

Transmission N° 1

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NICING MY DINKY

BY TODD COLBY

Everyday begins fair and smooth
A long, thin tube of white marble piercing a pink rose
Soupy morning of heat slashing chrome
I'm better at fear than fright
The spine broke on the poetics of reverie
The closet smells like something someone did to feel better
You win wet blue denim
Why not a calming potion?
The slightly bitter soapy taste of ginseng tea
If it's raining I'll have a scrambled egg
She does "not well" eating fish with mercury
The tender portion of white fish is called the wing
Suddenly hormones shoot out my ass
A black spoon in the tub
I may soothe you as a panther is soothed by the smell of butter
A person who opens a window exposes others to shards of glass
At a certain point all books blur into one book
What is repeated is always something that occurs as if by chance
Vivid animals strut and grind their hips into strangers
The subject of my organism is you
Popping blisters on my lead belly
Do you see what I am to you?
I will not force you to give up your verticality
Water is a concern because you could blow up a dam
I'm sorry that I said you had a third eye in the library
The merest dusting of pink or peach on the small of her back
I've never heard someone cry that I couldn't cry better than
Everything I own smells bad
Dark blue copper salt is soluble in a beige universe
Sometimes I think I just might have brain damage
Eat some of the meat wrapped in the pink terry cloth robe
You can't write a suicide note in the third person
I'll put my beach towel somewhere in the vicinity of the Wonder Wheel
Humming, degrees of humming, where it's constant
I'll curl into a ball and smile into the palm of my hand

FAXING ALASKA

BY TODD COLBY

By the way, I forgot to mention the water tower which is causing quite a stir among the city fathers of the village. Right now, you should tell them, it is an eyesore, but given the right coat of bright yellow paint, it will look like a huge metal flower looking over us as we go about our lives while pausing occasionally to drink the water that pours from it. You should certainly try to remember that when you're feeling sad. After all, who wouldn't want to drink from a flower, let alone live under one? And to think of all those birds eating the seeds that we put out for them and that rascal squirrel with his friend the rabbit eating them too! Oh, it really is all too much isn't it?

THE EXACT SPELLING OF FORWARD

BY PAUL KILLEBREW

Gristham is naming each step he takes. This way, entire monuments built in an afterthought won't spring upon history like the original recording of human laughter, which didn't land on the scene until well after these days with their distant concerns, so as to occupy us, though not distract us. Gristham is finding that if one names each step in the way parents name children, one doesn't walk much. He is having to pause every nine or ten paces to come up with another tack, until he thinks of something else, like every name he knows that starts with the letter 'L.' But this is not having the desired effect.

Or rather, the effect is one of moving in two directions at once, both continuing straight down the sidewalk and also twisting into shapes of consequence, a pile of mud thrown onto the ground, then stepped on, then dried and flaked off with care, then caught under a fingernail and hours later tasted with remorse. He had wanted to be like a building that knows it's a building, but also knows it's a misspelling. But it's never solid and concerted, constantly lending itself out until it's lost an address of its own.

In his frustration, Gristham deposits this former idea of naming in the slow generations spawned down the block, and instead slobbers out a noise at each footfall. This is either a radical re-understanding of names or an abandonment of loved ones, which he has learned are slower than his legs. But he soon feels ridiculous, and he realizes that this task was one of deliberation rather than the bottomless squabble he can't seem to shake, that the purpose was to know the space he moves through by situating a series of points, represented by the impression, however small, each foot leaves on time, dubious columns of air never coming to rest, but joining him around a table set with broken bottles to a meal of dried chewing gum.

It was something between these past two attempts, he thinks, that started the wind to blow his dusty paper sack over the river, never quite getting wet until finally, on a sudden downthrust of breeze, it's sunk farther down than wind should be able to push, pulled by a coincident suck in the river, sunk never to rise again. But Gristham's been either too windy or his river too lazy, and the sudden thrusts he's hoping for are like an unhappy child repeating everything he says, but in a child's approximation of an adult voice, oddly deep and shallow at the same time, and the worst kind of insult because of its impact despite the desperation that fostered it and the false face falsely held that it has no impact at all.

Gristham walks slowly, still making noises on each step, but quickly losing out to the knowledge making itself more apparent with each stride that he is failing, that this is what it is to have an idea, but only an idea. He has read that some people live inside one idea their whole lives, but all he wanted was to stroll through one for a few minutes. That it hasn't worked out is deadening, a mallet he can't feel anymore as it bangs his head over and over again, whose presence isn't felt on his scalp, but somewhere above his mouth, and not as a pressure but as a lack of pressure, the excavation of a hole that should never be empty.

And then he begins speaking.

