too. Through their bond, perhaps called love, she had embodied his traits, and treasured them as much in herself as she had admired them in her husband.

Until war had interrupted them, Walter and Mayta had been enjoying their conscientiously designed lives as city shopkeepers. They had worked untiringly to build their business and, as planned, almost five years after they were married, their daughter Elsbeth was born. But, despite careful planning, the German government had other ideas and seized their shop’s inventory on behalf of the war effort. The participants in the transaction were familiar; the Gestapo and the police, who had arrived without notice one morning in early April bearing equally familiar official-looking double rubberstamped papers approving the confiscation of their property without...
recompense.

As a result, Walter and Mayta were not the same spirited young couple they were when they had first moved to Memel. Nor were they the same couple they had been in the months since Walter had been conscripted. The aura of war now enveloped them. To Mayta, her home, community, and even her church seemed somehow less permanent, less secure, temporary. She and her husband would soon be separated, perhaps permanently. They lived in limbo, without any control. Directionless. Planless. But how dare she feel sorry for herself? She was not the one leaving for battle. She must be strong for her husband and daughter.

In the natural gravity that occurs when adversity strikes, Mayta and Walter were drawn to each other and to Elsbeth, seeking reality, a dose of sanity, a sense of belonging. Mayta collected memories, willing her mind to photograph every detail of the simple pleasures they had shared: rowboat trips on the smooth and silent Dane River, beachside picnics amid the tall grasses of ancient sand dunes, and refreshing dips in the calm, unsalted waters of the Baltic Sea. She had memorized the ear-piercing, high-pitched, giggle-squeals prompted by Walter tickling his daughter unmercifully. And Mayta would always remember their lovemaking, more trusting, intimate, daring, and often, her sole comfort.

Mayta sat up on the end of the sofa where she could look out of her window onto the busy street below. Armed Wehrmacht soldiers and Gestapo meandered about Memel as though they had always been part of the city’s landscape. From Mayta’s second floor vantage point, she could see two distinct reactions from the townspeople. Many approached the uniformed men with a hearty “Heil Hitler!” Others ducked into storefronts, hid under hat brims, or switched to the opposite side of the street to avoid an encounter. Were the soldiers blind to the terror they invoked in these people simply by their presence? Soon, Walter would be one of these uniformed soldiers. Would he use his authority to slap a woman as she had been slapped?

Try as Mayta had over the past months to imagine life without Walter and harden herself to the fact that war would take him from her, she had failed. The more she had tried to distance herself, the more intimate she and Walter had become. As they waited, day after day, for his call-up notice, Walter’s humanness unfolded beneath Mayta’s watchful eye, and she had come to know and love him in ways she had never dreamed possible. Could she be strong for her husband and daughter? Yes, she must. Could she be loyal to this government and Fuhrer? That was another question entirely.

Tiny droplets splattered onto the paper she gripped tightly in her hand. Again, she read the words, Induction Order… Walter Ernst Lagsohn… January 5, 1940… 2nd Battery Light Artillery Replacement, Division 161, Insterburg.

How could she say goodbye to him, the man who had given her willpower, strength, and determination?

How could she say goodbye to his eyes?
Antonio McCall
I would have flagged him down when I saw him making his way across the pavement in front of me, fast feet like he had somewhere to be. He was pushing a baby stroller with a black dog sitting backwards in the seat, facing him. Scraps was poised and attentive like she was navigating the strange vessel, barking orders. I didn't laugh or if I did, maybe only a little. I was used to seeing him move the dog around in a shopping cart but this was a new, odd scene.

For three weeks I looked for him, since I first had the idea. Seeing him now, I hoped he wouldn't see me. It was cold out and he looked mean. He wouldn't be angry with me, he never was, but for some reason I couldn't get myself to stop and call his name, David. He was maybe thirty five but probably younger.

Sleeping on concrete, open to the elements, it puts age on you. His hair looked like mine when I used to let Keren cut it, choppy and wild. I met David somewhere on Market Street, more than a year ago. I spoke to him when I saw him because of the dog. I guess he fares a lot better than the rest of the bums, on account of the dog. I had to admit, I liked David. I liked him even though he scared me. David wasn't stupid, he wasn't on drugs and I never saw him with a bottle. He scared me because he could have been me. He talks like me.

Our friendship started out because I loved the way he loved the dog, a black lab mutt with a blurred white spot here and there, one over her eye, a faded green bandana. The pattern was washed away by sunshine and rain. A sweet little dog, she had a habit of barking when you pet her. I'd only pet her for a minute.

