Under cottonwoods that stretch out their narrow fingers to the water, we skip the flattest stones and retrieve them from the shallow creek to try again. Or, at least you, being more patient and dedicated, retrieve them. The baby fish (or are those tadpoles?) don’t even swim away from my toes. They know I will bend down, a cup made of my hands, and then, they, being ever so clever, will shoot away.

We make a bed for ourselves beneath cattails bending to our noses with their own weight. Purple bleeds into the sky as we talk, and I wish I was writing down every word, because one day we will try to say the same things to other people as beautifully and precisely and perceptively as we are now and never get it right. We will worry too much about the naming of things and how they are arranged on the page and whether or not anyone else will recognize a color described only in words. So I ask: if I draw you a map to the moon, will you be able to get there? I am directionally challenged, so probably not.

The world is a curious place; we are curious about it, and it is curious about us. We examine the clover stems under the microscope, and, in return, they give us a soft, itchy place to read in the summer. Here we are, dealers of explanations, explaining to each other that the sky being blue has nothing to do with Rayleigh scattering and how the cicadas know to come every seven years. But we are given the gifts of exploration and beauty, naming and Truth (and all the things we know to be Poetry) in order to comprehend things like the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Once we understand that, we understand that our universe, so much bigger than the pictures in the science books, is only as random as the elusive four-leaf clover and fireflies blinking over the creekbed at dusk.

We eagerly catch the fireflies and pin them on our science fair boards before our mothers call us inside so we don’t catch cold.

Leslie King and Julie Laugherty
April 2006
Jackson, Tennessee
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Where are your eyes?
If you had them, would they hold me
   in knotted burrows where squirrels live,
   snickering,
hoarding their acorns?

Your body and roots weave 'round mine
   and remind me
   that you're not leaving.

Even if I drink all the minerals in the ground and
   all the seas and rivers and streams,
you will still lay your head on my green chest
 'til your body is hollow
and echoes with termites.
A STUDY OF HANDS
JARED NEW
GRAPHITE
24 X 18
Poorly Translated

“**I really don’t know what to do with these kids.**”

This was my warm welcome to the class I was supposed to tutor. “They’re so urban; I try to draw on their past experiences, but they just don’t have any.” The thought that a third-grader could be completely devoid of any experience was ridiculous enough to distract me from the fact that this teacher had essentially dismissed anyone from a city larger than this town of ninety-thousand, including me.

“But these ESL students,” she continued, my attention snapping back into place. I was here to help “these ESL students”; in this class, they were mostly Spanish-speaking students, and though some spoke Arabic or Asian languages, all were united by the fact that their English skills were lacking. “What can I do with them? They’re just as bad off as the rest of them, and they don’t speak English. Some of them I don’t think even speak Spanish.”

At the time this teacher went through an education program, ESL was possibly unheard of. I attempted to overlook her inability to see the native-language abilities of her students in favor of respecting the years she had stood in front of a classroom teaching almost the same material each semester. Most who enter the teaching profession quit within the first three years; she was a survivor.

“This is the new kid. They just sent him to my class today. I don’t think he even knows his name. Julio or something. We don’t have any paperwork on him; just do what you can with him. We’re working on verb agreement today.”

I looked over to see a small boy with a frightened face in a t-shirt with an English slogan on it that he might not recognize if read aloud. I sat down next to him, and he gave me an awkward, but well-meaning, grin.

“¿Cuándo te llegaste?” I asked him. He told me he had arrived in the U.S. at around nine or ten o’clock at night.

“But what night?” I asked him.

“Oh, last night,” he said, without a second thought to his words. Unreal. Only twelve hours ago, this eight-year-old who now sat in front of me had arrived in a completely foreign land. It was an experience that I could not comprehend. It inspired an amount of respect in me that this boy—“¿Cómo te llamas?” “Julio San Felipe Gomez-Gonzalez.”—would likely never know.

I was so overwhelmed that for the next forty-five minutes I actually attempted to teach verb-noun agreement to someone who could not
even introduce himself in English. Julio patiently applied himself to worksheet exercises he did not understand, never getting frustrated with the ridiculous differences between “has” and “have,” a teaching assignment that finally irritated the teacher to the point of giving up and handing out coloring sheets.

I told him I would see him the next day, and he smiled once again. I had offered little real help to him, except perhaps the comfort that some of these white teachers do speak his language.

