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Passwords, Spring 2011

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Passwords

Volume 11 Issue 2
Spring 2011

Passwords
A Claremont Colleges Literary Magazine
Volume 11 Issue 2 • Spring 2011

Cover Art by Jonah Raduns-Silverstein

Passwords

A Claremont Colleges Literary Magazine



Robert Bodor

Here is a package,
a program of passwords.
It is to bring strangers together.
- *William Stafford, "Passwords"*

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Editors' Note

Passwords, a five-college literary magazine of poetry, prose, and visual art, is published each semester. Our mission is to provide a literary forum for the community of the Claremont Colleges, and our editorial board is open to all students.

A word about our selection process: writers' and artists' names are omitted from all submissions before they are distributed to board members, and final selections are made through deliberation by the editorial board. Although the process is by nature subjective, we strive to make it as fair and collaborative as possible.

We would like to thank the Associated Students of Pomona College, the Pitzer College Student Senate, the Associated Students of Harvey Mudd College, the Scripps Associated Students, the Associated Students of Claremont McKenna College, and Without a Box for their financial support.

For more information about submitting to the magazine or joining the editorial board, please send us a message at passwords@pomona.edu.

Stephanie Stein and Mirabelle Korn
Passwords Editors-in-Chief

Contents

Writing Contest Winner

Untitled

Amy Shoemaker 8

rain for two

Savina Velkova 10

Composed between San Francisco and Beijing

Rebecca Lent 11

Frankie

Phoebe Maddox 12

Spider Mum

Catherine Parker Sweatt 15

Briefcase

Morgan Peterkin 16

Things

Kimbria Arno 18

Field Poem

Isabel Neal 22

When We Were Young

Grace Bialecki 24

Here

Emmett Radler 26

100 Leap Years

Ella Schwalb 28

Le Mariage

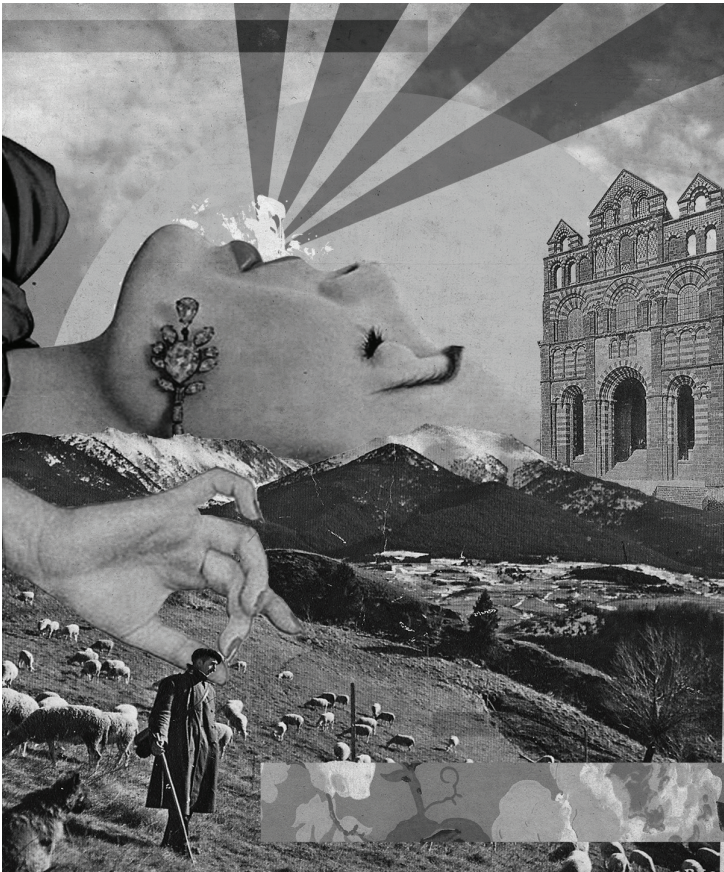
Elise Wanger 29

Revere

Bob Lutz 38

Artwork by

- Robert Bodor
- Patrick Liu
- Nicola Parisi
- Jonah Raduns-Silverstein
- Grace Wielebinski
- Sonya Zhu



Grace Wielebinski

In this semester's writing contest, contestants had one hour to write a poem or prose work relating to the theme of "a page ripped out."

Untitled

Amy Shoemaker

There is a tall man with nobby joints and limbs too long who sits, day and night, at a hickory writing desk. His legs fold and bend to just barely fit beneath the table top. He writes. Things exist. He writes things into existence. His room is empty, but through the lone window are all of his creations.

Lush meadows spring up with caterpillar-colored stems as birds songlessly perch on the tree branches. Raindrops of liquid amber fall gently, gently onto the garden, and fireflies float in the puddles. It is both day and night; stars, moon, sun, all rejoice at a family dinner. They—so far—are the man's only family, as this is his only world.

He once had a world like ours. But I'll save that tale for another time. For here and now, there is no time. He just writes. He writes his garden into dense beauty, then back into shaven purity. The garden has at some point comprised everything in the man's imagination. The garden has been a palace; it has been a city skyline, an ancient ruin, an empty warehouse, giant shoe, ceramic loo, broken bridge; through that window, the man had seen it all.

This day or night—choose that which you prefer, as in his now they are the same—his ever-changing garden stops. The man furrows his brow into a golden raisin. Everything is paused because the man stopped writing. He paws at the pages on his desk, the infinite, yarn-bound pages. In a windy, frazzled motion, the man arrives at the first page. There is no first page. He arrives at where the first page once was or wasn't and stares at its remnants posing like a useless ruler on the left-hand side. In its jagged, empty state, he can use it to measure nay time nor truth. But he knows it must hold both and more.

He knows (can one consider to "know" something if it is false, in fact, but fact to you?) that the first page is something he once wrote, but wished not to remember.

I know (by "know" I mean only to claim that it is fact to *me*) that to be false, because he lacks the ability to remember. I know that page is not something he wrote, because it is I who wrote it and you who reads it now. I, an average-height girl with average joints and limbs, sit here at a mahogany writing desk. My legs fit comfortable beneath the table top, and my now dulled pencil tip keeps moving and weaving my creation, whatever creation I want.