EXCERPT FROM THE PREFERRED MEDIUM

BY MEGAN NADOLSKI

I am addicted to liquid eyeliner. I let the black roll over my lids making damp outlines and false perceptions. Knowing I will capture their focus this way, I paint around the corners of my vision, and encase my eyes for others. They become boring oily landscapes edged by the saving grace of elaborate frames. But in the warm months I try to wean myself off of the face paint. For a few weeks, I allow my eyes to recede into my face. And so up here I go without. Up here in the summertime, my buried eyes stay low and quiet.

With painted eyes, I once watched my baby sister stick dozens of pins into her pale arms. Tiny springs of life fluid decanted as she pulled them out. I could only sit there waiting to see if there would be any strings attached to the bloody pins. There were none, and I collected all the tacks, needles, safety pins in the house and shoved them into the trunk of my car before slinking down south for the fall. I left only the spools of thread, lonely forgotten gifts for my sister to find. That would be the last time I let my sister drain herself in front of me.

I think of her discovering the treasure chest of colored fibers as I wait for my cereal to go soggy. My heels are conscious of the linoleum film that glides like an oil slick through the narrow kitchen of our cabin. I think how like butcher paper it is on rolls in some dripping warehouse somewhere, reflecting a line of florescent lighting, as it is unwound in sticky strands off the reels. It will be shipped around to the more careless decorators of the east coast and stuck with some irreversible glue to the crumbling foundations beneath. I swirl my breakfast around in the bowl and glance out the window.

My grandma's frothy figure is pacing on the dock; she pads back and forth like a child on a Christmas morning in her nightgown. The bottle of gin that we carted up here is in the cabinet unopened, but I have pulled my hazy grandma up the steps to their bedroom every night since our arrival. I try to hold her up by her substanceless arms as she ascends the stairs, my fingers like iron clamps. She trips over nothing.

Tonight, she will not plead with me and she will not cry, but she will ask me to sleep next to her. I will, letting the dust and the years of the room lay its layers down on me. Sad paint-by-number clown pictures will meld their faces into my grandma's and my grandfather will seep out of the fraying bed sheets late in the night. I won't be able to sleep, but will stay because I cannot let the oldest thread in my life wake up in an empty bed.

I look out the panes again and watch as she traces blanks between the boards with her feet. The glass of water in her hand wobbles with every step. She has been refusing food, holding in her breath and drinking the water left over from her dead husband's oxygen machine on a daily basis. She drinks it this morning again.

The phone rings with my baby sister in downer mode. She is caking fleshy liquid onto her serving platter face, and tells me that her latest, with chalkboard teeth and jeweled ears wants to take her away. I do not wonder where they will go. Upon my silence, she then tells me that there is something else, and I can feel the anxiety trickling out of her like piss on elementary legs during afternoon recess. It's them, she says, meaning parents. Ours. They are making her take a drug test. And she wishes I could come with her, to hold her hand, to hold the cup, to hold her neck as it rolls back and she goes white at the prick of a needle. I tell her I would, only I am here with Gramma who is walking the damp planks of the sinking dock and drinking recycled air. "What?" she asks in a moment of clarity enough to misunderstand. "Nothing," I whisper into the receiver. "Just make sure you get it in the cup."

When her voice clicks off I'm left with an image of her at ten. Perspiration sheds itself down her neck, and watermelon juices seep out of the curve of her lips, as she devours a bulky wedge of the summertime fruit. Her bare legs and feet dangle over the ledge of our open window, swinging back and forth. She spits the seeds at the boys below, gawking up at her cotton underwear. With watermelon in her mouth, she cackles, dribbling juices onto her checkered skirt. The pack below hollers and whistles up at her, as she holds her Rapunzel pose with crude elegance and nonchalance. Ignoring their juvenile pleas and eager hands, she bites into the last remnants of the fruit and finishes off the pink meat. She wipes her mouth with the back of her arm, and chews the last bits with an open mouth. With a playful smirk and a flick of her wrist, she flings the rind down to the boys below. She imagines how, like dogs, they will fight over the last thing she touched as she pulls her legs into a crouch and climbs gingerly back in through the window.

But now she just sits there among piles of rinds with her reality on fire, burning in the wrong hues. I want someone to suck the hallucinogens right out of her. Unlike her latest syringe of a boyfriend, who keeps ejaculating acid into her over and over again. I have often wondered if he even touches her from the waist up. My fingertips go cold on the edge of my cereal bowl, as I see Gramma walk up to the cabin with an empty glass. She will come in to twirl my boyish hair around her fingers and refill her cup. I want to tell her to stop drinking unused life. I want to beg her to drink in her own, to breath deeply and feel it resonate in her lungs. I only bite my lip and she asks me if I will put air into her raft.