When I returned the next day, Julio had been drowning in a foreign language for an hour already. His face brightened when he saw me at the door; all the ESL students noticed me before the teacher turned to face me.

“Oh good, you’re here,” she said, interrupting her lesson. “I have these things for you and Julio to work with.” Julio recognized his name—American style, with the first syllable elongated—and I could see in his face that he was a student who did not like to be in trouble. He was not in trouble, although I suspect he felt very much like it. Yet, how to explain to him that this trouble he felt was through no fault of his own, was a problem greater than the stack of games, flashcards, and children’s stories that the teacher was piling before me could resolve. “Y’all can do what you can with those—I’ve got to work on this story with the class.” Julio sat before me obediently, singled out in our corner of the classroom.

Absolutely nothing raced through my mind at a disturbing speed. I didn’t know what to do with him; I didn’t know where to begin. Half a semester of hurried discussions on trends in the homes of bilingual children hadn’t prepared me to sit face-to-face with a child who knew much more than I in many areas and yet was desperately relying on me to explain every detail around him.

I asked him how he liked Tennessee. On the back of an index card I wrote him a glossary of important classroom words like “homework” and “vocabulary.” We read a book in Spanish, written for white children and poorly translated.

He told me stories of his home in Mexico, extended families, late-night drunken parties at which the police arrived, and stories of Mass and the Father who bored him. I told him stories of growing up in the Texas through which he had so recently driven, and of the English words that I had learned when I left that state at fifteen-years-old. He told me, also, about his house in Mexico with its flat roof and why he had trouble understanding what an attic was; I explained to him how to correctly pronounce “j” and “h” in his new language.

“Excuse me, Miss,” I heard a small voice behind me say. As Julio and I emerged from our world of Spanglish, we saw that the class had turned into some sort of free time, and a young girl with short, dark hair and big eyes stood near us.

“Yes?” I said.

“Do you really speak Spanish?” Her face revealed her doubts, and I replied in Spanish to her enjoyment. “I remember when I first came,” she said. “I was in kindergarten, and I didn’t know any English. It was really
But you speak English well now. You can help Julio to learn,” I replied. I looked up at the room; for the first time, I realized that half of these students probably did not start out speaking English. Only the teacher and I represented the pale majority race.

Intercultural communication textbooks teach us that language influences thought. How could anyone possibly identify with these children—understand them, judge them, when the most basic elements of their thoughts weren’t shared ones? I thought in English and Spanish often, but what about the students whose thoughts were not even written down with the same alphabet? They were expected to understand our culture, to be understood by it, and quickly enough so that they might be passed on to the next set of worksheets, homework, and tests. And worst of all, I was expected to teach them: nineteen-years-old, armed with a green and red Spanish-English dictionary, a college ruled notebook, full of empathy and inexperience, and Julio’s support and his burden.

“I have to go.”

I had warned Julio that I was going to have to leave soon. I had tried my best to explain that I lived in an apartment at the University here for one part of the year, but for this next part of the year I had to return to my family in another state. I would be too busy with different classes for the school to allow me to come back to help him again the next semester. I tried to justify the fact that Alabama, someplace he knew absolutely nothing of, was stealing his translator and guide and would not give her back. I saw the disappointment behind his constant grin, or, perhaps, I only saw in his face my own distress at the thought of abandoning someone who was still daily drowning in another language.

Cristina, the girl who promised to help Julio learn English, had colored a picture for me in shades of pink and blue; the English-speaking students had drawn the ritual Spanish phrases from me. The teacher had begged me to come back the next semester. Julio had promised to do his homework, and I—did I really ever know what to do with these kids?

I had to put my dictionary and notebook away, to say goodbye and walk the miles of scuffed linoleum and cracked concrete that had managed to grow between the classroom and my car.
"TO THE LAST SYLLABLE OF
RECORDED TIME.
CYNTHIA KEEGAN
FIRED & UNFIRED EARTH
No one prays in this sanctuary. We pass through, dropping plated coins into metal boxes to turn the lights on, to see the paintings for a moment. Our eyes brimming with color and passion, we shuttle on to work and forgetfulness, squeeze into our tubes and boxes.