I write things into existence. I falter briefly to try to find where I started, how I started, why. I flip back through my pages before the ones you read now. And at last I arrive at the beginning, where there once was or wasn't the first page I may or may not have written. I wrack my memory (I know I have a memory) to think what I had written, to think why I had ripped it out.

I flip back and keep writing. I write a new man into existence.



Sonya Zhu



Patrick Liu

Composed between San Francisco and Beijing

Rebecca Lent

I love the beautiful expanses
seen from dizzying heights above
the earth; I love the light that dances
through frozen cloudscape; and I love
the aerial logic of a city
(earthside, never quite so pretty).
A window, on an airplane flight,
is more than just a source of light.
But, today, I'm on the aisle.
My neighbor in the window seat—
her method's (sadly) the complete
opposite of my travel-style.
Almost all the flight, she's kept
the window shuttered, and just...slept.

rain for two

Savina Velkova

in his arms like a fish
on a day like this
the sky crumbles and cries
in his arms like a fish
gliding in clean water
hard to catch its slimy back
drowning in blue sheets
growing inch by inch
deeper, deeper
up and out
to fill the lungs
to find the world
in his arms like a fish
everything happens so quietly
that if they listen
they can hear the continents dancing



Nicola Parisi

Frankie

Phoebe Maddox

All I've been able to think about, since it happened, was my friend Zoe from the third grade. Zoe, with all of her plastic spatulas and spoons, who had so eagerly awaited Wednesday play dates, who had laid out mother's nightgown and father's dress shirts, so that I always knew what was going to happen next. I don't even remember feeling guilty.

Since it happened, I've been blacking out a lot. Apparently I've become a rather functioning alcoholic, capable of engaging in lengthy conversations that I never remember, turning up in places I've never been before, even eating entire bags of arugula on the kitchen floor without any recollection. Arugula?

With Zoe, it was like blacking out, in that I don't know how to 'recollect' my experience, don't have any way to explain what really happened. Was it pain? Pleasure? I didn't like that I always had to play the girl, which meant that I had to be the wriggling fish beneath her, incapable of controlling the intrusive thrusting of the spatula. I didn't like that she always got to decide how the game would go. That, once the dress shirt was on, she could order me to cook her eggs and bacon, or order me to shut up so she could read the newspaper, or order me to lie down on the floor and do the wriggling fish. But, as she stated plainly on the first of our Wednesday play dates, the most important rule of the game was that the girl had to do exactly what the man said.

Last weekend, I decided to be Frankie again. Not me. Not this sad, angry, confused pathetic piece of shit. Frankie, the tough girl, the bitch. Frankie doesn't do the wriggling fish. Frankie eats meat, not bags of arugula. And if Frankie blacks out, no one knows but Frankie. Because Frankie is mysterious and intimidating and untouchable. She only wears black, she's mastered the smirk, and she can take a shot of whiskey without chaser. In fact, she prefers whiskey.

What happened with Zoe could have been a one-time thing. An experiment, a childhood game of doctor. No one would have ever had to know about the spoons and spatulas. About the way Zoe would sometimes hit me instead of kissing me. About how I couldn't walk one Thursday because she pushed in the wrong end of the spatula. No one should have ever had to know. But her mom came in one day, while we were doing the wriggling fish. And then my mom had to come too. And then we all had to talk together. And I had to sit, my head hung down, listening to the concern and confusion in their voices, while blood trickled down the inside of my thigh, staining Zoe's mother's nightgown with a diamond of crimson.

The problem with being Frankie is that I have started to prefer her. She doesn't say the word love, she knows love is a false, dirty word that never lasts. She knows how to have one night stands, to sneak out in the early morning before the sunshine brings emptiness to the night. She knows how to be dangerous, how to justnotgiveafuck. The before me, the person I was before it happened, she gave a fuck. A bunch of fucks. She thought love could change the world. She was a walking cliché. She was emotional, dramatic, sensitive. Sex with him was her reason for living.

After Zoe, it should have all been over. Nightgowns, playdates behind closed doors, plastic kitchen utensils. But in the sixth grade, I met Nicole. She had a computer, and video games, and cable. Things my dad didn't let us have. She had a huge house, snacks like Doritos and Oreos, a pool. She lived on the golf course. Her life seemed so free, especially because she was always alone. We used to go into the basement. She'd ask me to take off my clothes for her, and put on this white dress. Then she'd say, my name is Jim, and you are my girlfriend. Now, lets do what girlfriends and boyfriends do together.

I guess I should have known things were ending. My behavior was getting worse. I accidentally lapsed into being Frankie a few times over the summer, mostly out of boredom. Also out of pain. I know I hurt him when that happened. Frankie hurts everyone. But I guess being her made losing bits of myself easier. Frankie, even in her cruelty, was at least different than most people. And he couldn't handle all of me. So I hid bits away, hid my strange bits, removed my plastic spatulas from sight, and became someone more acceptable. Someone less crazy. Someone less.

After Nicole and Zoe, there was Lara. Only Lara and I didn't pretend one of us was the boy and the other was the girl. We were too old for that. I guess I loved her from the moment I saw her. Not really because she was beautiful or foreign or funny when she tried to speak English. Because she let me take care of her. Because she looked to me for answers. Because she said she'd never done anything spontaneous before, until she met me. Because she didn't try to explain how we had come to love one another. Because that night in January when everyone else was asleep, the two of us drank like twelve beers and just did what we wanted. For once. Without worrying that the eight hour drive home with scarves wrapped around our hickies would be awkward the next morning. Without worrying that my boyfriend's return from college the next day could be problematic. Just. Without. Worrying.

When it happened, when it was really over, I sort of lost it for a while. I didn't know what I was doing, why I was doing anything, what I was even supposed to do. I didn't know it was possible to feel so stripped, so empty. I would drive on the wrong side of the road without realizing. I would make a cheddar cheese sandwich, my favorite kind, and forget to eat it. My friends

would try to help me, we'd get dressed up, make some drinks. Every night I'd end up hysterical, just unable to stop crying, unable to stop melting into the floor.