Attending to her request in the afternoon, I sit on the bench, blowing up the silver float for my grandmother so that she may loaf on the plastic cushioning and dip her feet into

the water, making eddies with the wrinkled tip of her toes. She stands next to me and tries to part my hair as my lips go pale. This is all she wants to do today, she says referring to the float. This is all she wants to do. But as she says this, the sound of car wheels unravels itself into our stagnant day.

It is her vegetable oil son-in-law and my Uncle, who used to sneak up behind me and squeeze the extra layer of flesh on my thighs, asking, "What is this?" in mock excitement. I still sit with my hands between my legs when he is around. We can hear his lubricated dress shoes as he clacks down the shambled stairs. Knocking the hummingbird feeder out of his way with a Shakespeare swoop, he approaches to greet us. He kisses us both, wrinkled and cracked, on the face, and then moves right into new business. Says he wants to sell the place, maybe revamp the cabin and attach a nice Jacuzzi to the side. I wait for him to ask Gramma for her flaky approval. He doesn't. Instead, he takes down measurements, and scribbles figures on the property, consumes a glass of stale tea with us for compensation and kicks the fractured canoe. I hold my naked and raging eyes back, taking up slack on the reigns and let him go with the figures, with the measurements, with the dust of the chipped canoe still on his shoes. We both let him go; milked of words and knowing he might cash in our haven of secret and wallowing pain.

This night Gramma and I go walking beneath the moon's underbelly. We stagger over the stretching ferns with our child woman feet, slicing our heels open on the rocky clearings. Later, we ease our wounded soles into the nighttime water, stepping in and shimmying it up our hips like an expensive and earned evening gown. We let the waters twirl around our heads like streamers in Chinese New Year celebrations. We let it vanish us and then we emerge again like wild amoeba goddesses from some ritual in a landlocked sea. We pull thick sweaters over our stretched and glistening skins and huddle close sucking in each other's cloud of breath. She is wishing for fulfillment. I am pondering evaporation.

We left our silent anger from Uncle's visit on the rock-crusting shore, but I can still feel my grandfather's provoked temper clinging to the pine branches above us. He steams through the foliage and bark. His presence shouts in muted tones, demanding we stop the exploitation of the only life he has left after death. And I know the shape rage takes on his rough face, even though I saw it only once when I was young.

It was on the day I had decided to impose a mass genocide on the bullfrog population of our little lake. I worked all day hunting them down. Something in a child's veins can read the rhythm of water bound amphibians. I was minutely in tune to this gift, sliding my keen palms around them with vile grace. But there is also something in their slippery existence that occasionally allows children to take them prisoner, and I sloshed captured frogs into the bucket one by one. Until there were more than twenty. I pulled them out of the bucket, one at a time like newly bathed babies out of a sink bath. Tainted wetness shed from their immaculate bodies as I carried them to the execution block. Pressing them close

to the bare wood of our dock, I brought a stone down hard upon them, pinching the vitality out of their squelchy frames. I did not stop until their eyes tumbled out from the force and I was satisfied with the amount of raw existence that lay detached and drying on the planks. I had only just killed the last one when he found me. In a fit of fury, he kicked the bucket over, the bullfrog-scented water spilling and mingling with the new blood.

He could do nothing but stand over me and seethe as I smeared the shimmering guts around with the sole of my pink flip-flop. After minutes I offered up the bloody rock to him with sweaty palms and frog grit beneath my fingernails. He took the rock and drowned it. Then he grabbed my neck and led me down to where the water lapped onto the rotting wood, plunged my hands in, smoothing over them, scrubbing off their malignancy with his own calluses. He lifted his dripping fingertips up to my cheeks crusted with frog insides and held them there, letting the excess shed itself onto my decrepit stance, making falls over my shoulder blades. He placed his eyes into mine, and let out a deep sigh. I released with him, dropping my violent quest onto the faded planks. I looked down at the withering remnants of my destruction, and knew he would breathe low and soft for me on the day that he died.

OF YOUR HEAD THAT IS NUMB

BY JOHN STAPLES

The doctor repeats the words numb, and, half of your head. Andrew nods.

What do you mean when you say numb?

Well, I have a numb sensation. It feels numb.

How long has it been like this?

Two weeks, maybe a little more.

The doctor writes something in a notebook and asks Andrew why he hasn't come to see a doctor sooner.

The doctor gets up from his chair and walks behind Andrew. He gives off a chalky smell, and his hands feel damp on Andrew's head — probably from the last washing.

Which half is it — of your head that is numb?

Andrew moves his hand in a circular motion a few inches above one half of his head. The doctor places two fingers on Andrew's head just above an ear and taps on them with two fingers of his other hand. He moves to a different spot and taps again, an even rhythm of four beats, pause, then four beats again on a different spot: tap tap tap tap ... tap tap tap tap, and so on.