So white, so silver, so thick, clouds that look like paintings of clouds glissade across the moon, over black Appalachia jutting out of the snow, the source of a diffused glow like a miasma of Hollywood dreamsequences. Take a picture, say a prayer in this high relief of wilderness. Ceiling of light and vapor pitched on tallest rock and tree, sloping flush to floor of beveled ocean, blue-black-green, and cracked yellow panes of earth as far West and equatorially as the eye can see. The gods once lingered on the ribs of the nave to hear our songs, to watch our tragicomedies. Despite interstates cut through her white and shadowed peaks, scars of headlamps, of halogen Betadine, the house is empty.
Players spurn the playwright’s words in exchange for a cacophony of extemporaneous monologues. The curtain rushes down like burgundy velvet mercury, halting the drama nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita with such looks upon the actors’ faces as on those of Herculaneum or Pompeii. The lights go out, not one by one like altar candles snuffed by little boys with long, golden, bell-capped poles, but all at once with a sound like the sigh of Atlas laying his burden aside.
The cathedrals are empty.
Cradles rock husks of children.
They scuttle out, squinting into day and prophesying
with mandible and maxilla gaping. Closing. A silent
dawning. Our rainbow eyes only gasoline and water
in the sunlight. Push back the veil of stardust; dreams die.

We have tired the gods, now shuffling like old men,
crevices and folds on their faces
the same as the shadows of glaciers,
to the edge of the universe and the nothingness
beyond. The emptiness
easier to carry on their backs
than the globe burning at both ends.
One gray and beaten god puts his coins in,
two clinks in the stomach of an archaic machine;
the lights blink on in the apse,
only long enough to see a certain path.

The stars go out, not one by one, but all at once.
I imagine her fingers bled
for hours after beating that stone
into something she could use to
grind grain and spices,
as sweet and fleeting as breeze when you need
it most. Chipped and uneven, the basin
would hold a hundred corn-husk
dinners before disappearing under ash—
the kind of ash that blackens as it moves.

I imagine his heart was
coming out his ears when he found it,
slightly charred, lodged
between a partly-excavated wall and a
thrust of tangled tree roots,
deep and solid and heavy
as the day it was carved from rock.
“Don’t you want some breakfast?” Momma called out at me from the kitchen, “it’s a long drive into town.”

“Nah, I’m not hungry,” I said. I was combing my hair and pulling on my boots at the same time so I could be faster. Daddy was going to town today to pick up Momma’s new oven from Howard’s Hardware. “Where’s Daddy?”

“He’s in the living room,” Momma said, turning back to washing dirty dishes. She had gospel music playing like she always does, and she sang along about precious salvation and God loving the wretches.

“I’m ready,” I hollered, breathless and running into the living room. Daddy was sitting in the easy chair, reading the paper. “Whatcha reading?” I asked, craning over his shoulder.

“Wars, murders, Bush. Nothing you need to worry about,” Daddy said as he folded up the paper. “You ready?”

“Yes, Sir,” I said and ran out to our old rust-red pickup truck. I was seat-belted before Daddy even left the porch. He got in the car and made his usual adjustments: the mirrors, the air conditioning, the seat. The truck stuttered to life, and we set out down the dirt road towards town. I waved goodbye to my older brothers that were already out working with the horses. Daddy put in a tape of a preacher man shouting about hell-fire and revival.

Turning to Daddy, I ventured: “Revival feels like jumping in the pond when the water’s extra cold and the sun’s really hot, right?”

“No, Son,” he said, turning down the preacher man, “revival isn’t a feeling. You’ve got revival when you mind me and your Momma, and, most of all, the Lord Jesus.” But he just said that because last Sunday my church clothes were itching me, and the preacher man just kept talking; so, I got up to “go to the bathroom” and played outside ‘til the service ended. Momma and Daddy came out with that great rush of people in their fine Sunday clothes, and they found me chasing lizards in the shady side of the church. They pulled down my pants and whupped me right then and there.

I told them I left because I was uncomfortable. Momma said, “Eli, you need to pray to sweet baby Jesus and ask forgiveness for being so wicked and listening to the devil.” I bowed my head down and folded up my hands, but I didn’t pray, I thought about those lizards I was chasing.

Remembering Sunday, I looked off out the truck window and smiled. I watched the bramble bushes and gumball trees blur by the truck.
Soon enough, candy wrappers and soda cans replaced the loose cotton plant leftovers strung along the roadside grass. That’s when we came to our town, Wimberly. I gawked at all those city-folk in Wimberly, and they gawked back or paid me no mind at all. At the hardware store, Mr. Howard already had an oven-sized box waiting for us on the front porch. “You just stay in the truck, this will take a minute,” Daddy ordered. He got out of the truck to talk to Mr. Howard and his men.