Lara once told me she hated Frankie. I feigned surprise, innocence. Frankie, who the fuck is that? She just raised her eyebrows, shrugging towards the whiskey on the table. You don't need her, she said.



Grace Wielebinski

Spider Mum

Catherine Parker Sweatt

I am a hothouse variety virgin.

I was kept inside
under smooth panes of glass
even after I was blossoming

and then sensing my demise,
hastily shipped to the nearest nursery,
where only a few buyers glimpsed

my stems furrowed, matte-finished,
my leaves drooping, discoloring slightly,
my stamen nowhere to be found

amid the golden starburst
I couldn't contain. I was past-peak,
but tragically desirable in that way.

Today, I am still planted in the
fifty-cent plastic made-in-China pot
I came in.

Briefcase

Morgan Peterkin

my breath quivers
as you pick up your briefcase that you left
near the door.
leather.
that's the last smell
i will remember.
how 'bout this one, honey?
you asked and i wrinkled my nose
—endearing, i think you once called it.
our fingertips touch—
only the tips, for we were nervous
you were lonely
and i was fragile.
we bump arms
as you steal popcorn
from the bucket in my lap.
what do you think about this one?
no, you say, not serious enough.
did we ever agree on anything?
the muscles in your shoulder
twitch and glisten
beneath your thin cotton shirt
as you nail the last frame
to the wall.
we fall,
exhausted,
on the lone couch
amidst boxes and boxes.
This has to be it—
of course, you disagree.
you rest your hand on my stomach
and you give me the last longing look
i can remember.
we both jump at the movement inside of me
i realize now
she could not save us.
we found it,
we both think.

we run our hands over the glossy leather
the last smell
i will remember.



Sonya Zhu

Things

Kimbia Arno

I.

It started in class, as several things do. Theorems, puzzles, friendships, ideas about leather-winged bicycles, daydreams, cheat sheets. For him, it began as something fairly ordinary. It also started with a girl, as several things do. Paintings, poetry, the Crimean war, life, headaches, novels. Everyone is ordinary, uninteresting until proven otherwise, and she was no exception as he saw her from across the room. But today, she had deemed it necessary to sit behind him. Well, not behind him, per se, but behind the boy who was sitting next to him, but behind him is just enough for this story. She was actually not so ordinary, not so uninteresting; she was actually witty, or so he had thought when he first heard her speak. But, when he brought it up over Saltine crackers and orange slices, she didn't remember him from that time, so the memory fumbled from his hands and thudded with the horrible squish of an overripe fruit, inedible. She remembered the time, and the place—she just didn't remember him in it, which would later actually be horribly ironic, all things considered. He found that he quite liked her and that she was rather clever and that she would understand his obscure references in the esoteric world of Gundams, spirit guns, and bebop. He watched as she fluidly moved from one topic to another, from carets to carrots to owls, comforted to find that his mind was moving in the same direction. But then the bell would ring, and it was over, and he would forget, and someone else would call his name, and he would answer, and she would frown and pick up her books, disappointed. This is the way things began.

She sees a familiar Face, and forgets her forced façade. (Writing this later, she will try to say this five times fast, failing miserably.) She has not seen said Face for quite some time. She tells her that this is a great party, but this is a lie, because great parties are parties where she sees him, but terrible parties are also those where she sees him, so she becomes confused. The familiar Face says something, and she nods as though she had been listening, but really she is trying to spot him. He hadn't said he would be here, but he hadn't said he wouldn't. She didn't know what he had said because she didn't call him. An unusual step, but a necessary one. The familiar Face remembers that she doesn't actually know her very well and heads in another direction. She is relieved but also very suddenly bereft, and misses Face a great deal, because she was quite fond of Face now that she thinks about it, but it is too late, and she is stuck, holding a half-empty Solo cup of beer that she won't drink, and she is back to guarding herself from the rough tongues of what she doesn't

realize are glassy, unfocused eyes. Parties without him are stupid.

II.

It continued in class, but this was already explained. It continued in two classes, actually, but just saying that it continued in class is enough for this story. It even continued with the same girl, although that much was not surprising. He had long since thrown away that other Skinny Girl, although that much was not surprising either. He had clung to her because she gave him attention and touched him where he liked it. But that Skinny Girl didn't touch him where you think that she did, because he was too innocent for that, and the she that touched him is and was not the she that you are following now, although you are more than welcome to follow her if you so choose. The story becomes quite pathetic from this point on anyway, so I can try to tell you where to find the Skinny Girl, even though she changed her name. But he and she—the Skinny Girl, not the real she—still chat occasionally, which she—the real she—finds strange, but whatever. He relies on her—from now on, this is the real her—quite a bit, he discovers, in addition to finding that she can still carry on a wonderfully nonsensical conversation that can and will only make sense to him. For now it is nameless. He teases her, she defaces his personal belongings, and every now and then he sees something in her face. But this something is trouble, disappointing, as well as flattering. He carefully steps over it, unknowingly (actually, probably knowingly) stepping on her. But this is alright, he thinks. She will survive, and it will continue unnamed. Then one day, she calls, far braver than he ever was, because this is one of the things he admires in her, but he puts her down carefully, and tells her what he sees as obvious, and she nods and says 'of course,' and that is that. But that is not that, because she is now on the phone with her lieutenant, raising her middle finger to that bitch Sadie Hawkins. And so there is a compromise, meaning he gets what he wants, while she watches, pretending not to be miserable. That is the way things were.