I always give him my money. I don't care what he uses it for, or that it'll encourage him to stay a bum or whatever people say about paying bums. We can't always make a statement out of everything; at some point it doesn't matter where the money goes. He would come to my restaurant and I would give him big Styrofoam containers of the crap other people didn't finish eating; he didn't care. Even if it was all thrown in together, David would take it. He always asks me for a cigarette and I always give him two.

I met his girlfriend. She asked me if I would bring her a blanket and I said that I would. So the next day I brought it to her. She wasn't there, so I left it in the bar and when I saw her later I told her it was there. It was a blue and fuzzy thing and brought me a strange sense of loss when I gave it away. Maybe it was because I didn't like her. She said her name was Echo but it wasn't. Her hair was red like coral and everything about her was sad. Living on the street takes you through different stages of being. If David was a lost kid, she was damn crazy.

David was always looking around to make sure she wasn't there behind him. The cops came and beat her up last year, before Christmas. I don't think I ever saw her again but maybe I did once, I don't remember.

I was walking along Broad Street when I thought of it, about three weeks ago. I have lots of funny little thoughts and brainstorm as I walk the city's grid. I wanted his story, thinking it'd be a good one if he was truthful and even better if he lied. I needed something to write about, something good, something with some teeth to it, some grit. I wanted to know where he'd been and where he got the little cross tattoo on his forehead, right between his eyes. It looked like the kind of thing you would see on a neo-Nazi and the placement suggested something too, like he didn't care. Whatever he'd been into he was out of it now, he wasn't in anything anymore. I wanted to know why he came to Philly and what he thought he was doing here. If I hopped the trains and fell out of sight, like I used to say I would, is this where I'd have ended up? I let him go thinking maybe I'd see him later, if I still wanted his story.

The air was strong now, with hints of the icy virus that kills the tree leaves; the city doesn't notice it and I miss the autumn smell of burning leaves from
Andrew Walls
I'm feeling small. David and scraps are only fragments of the things that dance in and out of my head. It's hard for me to focus lately with all I've put on my plate. Days that were spent dozing and dancing have turned to nights spent with dead writers and my cats. So, trying to finally calm the spirit, I've set roots and left the road to the scene kids and the bums. I've traded whiskey for wine. More and more I need to sit down and catch my breath so I don't go drifting.

I don't cry as much as I used to; getting off the pills has hardened me some. Things are different and still the same. I'm still alone but I can bear it. My brother still hates me but I'm not angry. I talk to my parents at least once a week, which is better than three months of silence and they say they're proud of me. I live my life. I go to school and try not to talk so much that I forget to listen. I go to work at the bar and concoct potions to sing all the vegan hipsters to sleep, and end my nights with a petite syrah that's a little too warm or a Grenache to make me feel nostalgic of the fall. I write down my thoughts and then I throw them away.

After my almost-encounter with the man and his dog, I wanted to go home and nap. I find myself napping a lot now; I never used to but lately I have found a peace in that kind of light slumber where dreams are only abstract suggestions and don't hold a storyline. When I nap, I can shut off the endless banter between the receptors in my brain, the nonsense chit-chat song that gets so bad I can do nothing to slow it. Sometimes I wonder if I'm strong enough for this, then I let go of that line of thinking. I passed strong enough when I was stuck in those hospital beds, when my blood turned sour and everybody thought I was going to die. I only remember one thing; I didn't want to. After I got out, when my body refused to lose the taste for morphine, I would forget that, only to think on it now.

A week ago I got to thinking about the boy from Missouri. I walked him to the greyhound bus station. He had his ticket and he was going home. We sat on the ground outside the station where the busses pick up and we smoked cigarettes until he had to get on. We hugged and I was quiet. I felt my face tighten and I knew it looked ugly and sad like that. He said not to cry and I shook my head up and down, okay, not if he didn't want me to. He said he loved me and nothing felt real and then he left me. He got on the bus and I was jealous of the people he would talk to, even the driver as he handed over the ticket I had bought for him. My eyes didn't blur until Brad turned around; they followed him down the aisle and then they lost him and I knew what being empty was like. I stayed there at the station for a long time. I don't even know if I smoked a cigarette. I left and walked a block over to the Market East train station, laid down on a bench and slipped out of reality, bouncing back and forth between grief and half-sleep until it was time to go to work. That's all I remember about that day.