After arrangements and rearrangements, two strong men and Daddy picked up the oven and pushed it onto the truck bed. The sweat on their muscles reminded me of the sweat on the horses at the track. I only went to the track one time when Uncle Joey took us kids because he was watching us for the weekend. When Momma and Daddy found out he took us to a den of vipers, they sat us all down at the kitchen table with the family Bible and read us verse after verse about casting lots, redemption, and that wily Satan.

After they had the oven all strapped down, Daddy climbed back into the truck, all hot and sweating. “Hungry?” Daddy asked.

“Yes, Sir,” I nodded gravely.

“You like Mexican food? How about El Nepal?” Daddy smiled at me and started the truck. We drove a minute to a pink adobe building with a red tile roof at the edge of town.

Inside Mexican music played, and it was sweltering hot. A lot of white folk were there sitting at the bar smoking. The only Mexicans in the restaurant were running around with baskets of chips and bowls of salsa.

We were seated in a corner booth, and a Mexican waiter asked about our drinks. I asked for root beer, because he had root beer-colored skin. “I would like,” Daddy said drawing out his syllables, “a number 5”—he held out five fingers with one hand and pointed to the menu with the other—“and a number 3.” He held out three fingers.

The Mexican nodded, scribbled on his notepad, said “Sí, Sí,” and left.

While we waited, I told Daddy all about the baseball team this year, about riding my horse around our land, and about Billy and Jonah’s fight yesterday. When our waiter came back, he had four quesadillas and two burritos balanced along his sarsaparilla-colored arm, like feathers on a wing. He placed two plates in front of us and hurried away to other tables. “I’ll say the blessing,” I offered, and Daddy smiled at me. We bowed our heads and rested our folded hands on the orange plastic tabletop. “Lord Jesus, thank you. Amen,” I prayed. We sat silent for a minute; then Daddy added his own “amen” to my prayer.

We ate our beans, rice, and tacos then got up to leave. Daddy rifled through his wallet, past fives, tens, and twenties, to one of those tracts they gave out at church last Sunday. We’re supposed to leave them at gas stations, public restrooms, and restaurants so we can spread salvation wherever we go. Daddy tipped with a gospel tract that was shaped and colored like a twenty-dollar bill. He said while we walked to the truck, “We should’ve left him one in es-pan-yoll.”

I didn’t take any of those tracts with me when I left church last Sunday, and I didn’t laugh with my Daddy. I just wished that we hadn’t left that man a fake twenty-dollar bill for salvation.
"Sounds of the South"
Kathryn Johnson
Graphic Design
20 x 28
A house soaks in its memory—summer’s sun clinging to the wide and open fields and the crumpled woods in between them. Sweat stuck to my hand-me-down dress, nostrils full of horses and tobacco. I climbed trees and fought with my sisters over the tastiest chores.

But not today. Today I came home from school, an awkward seventeen years old, in hysteria, which sprouted from an unexpected phone call and early dismissal. I came home to see the porch blanketed by men, clad in overalls, smoking cigarettes in silence, and I swallowed my tongue. Their eyes shot me downtrodden looks and they backed off as I approached, forming a plaid and denim tunnel to the screen door that clapped in the wind.

Mom, at four feet and ten inches tall, was supposed to be a stallion, iron-sided and strong. I found her on the edge of the bed, sobs erupting in intervals. Uncle Suter paced in front of her, cradling a cigarette in his palm. He saw me and turned away. Mom saw me and patted her hand on the bedspread beside her. I sat and my throat shrank; I didn’t dare speak.

Dad, Jim, was dead. His shirt sleeve caught in the teeth of a thresher, death’s harvest, unexpected. He had once conquered a world war and malaria, though he was presumably dead. After a lengthy recovery, he pursued his love and married her, and began the life of farming. Now his girls were all alone.

Jim was buried, the Stars and Stripes adorning his coffin. With my sisters long since gone and graduated, Mom was now in my care. I taught her to drive, hiding every time I saw somebody I knew. Jim was dead, so I got a job at the grocery. I became a sharecropper of rent and responsibility—though tobacco still surrounded the house.
Sitting on the edge of his bed, one leg crossed against his knee in a line parallel to the floor, Jonathan Wiles tied the strings of his impeccably shined shoes in perfect, habitual bows, all the while watching the girl at the window grieve the snow falling on the magnolias. Her wings blanketed her naked back, and the light of the incandescent morning reflected off the curves of her body. She was more the tropical variety of butterfly, and he knew this when he courted her. She’d been doing well for herself in Curacao with a little boutique painted a soft, creamsicle orange and trimmed in white that sold Kimi’s handmade dresses and jewelry. She belonged there among the painted houses and storefronts, her own distinctive characteristic lost among the blues, yellows, and pinks reflected in the water of the bay that divided Willemstad.