The urge to flick off unsuspecting people in this stupid fucking dress that she only fucking wore because she thought he would fucking be there is ever increasing. But she smiles, because letting people know how you feel is a mistake, because then they'll either try to understand, or worse, they'll actually understand, and then you'll really be in a shithole. Pardon my language; she's not really very ladylike at all, although he once told her that underneath her fierceness and intimidation, she is very sweet. At that point, she didn't know whether to be secretly pleased or to call him a bastard because he was toying with her again. She tugs at her bra strap, and looks about her again, trying to pretend that she's not looking for unremarkable short black hair, a white

t-shirt, and a pair of black shorts with a white stripe going down the side. He won't be wearing this, and if he is, she'll mark it down to a coincidence and not some stupid acronym that doesn't exist, because by now, this is what she has taught herself to believe, as the alternative makes life a lot harder. He descends the stairs, not wearing a white t-shirt or a pair of black shorts with a white stripe going down the side, but even a glimpse of his grinning dimples makes her smile automatically. His hair is also longer, the way that she doesn't like. She thinks of telling him so, but then recalls that she has no obligation to him, that she is not responsible for him. This is a feat that has taken much practice. Still, now she wishes that Whatsername would wander back here, so that he would not see her standing with a stupid fucking Solo cup for company. She always spotted him first because he was never ever looking for her. Quickly, she looks for potential exits, taking none of them, instead waiting for him to come and talk to her so that she might pretend that she didn't see him come in. She waits, glancing sometimes to check on him while he talks to some other someone over there somewhere. He is not looking for her. Of course he isn't. The beer is actually looking tempting, but before she reaches this stage, he has called her name and she is able to turn on her heel, with an expression of pleasant surprise. He grins and immediately embraces her. He exclaims that he didn't know that she was in town, and she says that she must have forgotten to call him, silently reveling in her nonexistent passive-aggressive victory. He says she looks amazing. She remembers something. This party is terrible. Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200.

III.

He behaved far differently than he had, now that the obvious was obvious. He called her for no reason, just to chat. This didn't continue in class anymore, but in meetings in various places that she lived for. However, he had decided that he didn't want to end this part of his life with nothing. He missed that skinny girl's touch. So, he made it his mission to find it again. She supported him in this endeavor, as he wound his way through a series of girls. She knew that they were wrong for him, but even she began to wonder. After all, they didn't seem to mind. And maybe calling it a series was unfair to him, but it seemed as though when one let him down, he would just move on to the next. He did not see this though, because this was what he wanted. But it seemed to her that this was a travesty, a mere simulacrum of his dream of being loved, a dream that was identical to her dream, but he wanted someone beautiful, and she was just her. This came as no surprise to her, yet, one day, she had had enough. And again, brave as she was, she called him and told him so. But this was useless. He and she were inseparable, inevitable. He later gave this a name. But at the time he begged and pleaded with her, and

she enjoyed it and was cold and was sickly satisfied with the way the tables had turned. But then she remembered that he was unavoidable, that her eyes were already too well trained to find him. Stupidly, she called him again and fixed what was broken, although letting it stay broken would probably have been a smarter move on her part. He was relieved, and went back to playing around as though nothing had happened. He enjoyed himself while she tried to tell herself he needs her more than she needs him. The time came when they were to go their separate ways and he was sad and she was sad but she was also relieved. Even to the end, he was still throwing her to the side, and even to the end, she was trying to adapt to it, and to recognize that this is the way things are.

She finds herself drowning in him again and does nothing to stop it. He says to her, "Listen, I've really missed you, and I thought, even though I took advantage of the fact that you loved me, that maybe you would give me a chance and be my girlfriend." And then she nods, and kisses him. Or maybe she knows better and says, "No, sorry, you had your chance," and walks away triumphant, to the applause of the other people at this stupid party. But this doesn't happen. Instead, she is already gone and into streaks of stop lights and 'No Vacancy' signs as soon as she sees him begin to descend the stairs, because he will not see her in her 'amazing' dress, because he will not look, because this is the way things are. But the really funny part, the really hilarious part, the part where the whole world laughs until they have tears in their eyes, is when she calls him tomorrow morning, telling him that she's back in town and wondering, if he's not too busy, if he wants to hang out.

Field Poem

Isabel Neal

Just before waking
I dream the blind cow has slipped and fallen down,
her belly split
a clean barrel, a diagram.
Inside
her heart shakes
and squawks, batters the ribcage,
a white bird.

She stands still
nosing the
gray mud
this
piece
of light
flips
a
gainst
her bones
the
knowing
field
drifts
under my boots.
I can barely look at her.

In the morning, we thumb our cold coats on
and do not eat breakfast til we return
smelling clean shit, rain
straw. I pronounce les vaches
les veaux
la jeunisse. I repeat names
with my mouth full and Philippe and Marie-Laure nod.

Another cow gives birth.
Her long cry shifts the herd
on their hooves, taut hip skin stretches
brush tails swing.

A measure of sun,
her broad and bloody chime,
rising,
again, again, a
new vowel.



Robert Bodor

When We Were Young

Gracie Bialecki

And the band played on: football games, growing pains
and sickly sweet liquor drinks at frosty first kiss field parties.
Always saw all the stars.
Especially in winter, but the endless summer nights were best
with their false promises of freedom.
Inevitably, August's heat cools into another orange-red-crisp-blue September.
Fall and leaves mean school and these
things constantly continued to pose issues.
Bleached chemical girls drank cheap vodka in the locker room through the
first two bells.
Pack cackles hurling off dirty tile walls.
I took the bus to school early and we held hands in the hallway instead.
He made me a winter depression mix.
I never memorized the name of the river Styx, usually cheated off the
football captain's test in Greek Mythology – number-two-pencil-multiple-choice-bubble-sheets.
Got by and got As the only way I knew how – without trying.
Short short short jeans shorts and long long long pulls of vodka.
Won the pool game, won the cruel game
of love and ended up in your arms, legs, lips.
Losing my virginity was
Hazy?
But everyone knows Jen Shepard lost hers on the hood of a Dodge in
Albany,
so the standards were never too high.
Finally, a fully fearful year later – Planned Non-Parenthood
and my mother's endearing illusions about the state of my hymen.
Forty dollars from my grandma each birthday. Fifty states and their capitals..
Eighty days until summer vacation. Nineties Honda Civic.
One hundred percent ready to leave this town.
Lazy Sundays, Blunt Mondays.
Boredom begs for more and more sticky green adventures.
Lemonade Grenade, just got laid, underpaid, but we can't complain.
Squelchy ska in desolate Irish bars that we wouldn't be able to drink in for
another six years.
Stop and Shoplift.
Red lipstick, move hands quick.