A day later I was in hysterics in an empty bathtub, spitting up blood. Two days after I was in Methodist Hospital. I was weak and covered with huge black and yellow and purple bruises; they looked gangrenous. The doctors were worried. Everything hurt. They kept talking about blood; the white blood cells weren't doing their job, weren't making platelets and my blood would not clot at all. I was bleeding internally; they could not make it stop. They were scared I'd get hemorrhage in my brain and die. My mother brought me a broccoli rabe sandwich with cheese and I thought maybe it wasn't bad to be off my feet for awhile. I was all full of pretty blue pain pills; every couple of hours they would shoot morphine into my shoulder. If they were late I would cry for the shot and hit the intercom until they came. My friends and my family were there in blurs and everything was a dream until they released me and told me to take it easy. The steroids had saved me and I wouldn't need to lose my spleen like the doctors had thought. I was free to go, with healthy blood and an appetite for enough downers to kill a man twice my size. I was over it all and I wanted to go down. I was alone and only a boy. Brad called me only once in the hospital. He said he never should have left. A week ago I sent him a happy birthday message on the computer. He didn't deserve it but I miss his smile sometimes, the way it sucks his mouth into a heart,
just as little as he is. But now more often I like to forget about my time in Missouri with him and his time here with me… I guess it never really was with me. Red Mollie wrote a song about him and me, and whenever she plays it on her guitar, I think that it’s not really about him or me like it happened but rather me in a dream, and I like that. The boy was never worth the song but it’s nice to have a song anyway.

Sometimes David reminds me of Brad. They have the same grown out Mohawk and they are both dirty and squatters and have almost nothing. I guess David’s got his dog and Brad has his religion. Brad’s just a damn kid. He doesn’t need to end up like David did or like maybe I would have. He probably will, though. David is on the street because David wants to be on the street and probably couldn’t come back into the world anymore. He takes care of Scraps and she loves him and it works, but now each time I see him he looks thinner, his face has more lines and his smile is more trivial. I worry about the winter coming. I hope to see him soon and write about his life. I wish I had just called out his name.

Halloween is next week and we all get to be something else for a bit. Life seems light in the autumn and everything dies in a proud show of every hue from yellow apple to blood orange to brown pear and I can’t stop from thinking that it sure looks better on its way out. The world around us dies and then comes alive in the spring to die again after the summer, and all of it is just matter. I’m just matter. Knowing this makes things less random and I think it can’t be so bad. I miss the smell of burning leaves and I have to remember to go back to my mother’s house before the winter comes. Nobody burns them in the city; there are not many trees to drop their old leaves and maybe it doesn’t matter because it will always bring me home. There is a place in the city where I can go to see the violent panorama of fall, yellow and red and orange and every shade in between. The mirror vision of the trees along the Schuylkill River is my home too, and when I think of leaving, it always brings me back to
Laura Gaylord
Marquise Jones
It is summer. The street swells with the heat of the day and the sounds of music and laughter. Every person Manuel and his friends, Hector and Sammy, have known all their ten years of life lives on this small block. Tables that have escaped rundown kitchens or damp basements line the curb. Chairs from dining rooms and desks, flea market, and “WalMart” haphazardly populate the street, fighting for attention as people walk and children run past, not even noticing how empty they look. Mrs. Santia, tending her makeshift grill of a wire grate laid over a cut in half oil drum, wipes her forehead with the corner of her apron decorated with embroidered “Viva Cuba” on the bib.

Neighbors’ cars parked on lawns rest comfortably under the shade of the trees, trying to stay cool for when the metal folding chairs become impossible to sit on without singeing one’s pants or searing young thighs. Posters of past concerts and faded pictures of lost dogs are hidden by various South American flags stapled to wooden utility poles. Colorful trash cans dot the small front lawns of some of the homes, cradling beverages instead of garbage today. Mothers bounce diaper clad, barefoot babies on one knee. The men play “bones” as a way to pass time until the sausages and chickens are ready on the grills.

Manuel, Hector and Sammy are at the end of the block cooling in the makeshift fountain consisting of a hydrant and the behind of one of the many children gathered at the corner. In the middle of this very important work of ten year olds, Manuel and Hector lose Sammy to Mrs. Santia’s unnecessary request.