He’d brought her here, to his old fieldstone house that once seemed haunted and romantic, but now the ghosts were gone. They must have left the renovated boarding house when she arrived at the end of July knowing that they could not compete with her spirit, her body, and those wings on her back which made her far more peculiar than remnants of the past. Some days, ever since the early winter had blown in, Jonathan would have preferred ghosts.

“Will you be at the office forever again today?” Kimi rested her cheek on the cold glass pane.

“I’ve got to work hard now. People don’t buy and sell in the winter.” He watched her open her mouth—and “hah” on the window. “I’ll come back for lunch?”

Erasing a frame for the landscape out of the fog, she said, “I’m feeling a bit sick, anyway. It’s probably better if you’re not around to catch it.”

“Then I’ll just pick up some dinner for you on my way home.”

“Just a salad, then.”

Only a few months ago, he would have come home in the afternoon to sandwiches or fish, returned to the office for a few more hours, or stayed and made love to her and slept, waking up to another meal. She no longer made him the fragrant suppers of the late summer that they would eat on the big cedar deck with a bottle of wine. And he did stay at the office for long stretches of time, longer and longer as the days got shorter. He filed deeds, perused zoning restrictions, and informed clients of their property rights. At the office he didn’t have to watch her pace barefoot on the parquet of...
the foyer like a caged thing. He didn’t know what Kimi did when he left her in the mornings. She used to sew little tops for herself that tied around her neck and at the small of her back, the only kind she could wear with wings as large as hers. But her interest in sewing had faded as the novelty and color of fall had faded into a harsh, gray winter. His growing apathy toward her, his brown butterfly, had left him, too, bereft of the passion and playfulness of their days shared under the cloudless sky.

Kimi Mela watched him until he turned out of the long drive onto the street.

A full-length mirror reflected her naked body when she turned on the bathroom tile with her toothbrush stuck in her mouth. Like leather, like leaves, a lamina of flesh stretched over thick veins pulsing with wine, her wings rose above her head stained in the earth’s deepest oranges that progressed to darker browns upon a contour, perhaps burnt from a flight too near the sun. They were in strong contrast to her solid body. She gave the mirror her profile and backed up so her wings jutted out of the frame. Without the wings, she felt she might be beautiful, the rest of her.

Then she pulled on her jeans, applied a little eyeliner and gloss, and threw a light afghan over her wings. She pinned it around her neck with a safety pin the dry cleaners had used to attach Jonathan’s customer number to his suit. But where were her keys? The keys weren’t near the phone like she’d thought. Okay. I gave them to Jon. He took my car yesterday when he took the cat to the vet. He usually drops his keys by the phone. She stood on tiptoe and ran her fingers across the top of the refrigerator—just in case they really were in the last place she’d look.

Clutching the ends of the blanket around her neck in a fist, Kimi Mela began to cry. It was the obsessive-compulsive child in her, the one who couldn’t handle loss. When she was six or seven, she lost a necklace her father had given her. He’d seen her looking at it in the store, and though it was just a cheap, nickel plated cross, he made her promise that if he bought it for her she’d wear it all the time and never take it off. He probably didn’t want her to break the chain and have to deal with the squalling on the way home, but she took her vow seriously and even bathed with that tiny cross around her neck. It turned a darker shade of silver and didn’t shine, but she wore it. The first time she took it off was the last time she saw it. Whenever she visited her parents, she still cast an eye for it. Perhaps she’d find it one day hiding in the bottom corner of the linen closet or beneath the yellow dresser in her old room.