Bong rips before prom hips
shake, heart ache. I'll never make the same mistake again,
and again-again-again, we're off and on, hot and cold, holding hands. All
our plans
fell through.
Nothing lasts forever, apparently,
Two cats, two kids, two parents, too much symmetry.
So then it was single mother home structure,
college bound brother and me wondering
what to do with all these dusty rooms and empty closets.
Filled them with drunk up magnums of wine, faded memories and every-
thing else that is hard to get rid of, but you don't want to look at.
Spring thaw. Winter's fatal flaw was never knowing when to end.
Sprint hurdle track circle, won wearing black and purple.
Pomp and circumstance,
baby give me one more chance,
but I can't.



Nicola Parisi

Here

Emmett Radler

Walking down Christopher St. towards the pier,
if one listens closely, one can hear
the great-grandchildren of the Marginalized
tentatively reclaiming their grandparents' most-hated slurs.

Rolling the words under sweaty palms
(palms that reach for other palms),
silent echoes of nigger, queer, and pansy
become your unengendered generation's psalms.

Gathering courage on the L-train,
sneakerheaded youth spit them out in rhymes:
palms hanging fast to straphangers, intoning this is how I identify,
I, myself, armed with 40s and too much time.

On Christopher and 6th, I take you to Tranny Bingo Tuesdays
and Ye Olde Gays smile upon us when,
hunched over bingo cards,
we place our drinks down and shift our hips



Nicola Parisi

into one another's. You marginalize yourself
on the mornings that you tell me
you are sick and tired of everybody getting hung up
on which words to use.

But I can offer you only upturned palms,
and the sigh of shrugged shoulders,
because while it is all well and good to say
I am never neither/nor, maybe not even both/and either,

next week when you catch your reflection
in the one clear corner of your fogged bathroom mirror,
and find yourself a two year old boy inventing his reflection,
knowing nothing yet about man or woman

except the myriad differences between
Mom and Dad.
And your newborn sister,
you look at her and she is the opposite of you.

Your vocabulary is as small as your still-dimpled hands,
but you are priming yourself for the labels you are later going to claim,
those same words you've written off as overly precise, as tiresome,
as thick with the residue of too much shame.

And in the beginning of September,
when you ride the L-train to that one young gay bar,
or see all the slim teens voguing on the pier,
Remember:

You are seeing how they work,
(though only ever how they appear)
how they divide us, while uniting us,
small bastions against stuttering fear.

You are confronting the full-length mirror on the inside
door of your father's wardrobe, and
you are practicing: not sadness, not fear,
but the day our palms do meet: *Here*,

100 Leap Years

Ella Schwalb

An 80-proof millennium, a wingspan long enough to shade the Andes—
I've locked all the shutters and I'm sitting up against the wall
Making charts in the tea-leaves at the bottom of my cup.

But the devil's in the details, in the corner tying nooses—
Crude, fraying nooses with those manicured fingers.
Then leaping lightfoot, swinging doors,
Leaving a hung jury in my silent attic window.

In frozen Roman baths the skeletons still lounge,
Calling shots and making deals through centuries of ice.

When you teach me a physics lesson, I have to worry
About my gravity on everything, tipping scales a thousand galaxies away.
When you teach me statistics I have to worry
About the words and the newspapers and someone's ugly vindication.
When you teach me history I have to worry about you,
And who's feeding you lines, and what the hell would anybody be scared of
me for anyway?

I'll come down now, run away.
Show me anywhere that I can't help
Tracing fault lines,
Pacing the fragile necks of continents.

I can't help it if the rust on their plows
Twinkles, leery by the lilac tree.
Can't help singing along to sad songs distended through the radio air.
I can't help watching goodbye kisses,
Imagining bricks of cocaine and bulletproof uncles
Or a bloodhound collapsed from fatigue.

I'm keeping promises I never made,
Taking medicine that I don't need,
Just for a little solidarity that you'll never even feel.

Le Mariage

Elise Wanger

It was that damn bottle of Palo Cortado or the glass of Cava we chased it with. I hadn't had a sip of anything for months, and the minute I got on the ferry towards Spain we toasted the occasion. None of our friends drink back in Morocco, not that there's much in North Africa worth drinking. Yet here our meals are brimful of sharp, Spanish wines. The kind of wines so biting in flavor that you have to restrain your intake to a delicate sip. The kind of wine that makes you sad that life can't always be so poignant. We had just finished our Italian meal in a restaurant full of Spaniards and you were struggling out of your Arabic mindset and I was still thinking in English as we chatted in French, our accents deplorable to any Parisian. Then there were the Spaniards surrounding us, some with a Catalan lisp and others with the Madrid *sh* and *y* crawling through their tongues and I just wanted to scream so loudly that my whole throat closed up like a zipper. Americans have never been trained to tolerate so many sounds in one room. So when we finally got back to our hotel in *La Gràcia* that thing you said to me pulled the zipper down and all the contents just spilled out. I wasn't ready, that's all. I've been equipped to handle the three little words. I know how to affront or duck or override the standard English sentence. Noun, verb, object. But how could I have guarded against two words with a personal pronoun elision? Like I said, Americans don't know how to deal with translation.

Everything I say, feel, want, fight, smell, dream must cycle through so much that by the time it gets into French or, even worse, Arabic, the poor thing is writhing on its death-bed. The journey: pre-language, then thought, which is a primordial language in itself. Thought then crawls its way to the outré English of learner's English, back when no one knew how to follow the predesignated tracks. Back when my mom would say after a long day at work *I'm beat!*, and I would look for bruises. When I'd sit down at the dinner table and shout "I'm so hungry I won't hold my horses!" and stuff a slice of bread in my prepubescent mouth. Before the universal confinement we idiotically deem comprehension. Then the words form in my colloquial English, from there to a respectable English, and finally another language. Only to have to make it's way back down to sensation so I can make sense of it. The whole world works that way. Certainly the human body. Plants convert light and carbon into sugar and then sugar into carbohydrates. We eat carbohydrates. Break them down to sugars. Turn the sugars into energy which we exhale as carbon. All that work just to end up at the start.