“Amy, no one wants hot drinks on a hot day.” Mrs. Santia never pronounces the “S” in Sammy. “Go get me some more ice, mi niño.” Her wide smile runs across her face exposing gums where teeth use to be. Sammy runs to the icebox in her garage and brings back two bags of ice. The cubes look like diamonds, wet diamonds, as they fall into the silver bucket filled with beer and soda and juice and water and wine coolers. There is no room for the ice really and the few that escape dance happily against Sammy’s legs before falling and quickly melting on the hot asphalt.

Sammy escapes Ms. Santia’s to-do list and returns to his friends, Manuel and Hector. They watch as the older boys occasionally chase some girl down with a bucket of cold water, acting like the gentleman they are destined to be, or egging on some unsuspecting motorist, assuring him that they understand that water does not go inside a car. And thinking, maybe he should roll up his window then.

Manuel and his friends, Hector and Sammy, love the celebration of Puerto Rico. Although they know they are not Puerto Rican. That doesn’t matter on Parade Day; everyone is Puerto Rican on parade day. Their six square block neighborhood is transformed into a small village on the island, giving the elders a taste of home and reminding the youngsters from whence they come. On Parade Day, all ten year olds can run in the streets, hide in garages, play in the fire hydrant until a police officer drives up and turns it off. Someone forgets to get the free sprinkler from the firehouse, condemning Mr. Colon to playing hide and seek with his wrench all day.

“I wonder why we can only do this once a year.” Hector pushes his rear up to the hydrant and manages to create the perfect water arc. It shoots a good ten feet onto the other side of the street, wetting Mrs. Castellanos and her barbeque grill. The force also slightly disrobes Hector as his already too big pants drop further down his narrow hips. Hector plays eternally.

“School, Hec,” Manuel says, grabbing his bucket and filling it in anticipation of Linda Cruz making her way toward the corner, obviously trying not to get her feet or anything else wet. This is love, a bucket of cold water shared with Linda Cruz.

“You got her,” Sammy yells. Manuel stands proudly watching as his heart runs down the street screaming in Spanish.

“We could still do this more than one time a year. Every Saturday would be good, I think.” Hector steps from in front of the hydrant, motioning for another unsuspecting motorist to pass through. Perfect timing, as Hector slides in front of the hydrant. Electric windows aren’t faster than water. Manuel windows are no match. The boys delight as the spray
swallows the long, turquoise Chevy.

“You little…!!!” Mr. Morales slips out of the
driver’s side of the car, only to be met with another spray
made by Sammy, giving Hector and Manuel enough
time to run past the sopping wet driver into Mrs. Cas-
tellaños’ yard. They climb over the cyclone fence and
through the alley that connects the backs of the houses.
Poor Sammy is sacrificed and is unceremoniously de-
posited to his mother by Mr. Morales. At the end of the
block, Hector and Manuel watch Mrs. Moya and their
friend, Sammy, disappear into their home.

“Do you think she’ll let him go?” Hector asks.

“Oh yeah, she can’t watch him and enjoy the
party.”

It is hotter now. The noon sun is unrelenting on
the asphalt; you can see it starting to melt. The heat
from the grills and the street mingle so perfectly you
can’t tell when one stops and the other starts. The air is
heavy with the smell of peppers and onions and grilled
chicken and salsa, the kind you eat and dance to. The
WalMart chairs are no longer begging for company. Be-
hinds of all shapes and sizes wrap across the plastic slabs
or gingerly descend on hot, metal seats. A few folks seat
themselves in the cars, glad they had the wherewithal
to let them sit quietly for most of the day shaded by
old trees. Sammy is pardoned and Manuel, Hector and
Sammy are not yet tired from their work of the day.

“What did I tell you?” Sammy’s mother yanks him
out of the hydrant just as he is about to make the moth-
er of all water arcs. Barefoot and topless, Sammy disap-
ppears down the street like some alien has just grabbed
him and transported him to another world. Hector and
Manuel stand in horror.

“Man, that sucks.” Hector steps into the street to
see whether the alien is going to whack Sammy.

“He’ll be back out soon. His mom’s just upset
because it was her boyfriend’s car this time.”

“Well, let’s disappear on him, too.” Hector pulls
his wet shorts up, only to have them slide down lower.

“I don’t know. Sammy gets really pissed when we
leave him.”

“I know.” Hector runs down the street past Ms.
Santia’s now empty silver bucket and turns the corner.
Manuel follows.