Okay, girl, this isn’t helping. Get practical. Hoping Jon hadn’t locked her only set of keys in her car, she went outside. The glare of sunlight bounced off the glossy avocado exterior of the ’79 Grand Marquis (the car she had bought and learned to drive shortly after moving to Decatur, Georgia), and Kimi, taken unaware, squeezed her eyes against the light too late. Her head hurt as her eyes adjusted enough to peer through the glass on the passenger side, and her body began aching with the cold as the blanket offered little warmth. No keys stuck in the ignition column or lying in the leather bucket seats. Back on the porch with her hand on a cold, white column, she saw them through the storm door, dangling from the latch. She yanked the house key out of the door and all the others fell against it in her hand, jangling, laughing at their clever little joke.
Bending and twisting as not to scrape her wings against the doorframe, Kimi crawled into the driver’s seat. The back of the seat reclined like a La-Z-Boy all the way onto the bench seat behind it. In the passenger’s seat, her overnight bag bulged and strained against the zipper like sausage in a tight skin. She browsed through stations while waiting for the defroster to melt the ice on her windows. Should have left the car warming up and gone back in the house. The oldies station caught her attention with a few notes from the chorus of “Eleanor Rigby.”

At the red light, she drummed her thumbs against the steering wheel and looked directly at the light willing it to change to green and willing the eyes that she felt burning through the tint on her windows to look somewhere else. Most people ignored her wings the way they’d ignore a person’s missing arm or wheelchair, but just like the person in the left turning lane, when they thought she was not aware of their stares, they would pour their vision over her and it would drip and puddle at her feet.

She was twenty minutes late by the time she found a parking space and made her way to the specialist’s office for their pre-op talk. Breathless, she told the receptionist her name and that she was late.

“Just sign in here.” The lady pointed with a shiny acrylic nail to one clipboard and handed her another. “And fill out these, okay? I’ll let Dr. Graham know you’re here.”

Kimi moved some out of date magazines from an end table to the chair beside it. She sat down on the table, balanced the clipboard on her lap, and began filling out her information, information she was sure the doctor already had. The only other person in the room flipped through a *Newsweek*. He couldn’t have been more than seventeen, but, God, he was a big boy. Dr. Graham had mentioned his partner specialized in severe sports injuries. When she looked up from her forms, she found the young man’s eyes locked on her. Her wings snapped out further, an involuntary sign of disapproval, which he obviously did not read correctly, because he took it as an invitation to speak to her.

“Hello, Butterfly.”

“Excuse me?”

“I think your wings are really beautiful.” This was something new to Kimi Mela. She’d often been told how lovely her wings were, but never by anyone over the age of ten.

“What?” Kimi realized that she had heard him perfectly after the word had left her mouth. “I guess. If that’s what you want to think.”

He had not expected that response and looked up from the magazine once again. “You don’t?”

“Oh, I just don’t care for them so much anymore.”

“Why not? Can you fly?” He closed the *Newsweek*, leaned over to close the distance between them, and smiled.

“They’re too much. I don’t know. It’s not very practical, so I’ve never really tried that hard.”

“You should. Who doesn’t dream of flying? I’d fly everywhere if I had wings.”

“Like I said, it’s really not all that practical. I just drive a car like everybody else.” She never talked about her wings with people she didn’t know, but this big child with his shaggy black hair made her feel attractive and interesting with his questions and smiles.
“You’ve got wings, and you drive a car? Don’t you think that’s a waste?”
“A waste of what?” Kimi heard the high, annoyed pitch of her voice and calmed down. “Well, it doesn’t really matter anymore.”
“What do you mean?”
“I’m having them surgically removed.”
A brief shadow of horror crossed his face. “Why would you want to do that?”
“I don’t want them. It’s easy for you to look at me and tell me my wings are pretty, but you don’t have to maneuver with these things or deal with the looks or stay cooped up in the house all winter because you can’t wear proper winter clothes.”
“Well, still, I’d keep ’em if I were you.”
Kimi was just coming up with her reply when a nurse called her name. As she looked back at the boy and shrugged her shoulders, her wings rose up and fell down against her back like a sigh.
Dr. Graham said the surgery would last about six hours and that they were putting her all the way under with general anesthesia. He mentioned a sort of “ghost arm” sensation, because after she healed, Kimi would still be able to move the interior muscles the way she always had. The difference being, of course, that she wouldn’t have the wings themselves moving externally. Graham shook her hand and told her not to be nervous; he would take good care of her.
As she lay on her stomach on the way to the O.R. a week later, she considered what it meant that Jonathan hadn’t tried to find her, hadn’t called her cell phone or anything. She’d left the house at four in the morning; he watched her dress in the bedroom and never said a word, just closed his eyes. Kimi wanted to call him, to say “sorry” and “please come,” to say “I need you.” She wanted someone with her. Her friend Sheila, who’d picked her up from the house that morning, would be in the waiting area, but Sheila was more client than friend as Kimi was creating centerpieces for Sheila’s wedding. And this was not the time to forge a relationship deeper than the difference between beige and crème. Someone put a mask over her nose and mouth and told her to breathe deeply.
Jon’s anger had turned to worry when Kimi Mela hadn’t returned home by the time he had gotten dressed for work. He thought she’d left to go to the grocery store, thought she would come back to make black bean omelets. He began calling their friends finally talking to Sheila convinced him it was elective surgery and nothing life-threatening. He placed the phone in its cradle and held his face in his hands.
What he saw in the hospital bed battered at a Wiles family tradition of stoic, undemonstrative men. Soft light from the dying sun fell over the linoleum floor and across the bed where Jonathan’s lover lay. The IV unit shadowed her slack mouth and the delicate, vein-embroidered skin veiling the movements of her dreaming, searching eyes. The water in his eyes blurred the trail of red stitches on Kimi’s back into an image of a running, gaping wound.
She’d been home for almost a week when Jon brought a large, department store-wrapped box into their bedroom and set it on the end of the bed at
her feet next to their sleeping Himalayan. “I got you something.” He did his best to sound cheerful, but Kimi’s recovery had not been cheerful; it had been painful, gray, sad, occasionally tender, and full of silent heaving on Kimi’s side of the bed. She crawled out from under the covers on hands and knees, and broke the Scotch tape seals with her fingernails. The paper came off quickly and the tissue joined it on the floor. She removed a white, down-filled coat.