Like us. We created love in linguistic entropy. We spent endless hours trying to find the same wavelength, to understand each other so we could

throw meaning away.

Like the Sahara.

It was the first time I let you hear my native tongue. We were lying in the *djerba* under a hand-woven blanket more suitable to be a carpet. The sun had gone down hours ago and only a few stars were in sight, almost none. Nor did any appear. Despite the lack of street lamps and headlights, the night had an orange haze and I could see you, the *djerba* and the rough sands clearly, albeit colorless. Air was palpable. I could reach out and grab the particles in my hand. I had always thought the desert would feel open and empty. Instead everything felt so dense, oppressed by invisible matter. I didn't float on the sand like a bed. Claustrophobia stirred. I felt your arm draped across me in a whisper of Arabic, French and Tashelhiyt combined. I, in turn, whispered English.

Stay with me.

You lifted your head and slowly fluttered an eye open. The words had slipped through my hands like a fish through untrained fingers. My fingers. It sounded a lot less beautiful. The tongue didn't roll or travel from the back to the front of the throat. It just stayed near the teeth, where it's comfortable and safe. Yet you know that's where it gets its charm, from fear disguised as straight-forwardness.

You opened the other eye, so that both were squinting and fluttering back to reality, still unable to make out the features of my silhouette. Your skin looked like unglazed clay in the lamplight, created straight from the earth. I was so expectant of a rough, cold texture that I was a little disappointed to find you so smooth and fragrant. I had thought by the sheer fact of being foreign you would lack the American softness I have learned to interpret as weakness. I had thought something abrasive could be a healthy change.

Stay with me.

I wondered how many fish you had caught as a child along the rivers or in the Atlantic, and whether you managed to hold onto them as they convulsed in your hands, strong hands, perhaps always strong. I wondered whether you skinned them yourself. If you ate them or sold them. I wondered what kinds of fish are found around Morocco. If your mother cooked them and how. I wondered if nomads fish at all.

You looked at me inquisitively, still too disoriented to get words out of your dry throat. I thought about whispering *restes avec moi* in broken French, but that would ruin the whole point. Besides, it was clear you hadn't heard me the first two times, and so I decided I might as well keep it that way. I had no reason to try to be profound. My only advantage over you, with your farrago of culture and effortlessly sexy smile, was my uncouth, American obviousness. I decided I must remain unadorned, unattached and everything else that

defies finesse. I must keep you disarmed, unable to determine what to make of me. That way you'll stick around. You'll crave to either figure it out—the uncouth—or beguilingly smooth it away, stain by stain, until I become a blank slate. Until I become immaculate.

“Ça va? Pourquoi est-ce que tu es éveillée?” you whispered. You were clearly still confused by the spongy skylight behind me. Perhaps you had forgotten the idea of light in your sleep, and had to relearn it.

Thinking about fishing, I replied in French. *Je pense de pêcher.*

Fishing? Do people fish in L.A?

I had never thought about that. *Probably not. At least not in the ocean.*

Mais on pêche d'autres choses? you asked. *But they fish for other things?* I couldn't tell if you were being facetious or just foreign.

I nodded.

Let them fish then. You kissed under my right brow. *I would like to sleep.*

And we did. Night after night after night. We slept on the flat rooftops of the city under clotheslines. We slept on beaches. At Tarik and Wharta's apartment. We slept everywhere but our own places. I was intimidated by your family and my landlord knew I was unmarried. We didn't dare try to rent a room: all the good hotels asked for a license.

Humans weren't biologically meant to be this way. We were probably just one big mating family, a free-for-all. Primatologists call it “fission-fusion” or “Multi-male, multi-female.” Screw what you want when you want. Maybe we should listen to our biology; monogamy sets us up for so much pain. I used



Nicola Parisi

to take pride in my liberal views of love because I truly thought I could defy society's moral compass. I thought I believed exclusive love was blasé. Only after you moved on did I realize how deeply I'd been lying to myself. I was worse than the serial monogamists and suburban newlyweds. I was so scared of someone breaking the pact of monogamy that I anticipated disappointment by saying I don't care.

In college I wanted to study biology. The inane dances of biota from system to system. Macrocosms and microclimates and phylogenies. But the words followed me. Those insolent names for great wonders—*amenorrhea*, *sedimentation*, *prezygotic isolation*—would stare at me from the textbooks with an entitlement they didn't deserve. How ironic that I came to Rabat to teach English. To teach something I don't even believe in. To teach my students to understand even less.

Like the first time we met. It was at that beach between Temarra and Bouznika. Tarik and Mehdi were cooking a tagine on the beach. I had met Tarik during my first month of teaching, when I'd gone to the American Embassy to pick up my paycheck. He was behind the front desk in a handsome suit and *La Planète des Singes* in paperback, with a gaudy sci-fi cartoon of apemen on the cover. I commented on his reading selection and he immediately handed it over, eager to share French pop-culture. I in turn handed him what I was reading, a Moroccan novel called *Pèlerinage d'un artiste amoureux*. Rough translation: *Pilgrimage of an Enamored Artist*.

But no one brought books to the beach. Just tagines, tents, musical instruments and soccer balls. Tarik cut all the carrots and tomatoes and eggplant and Mehdi put the triangular ceramic dish on the clump of smoking coals. The oil and Maggi seasonings simmered to the sound of the waves and a distant guitar towards the shore. Wharta, Tarik's sister, sat beside me and swirled her fingers around my dirty blond locks. She wore a blue cloth wrap around her hips and a swimsuit top that barely contained her billowing breasts. It was exactly the Morocco I'd imagined Morocco would always be. Spotless. An endless blue sky on endless dark sand by endless warm waves. I wore wide cotton pants that passed the ankle and a long-sleeve peasant top designed to mask my figure, though that's quite a challenge. Unlike Wharta, this was not my home turf. I attracted enough attention with the milk-white anemia of Euro-American skin.