The vacant lot at the end of Ms. Santia’s street is
a miniature scrap yard. Old everything is positioned
strategically on the overgrown land, so as not to be too
visible from the street. Weeds, as tall as trees, push their
way through old tires, sofa springs, car carcasses and
old appliances. Decaying remains of fast food in
cardboard boxes from the night before and used dis-
posable diapers lie like a mosaic on a dirt floor. The
perfume of the old and discarded hangs in the air
like clothes on a line. Garbage must go somewhere.
Mrs. Santia complains to every city agency she can
think of but it doesn’t seem to be anyone’s responsi-
bility, except the owner who died and left a lien on
the land and a bill from the city for the demolition
of the house. It is the perfect place for discarded pets
and adventurous boys.

“This is the country of President Hector
Ardiles.” Hector climbs up on the rusting car roof of
an old Buick and spreads his thin wiry arms out as if
he is an eagle about to take off. Manuel follows suit,
reaching the hood by placing his foot on the door
where the windows used to be. In and out of the
cars, they run being everything from fire fighters to
policemen to racers.

Hector climbs into the trunk first. Just to rest,
that’s all. Being king is tiring and it is hot after all.
It is like being in a bottle. He can see everything in
front of him. He watches as people leave the celebra-
tion and pass the lot heading toward their homes.

“Hector! Manuel!” Sammy yells. He has es-
caped.

Hearing Sammy’s voice, Manuel jumps into
the trunk with his friend. The two boys lower the
trunk hood and peak out the sliver of opening,
watching Sammy walk back and forth across the lot.
He is heading right toward them and the two boys
gently pull the trunk hood down a little more.

“Shhhhh.” Hector puts his finger to his lips.
It is dark inside. Manuel can’t see anything. He can
hear the muffled calls of Sammy outside the car and
it takes every ounce of self-control not to laugh.
Sammy jumps onto the trunk of the car and
it clicks shut. Cupping his hands around his mouth,
he screams, “Hector, Manuel!!!”

Hector and Manuel place their hands over
their months to muffle their giggles. Sammy climbs
to the hood of the car and looks across the lot.

“Manuel! Hector!” Sammy yells again.

He hears only the faint music from the cel-
boration two blocks away. Sammy jumps down off
the car hood. He takes one last look around for his
friends and runs off screaming their names.
“Hector! Manuel! Come on, where are you guys?!” Sammy’s thin voice grows thinner as he heads back to his street.

“He’s going to be really mad,” Manuel says to the blackness.

“Yeah, especially when he finds out he was standing on us.” There is silence “You ready to go back?”

“No, it’s kind of nice in here.” Manuel shifts to allow his legs a little more room. “Let’s just stay here a minute.”

“I could be President one day, you know?” Hector reaches into his pocket and feels for what is left of a small pack of hard candy. “My Dad says I can be anything.” The cellophane makes crackling sounds when Hector opens the bag.

“Did you see her run? She runs like a boy, that’s so cool.” Manuel says. “What ya eatin?”

“Here.” Hector reaches out to the darkness and passes off a piece of candy to his friend’s invisible hand. “She’s still a girl though.”

“Yeah, but she runs like a boy,” Manuel says. “I bet she can catch, too.”

“We’ll see. Maybe tomorrow, if she speaks to you again,” Hector says to his friend. “You want some more.”

“If she doesn’t, I can always wet her again.”

The night of Parade Day, the neighborhood calls their names so many times it is a language of its own. Sammy and his mother trace and retrace his every step. Hector’s father and Manuel’s sister breathe in his every word.

Fathers walk down dimly lit alleys. Mothers hold their diaper clad babies on one hip and yell into abandoned houses.

“Hector! Manuel!”

Mr. Colon brings in his daytime janitorial staff. Mr. Morales and his sons join the search.

“Hector! Manuel!”

There is total silence. The alien has snatched Hector and Manuel this time.

The parade of neighbors marches through the six square blocks. Dogs sniff garages and old refrigerators. The lot is walked and poked and prodded.

On the third day, they pry open old car doors and trunks with crowbars.
echoes

by Mallory Fisher

The snow falls so gently here.
It falls gently on pitched roofs
and fresh hills,
where giggling children
dream of flying.

Inside a brick house,
three generations of women
draw memories on
the lacquered grain
of an oak table.
There are no children here,
sitting, legs folded in pantry cupboards.
They are grown now, and flighty.

Oh, mortality is a gentle push into
the arms of memory.
We are hurrying to create new giggles
that echo in doorways,
to draw on oak tables of our own.