Is this the area?

Yes, all around there.

Andrew moves his hand above the area again. The doctor stops tapping while Andrew does this and waits until the hand has been withdrawn before resuming.

Can you feel this?

Yes.

The doctor taps on the other side of Andrew's head. Tap tap tap tap ... tap tap tap tap ...

Can you feel this?

Yes.

Why did you tell me your head is numb when it isn't?

Excuse me?

Your head is not numb.

The doctor walks back behind his desk. He opens a drawer, peers into it, then takes out one of those steel hammers with the black rubber tips. He walks behind Andrew with the head of the hammer cupped and tapping in a palm and tells him to hold his head still. He begins to tap with the hammer on the half of Andrew's head that feels numb. Andrew feels the rubber of the hammer and the weight behind it bounce off his head. At first light and steady, the bouncing becomes faster and harder. Tap tap tap tap ... tap tap tap tap ...

Is this effrontery, to use such an instrument?

Can you feel this?

Yes.

What does he think he's doing, hitting like that with that thing?

The doctor taps the other side of Andrew's head. Tap tap tap tap ...

Can you feel this?

Yes, of course I can.

Andrew leans forward away from the hammer and turns one side of his face to the doctor.

Your head is not numb.

The doctor walks behind his desk, sits down and leans back in his chair. Andrew presses with his finger tips on the side of his head that feels numb.

Why did you tell me your head is numb when it isn't?

Because it — why would I say it felt numb if it didn't? It feels numb!

You feel it? Then it isn't numb, is it?

Look, numbness —

ARGUMENTUM AEROMANCICUM

BY JOHN STAPLES

I'm just worried your attempt to rebuild that airplane will make you constantly frustrated.

I worry about that too.

Well, I don't think that's so great.

It's not.

Well?

Well what?

What if it takes you twelve years to rebuild that airplane? Are you going to be frustrated all that time — twelve years?

I don't know. It's possible.

Well, I don't think that's so great.

It's not.

Well?

Well what?

I mean, what if it takes you twelve years to rebuild that airplane and the goddamn thing won't work — fly? Huh? What then?

I worry about that too sometimes.

Well, I don't think that's so great.

It's not.

Well?

Well what?

What if — even worse — you lose your job because you're spending too much time and the mental stamina it takes to do your job on trying to rebuild that airplane — that might not work?

That's a risk.

Well, I don't think that's so great.

It's not.

Well?

Well what?

Well, what are you going to do?

I think that plane'll fly.

You really think so?

I almost know so.

Well.

Well what?

How high, again?

Eight thousand feet.

Well.

Well what?

Five hundred miles on one tank, was it? You ... we could go practically anywhere?

Anywhere.

Well ...

Well what?

Well, I don't think that's so bad.

It's not.

MERCURY

BY COURTNEY STONE

The day my grandfather's leukemia finally failed to respond to the glittery poison-cure coursing through his veins, my grandmother—former fashion model, ex-Naval intelligence officer, recovering alcoholic—gathered up all the thermometers on their farm. She carefully broke their metallic bulbs into a Mason jar that had once housed my grandfather's favored fig preserves and then called her chemist neighbor, insisting that he come at once with his lab kit. Upon his arrival, she told him nothing of her husband's death, but instead had him seal all the mercury in the Mason jar into a glass bubble. He blew this bubble using the farrier's forge in the barn in place of his accustomed Bunsen burner. My grandmother dismissed him and placed the vial of sparkling poison on a worn chain around her neck, then rose to take a shovel from the wall. Alone, my grandmother traipsed to the back pasture, to the mossy plot dotted by bleached headstones long since tipped over by cows. She clawed through a good three feet of Tennessee shale and then fired up the backhoe parked behind the barn to finish off the job. My grandfather was laid to rest in the early evening humidity in much the same fashion as he himself might have buried a favorite mare.

The next week, my grandmother bought a plane ticket west and set out to follow spring across the world. When Biloxi's riotous azaleas had faded, followed by Phoenix's neon cacti flowers, and finally San Francisco's demure daisies, she jumped a steamer across the Pacific. Hawaii's lush hibiscuses and New Zealand's exotic kiwi blooms did not move her, but orchids amidst the war rubble at Nagasaki finally made her cry. Still she continued her trek westward, visiting Moscow, Cairo, and finally Paris, where rain forced her to settle for a gallery of Monet's water lilies. When she returned across the big pond to Tennessee, having been gone nearly a year, she went out to the graveyard and knelt on my grandfather's grave. Then, just as another woman might break an egg against a mixing bowl, she cracked the necklace against his headstone and drank deeply, refreshed at the last.