“Thank you,” she said as she folded it back into the yellow box. Jonathan snatched it up and threw it over his arm. Coldly he told her, “I’ll put it on the coat rack by the door downstairs.”

Not much later, Kimi heard the front door slam. She pulled the covers over her head and listened to her own breathing and the scratching of her eyelashes against the sheets. She threw back the covers and swung herself out of the bed quickly as if a moment’s hesitation would stop her movement forever. She ran down the stairs and into the foyer in nothing but flannel pajama pants. She forced her feet into a pair of tennis shoes she’d left by the door and took the coat off of the hook.

For the first time in her life, Kimi Mela felt the silk lining of a jacket slide across her back. She tugged the zipper up to her chin and snapped the buttons closed. Then she pulled the fur-trimmed hood down over her head. She marveled at the sensation, of being constrained, of safety and warmth she could only compare with the womb she didn’t remember, and then, she stepped outside.
“I’ve never been to New York City. How was it?”

The thought floored me; this girl who was talking to me after school had never ventured an hour from her home to see one of the most talked about, most written about, most seen, sights of the world. In a moment, I forgot her name; I forgot New York City itself.

“Where have you been?” The words escaped my mouth before I could assess their level of appropriateness, but I was beginning to see that in Orange County, New York, level of appropriateness mattered little in conversation.

“I’ve never been farther south than New Jersey.”

Later I began to realize that to this small area of the country, there was nothing of any worth that was farther south than New Jersey. Virginia, Tennessee, Texas, and sometimes even Mexico, were all part of one, worthless region.

And those are the places I am from.

“Are you from the south?” He asked me at a friend’s birthday party.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I replied, uninterestedly. The Texan accent, clothes, and ideals had been ridiculed extensively so far, but, somehow, I was entertained by the fact that someone could mock something they knew nothing of.

“You must be part of the KKK, right?” To this day, I don’t know how serious he was. “Or at least your friends are?”

I had never seen segregation until I saw Middletown, NY. The blacks have a few streets in the southern downtown area; within that ghetto, there is one street on which Hispanics live, work, and eat. The white people live elsewhere. Having grown up in a house sandwiched between an Indian and a Mexican family, in a city in which my Caucasian skin belonged to a minority, I had never thought twice about anyone’s appearance or accent.

The boy across from me grabbed a white napkin and put it on his face; poked holes in it for eyes and leered at me. I mumbled something at him in Spanish and walked away.
“So I guess you can change into your snowpants in my room if you like,” she offered. I stood still for an awkward moment in my new friend’s home, and then finally forced myself to ask.

“What are snowpants?” Laura N.—Laura Classic, as we liked to call her—laughed hysterically.

“Are you serious?” she said after a moment. “You don’t know what snowpants are?” I tried my best to keep the blood from rising to my face.

“Umm, no?” I replied meekly.

“Haven’t you ever been sledding before?” I shook my head. My ignorance was laughed about when everyone else arrived. I borrowed someone else’s snowpants.