So there we were, the boys cooking and Wharta telling me all about Mohammed VI. *Il est un roi merveilleux*, she said. A marvelous king. He takes good care of his people, and his son will do the same. I nodded. Wharta laughed and put her hands around my torso to meet at my back, the embrace pressing our breasts into each other. *You do not like the monarchy, no?* She asked in French. *You think we are behind the rest of the world?*

I didn't. Given Morocco's geocultural makeup I don't see any other option. Wharta kissed my cheek and sang loudly to the guitar. She was not your average Moroccan girl. She owned a car and had boyfriends and smoked Marlboros. When she picked me up from work to go to the beach she blasted Green Day and sang along to every word. Her defiance was beautiful to me and yet, as an American, impossible to emulate. It's either intolerant or a non-issue when I do it. Americans can't be iconoclasts. And then, in this milieu of friends, you walked towards me. You were wearing nothing but your cargo shorts and dark brown curls, the rest of your body as continuous and indiscrete as sand. You greeted me with a kiss on each cheek, thinking all foreigners greet like the French, and that if they don't they secretly want to anyway. Which might as well be true. And I was trying so hard to not make waves with my presence when I saw that spotted cat run past our little tent and it was so beautiful that I gushed to Wharta "*Quelle belle chat!*" in my American accent and everyone burst into laughter. Two weeks later when I was walking with you through Agdal, you saw a gangly bunch of cats along the dumpster and asked "*Les belles chattes, oui?*" That was the first time you teased me.

So we decided before I returned to the States that we would go to Spain. Well, not Spain exactly, but Barcelona. Land of Catalan and the sardana. Where we could finally make love. Where you were just a young, red-blooded male and I just some female: not foreign, sexually-liberated or exotic. In Spain I was just another American dumb enough to believe I could ferment European romance like a Palomino grape. Finally you were rough, reprehensibly rough. What I wanted, the kind that reminded me I was no longer in the safety of my homeland. We stayed in an upscale auberge with a room on the fourth floor, the top floor, with a little balcony where I left our empty bottles. The building had nothing but a courtyard in the center, as if someone decided to tear out the insides only to leave a corridor of outskirted rooms. The room where you and I drank our final glass for the night and you said what you did in French and I pretended not to understand, digging my fingers into your beetle-black hair and licking the rim of your ear. You consumed me in our Spanish bed and I closed my eyes, searching for profundity in the wincing and hair pulls. You used my hair during sex more than any other body part. Wrapping it around my neck until I couldn't breathe. Pulling it behind my back like a sailor's line as you fucked me from behind. Submerging your nose in it. You loved my dirty blond hair, especially the way the humidity would spiral each strand into the geometry of Barcelona, locks of Gaudi.

By the next afternoon we had finally whetted your voracious appetite. We celebrated by going to the MACBA, a museum with more glass walkways than artworks. You couldn't stop writhing your head towards the upside-down floor, gazing at cubes of leathered men spanking each other. And my

favorite piece terrified you though you didn't know why, the Venus of Willendorf on her period. The artist inundated her canvas in strokes so wet and smooth that I imagined she used her tongue in lieu of a brush, blood gushing from primordial genitals. It was in front of her that you told me about getting married. That you needed to become a man. That if you didn't find a nice Muslim girl before next year, your father would find her for you. It was time, after all. Berbers marry early. After the museum we went back to the gutless hotel and I opened another bottle, a dry Rioja aged in American oak. Bitter and irresistible. It didn't see the poetry in it at the time, but now it feels all too obvious. Now I look back and realize we had our whole relationship distilled in that wine. It had the heat of your skin and the yellow of my teeth. It had the linguistic entropy.

The night grew colder. We migrated from the balcony to the shower. I didn't want to look at your clean-shaven face, the cheek bone curved into a smirk. I didn't want to look at you at all, and didn't know what else to do with myself. I thought at least on my knees I could keep busy and have a excuse to disconnect. I kissed your chest and quickly worked downwards, my fingers trickling along your sides to catch-up with my mouth. You stood there stupefied, water flowing from the ramp of your nose onto the crown of my head perfectly. A fellatio fountain sculpture, cast in cold hard flesh slowly aging green. By the time I parted my lips you were already in your own universe, eyes forcefully shut and a hand on the faux-tile wall to hold yourself up. Since I was the whole of your sexual history, I knew no one had done this to you before and that privilege made it all the easier to forget your presence. You came. I opened my mouth and let the water fall inside with it. I could feel my tongue a vein-purple, a fuzzy residue from the Post-Modernism and your acquiescence. Even diluted it tasted horrible. I ran to our almost-empty bottle and finished a last layer blanketing the green glass bottom, still naked, staring at the porcelian enamel where you stood dripping, grinning like you just won a prize. Then my zipped-up throat unzipped again and I had to run back into the bathroom to release its contents. We blamed the first time on the wine. This time we blamed on gag reflex.

I flew out of Barcelona the next day. The school year was officially over: time to go home. We transitioned easily from lovers to pen pals from June to June with quaint e-mails and nationalistic postcards. I told you about the Los Angeles you wanted to hear, the one from the movies. You told me about deciding to stay permanently in the city, leaving your disillusioned family behind in the desert. Joining the urban milieu. But you still kept your promise. By that next July you became a man.

I flew back to Rabat, just for the occasion. Wharta picked me up at the airport in Casablanca and we drove straight to the medina as she recited to

me all the new lovers she kept in France, now that she was a stewardess. *Une vrai hôtesse de l'air!* I had never been to a true dress shop in Morocco before, one full of mirrors and changing rooms. I usually bought sweatshop hand-me-downs in cardboard boxes off the sidewalk. The green *djellaba* beckoned me immediately, forest and lime threads weaved together for an iridescence that made me feel so tranquil, so complacent with life's sickening humour. Shining green from neck to ankle, like a Renaissance bride, like that Jan van Eyck with the newlyweds and the convex mirror. As we drove back to Wharta's apartment, I ran my knuckles along the green silk folded on my lap. It had countless little buttons all the way down the front, each one handmade. Each one built of intertwining lines of white cords, all coiled in dark green thread so intricate that it reminded me of those puzzles where the end of the maze is the start. I kept thinking about how wonderful it would feel to have someone undo every single one, one at a time.