“I’m sure there’s something about Texas ya’ll wouldn’t know about either,” I attempted later that evening, but nothing came to mind. Only months later did I realize that lavanderias were a foreign concept, that barbecue to them was hot dogs and hamburgers, and that if you gave them pulled pork or brisket they wouldn’t know what to do with it, and that not even the Spanish teacher at the high school spoke Spanish.

“You mean you don’t like it here?” I asked him late one night. Matt shook his head and replied,

“I hate this town.”

“Then why don’t you get out?” I asked, excited that I had found someone who shared my sentiments for this entire county. “I’m going to a scholarship weekend at a college in Pennsylvania next month; I’m sure you could come visit too.”

“I can’t leave,” he told me decisively. Confusion spread across my face, and he continued, “This is where my friends are.”

“But I have friends here too, and I’m leaving. I grew up in Texas and I left there. I’m sure you could leave if you tried. Where do you want to go?” He pondered the proposition for a while, mentioned something about Indiana, but stayed in his chair the entire time.

“I can’t leave here. This is where my family is. It’s just that I don’t like it.”

My graduation and eighteenth birthday party had to be rolled into one during the summer of ’04. On my way to a college in a state that most of my friends could not locate on a map, I knew that I would see few of them again.

“Happy birthday,” he said and handed me an envelope. Dan had been one of my closest friends, one of few who possessed some ambition and ideas that stretched past our high school halls; when I opened the card later that night (a strange custom in this still unfamiliar state: to keep the gifts wrapped until the guests had left), I found no sentimental promises to miss me or expressions of affection; only a crumpled ten dollar bill and his girlfriend’s signature next to his.

Driving away from New York, I crossed the Ohio River and wondered if any of my friends from Orange County would ever have a chance to get this far away from the jealous hometown that grasped at their heels.
In older times, it was classified as love and pleasure, or necessity, or even complete selfishness, but now the biology textbooks see only twenty-three pairs of chromosomes, with characteristics chosen haphazardly. Two half-cells meet and form a whole cell, and that cell becomes strangely reminiscent of a symphony: one violin finds a note, and then a tune, and then others pick up the melody and harmonies until the sound is full and resonating. And in this way, a life begins. Just the way the textbook predicts, Prophase and Metaphase, Anaphase and Telophase, over and over, until a heart appears, and then arms and legs, and then the liver and pancreas and lungs. Finally, after eight weeks, there are almost ten complete toes, and we are allowed to call it Baby.

But surely Michelangelo found more than this when he risked excommunication to examine the coagulated insides and glorious outsides of the human body, late at night, using candles to make notes and sketches for reference? Maybe it was only after he planned and sketched that he could create: freely and majestically, with all the beauty and prophecy of heartbreak that Mary cradles with her child. After all, there is perhaps nothing so beautiful as the moment a baby discovers that she has a toe. Soon after, she discovers another and another, until there are ten. And this is what the textbooks forget: that amid the ossification and fusion of three hundred baby-soft bones into two hundred and six adult bones, there is also the possibility of a ballerina.
When Jared New plays the game Life, he always hopes to land on “Swap Salary.” Aaron Shepherd, sophomore English major, is what we talk about when we talk about love. Alice Calvery agrees with you. Sophomore English major Sarah Nadashay reads multiple books at once; it makes her feel smarter. April Wright, senior art major, creates sculpture on the run (from security). Some people actually think Laura Jackson’s name is Laura Carrot. Bob Sparks enjoys drinking coffee and is obsessed with all things Russian. Senior graphic design major Beth Pierce came from Alabama. Cynthia Keegan, senior sculpture major, can list all the states alphabetically. If the Torch had a face, Will Calvert would rock it. Kastyn Johnson once saw a magic show & a potato-peeler demonstration. It was classy. Julie Laugherty knows the same two constellations as everybody else. She’d learn the rest if she had time (like everybody else). Matthew Diggs deep. Leslie King comes up with such great titles for other people’s things that she’s naming Julie Laugherty’s first-born child. Julie Palmer has a pathological fear of roller coasters and dodgeball. Bobby Rogers, faculty sponsor for the Torch, makes an annual contribution to the yellow legal pad industry. Renee Roberson loves slight sunburns and crossword puzzles. This past summer Laura Berkmeyer made a bronze cast out of a dead bird. Josh Wilkinson rides a horse called Hubris. Josh Wilkerson, junior graphic design major, eats Fire sauce straight from its witty little packet.