That was the last time I looked back at the medina, the open-air booths and sweat-filled vendors. I love the marketplace. Men grabbing your arm passionately. Making outlandish requests to the most coy responses. I was attracted to your abnormality. I *am* attracted to it. I wanted your strange perks and treason. Perfidy.

There were children running around outside of the bride's home and musicians eating pastries of pistachio and sesame. Inside the women piled massive ceramic dishes brimful of couscous and chicken and sweet lamb-and-plum tajines. The smells kept layering on top of one another until I couldn't distinguish salivating from the fluid taste of nausea. Suddenly the green felt all-too appropriate for the wrong reasons.

Thankfully Wharta clamped her hand around my wrist and jerked me into the middle of the women's room. The musicians on the other side of the curtained room—the men's side—started playing and suddenly all the women around me began manically clapping and oscillating their jaws in shrieks of *aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy!* A teenage girl in front of me with massive eyes and yellow teeth threw off her headscarf and everyone hollered. She bent over at the waist and hung her long hair towards the ground, slowly swaying. I soon realized that the sway came solely from her neck as her hair swung longer and longer and suddenly her head swept in violent circles, hair whipping round and round as the *aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy-aiy's!* reached a piercing frequency. Wharta shook a tamborine that seemed to have manifested from the air, the girl turned her swirling black mass towards me and I looked to Wharta, who jerked her instrument towards the center of the room in encouragement. I felt dizzy. I pulled out the pins keeping my modest bun together and began to swing my head until the room swirled into a monsoon of shrieks and saffrons and silks. I wondered if the men had any

idea...

You asked me once why I didn't cover my head like the other American tourists, the ones that hung expensive cameras from their necks and wore *djellabas* to blend in with the locals. I told you I am not a liar, *je suis pas une menteuse*. That the headscarf symbolizes everything I am not. That I believe in pre-marital sex and alcohol and would never uphold modesty as a virtue. That I will never be a daughter of Mohammed.

You betrayed me. You had me pecking little sesame seeds from each finger and nuzzling the hard joint of your wrist. There will always be the longer, sexier, skinnier little body of Mohammed's children to press up against you in bed, one better behaved. But she won't understand wine. And she doesn't dream of going down on you, because the thought of pleasing you turns her on so greatly. That's me. I like you more than you'd ever be comfortable with. And it doesn't bother me because I've been you. I've run away from affection because that's nature. There needs to be the chasing and the chased. But you deserve to know what it feels like to be chased. To have someone like you more than you should be allowed, more than you would ever deserve. There's no alternative in sex. There has to be the one fucking and the one getting fucked.

Between dancing and more dancing, the sexes reconvened to summon Allah and bless the couple. Hair came back up. Music began again, but a different music, it weighed more. The couple entered and the long horns struck with a *sforzando* throbbing, the rhythm of a heartbeat trapped and confused in a metal detector. A pacemaker gone awry.

The bride represented everything a good Moroccan girl should be. Demure and full of frightened curiosity: a newborn squirrel. Barely eighteen. Everything I'm not. Unlike you, she was a virgin, and you would be the only man to ever know her body. To see her hair down, every silk strand mouth-watering and clandestine. I have a head that could be described as a beige. Or perhaps taupe, although I don't think I know what color taupe is, but it sounds bland enough to work. Not blond nor brown nor straight nor curly nor frizzy nor smooth. Irrelevant hair. Perhaps if I had hair that dark and beautiful I wouldn't let the rest of the world see it either. Maybe I would be okay with always being the chased.

Within a month she was pregnant with your child. Not until her third trimester did I find out. I had just returned from a date in Santa Monica when I noticed a letter from you in my mailbox. The pictures you sent me of her rotund womb and seal-lips complacency caused me to vomit with such force that I didn't even have time to hold back my hair or step inside. This time I truly did know the cause, didn't make excuses. My hair smelled

so putrid afterwards I couldn't stomach the thought of washing the bile out, so I grabbed the kitchen scissors and ran into the bathroom. I cut it off along with thoughts of fucking in Spanish rosés and fishing in deserts. Of unsolicited pregnancy and visits to Planned Parenthood. After I put the scissors down, I looked in the mirror at my purple-crescent eyes, the circles so dark and imprinted I wondered if I managed to beat myself in my sleep. A convulsive shiver ran up my spine and forced the beige hairs on my scalp to prickle, each strand standing on end, the Gaudi curls lifeless and heavy in the porcelain sink like dead baby mice.

It wasn't until they started the in-flight movie did the truth ever crown its bloody scalp. At first I laughed because things like that don't happen abroad. I always assumed the exotic miasma of spices and mosaics would be sterilizing. Such things only happen in reality, of which I never wanted you to be acquainted.

I keep picturing her naked lying faux-sedately, her fingers enclosed around the sheets at her sides and hoping to make it through without crying too much, at least not until she can run into the bathroom so you can pretend not to understand. You know she will never grin at your girlish butt or flick the end of your penis with a playful tongue. And perhaps I never should have.



Grace Wielebinski

Revere

Bob Lutz

Sitting beside you at the station again
and I'm wondering what your number is.
If only it were 219
I could ride all the way back to baltimore
continuing to admire how well the eyeliner
plays off that old red coat of yours,
imagining thousands of early bostonites
fleeing your imminent arrival
to escape an immanent war. If even one
could summon the spirit of patriotism,
could hoist his rubbery musket and ride,
I would squeak a hello—
a hi, a how are you—a smile even,
but not today. Your train is here,
and wherever you're going
there are bound to be men—
Ursine men, mountains of men
willing to fight and die for their country.
But even the bravest patriotics
can't win these five minutes
of sitting beside you, night after night.

Passwords

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