

*Holly Peterson*

## **Safety**

There were three of them, oozing into school, infiltrating in intellectual bomber jackets, wide-leg pants, oily boots and hats that weren't theirs, all this attractively integrated with their uniforms so they didn't have to change like I always did when I tried the very same tricks.

There was Homemade Bob-n-Bangs Haircut, the master of the ever present friend-on-the-arm, queen (or slave) of the all-night-hang. She was always out with someone and it wasn't you. Then there was the *Scream*-Hound, lover of gore and *gialli*, who was the only one of all three that really made sense in what they were up to. There was also the one that the guys continually eyed: Unread Copy of *Lolita* on the Bedside. Socks and shoes and Satanism. All together they made a circle—well, a triangle—to rival any gang of bony, smoky girls on the big silver screen.

It was autumn. Red leaves and white fog (the gentle stain of burns on the gauze of band aids), lungs filled with wet air caustic like rubbing alcohol. I think it started with the three of them asking specific questions during class. Teachers responded with too much enthusiasm, mistaking their digging for academic interest. Then the girls were at the end of the hall as the lights clicked off down towards them. They stayed after hours at the school, raiding the chemistry closet and shrieking as they climbed the fence under the buggy lights by the parking lot. They would come in the next morning tired; they had been up all night messing with chemicals and paperbacks—but not for school. One day they all appeared with bangs; I realized later this was because they had all burnt their eyebrows off.

The police were called after their first bomb went off. The cop cars pulled up to the dump on the outskirts of town but by the time they got there the girls were gone, leaving a burnt-up car in their wake. No one assumed it was girls, of course. They were quieter next time and people forgot. I noticed all of this, although I don't think the three of them noticed me. I could always hear something else when they were silent. Heartbeats but no hearts. In the Dark Mart parking lot they sipped Slurpees through shivery lips.

After school they ducked their eyes and did drive-bys, which I followed in trance-like rapture on my bike. In a mother's car, they snapped film. The old house, the object they ogled, stood back from the street, but not too far. A willow tree with hanging moss stood looming in the front yard, overgrown bushes crowding onto the sidewalk. I stood across the street (a few houses down), behind damp tree trunks on slick leaves and needles, breathing the sharp air, smelling pinesap and ubiquitous cold-weather wood smoke. After they were done with their surveying, the three would be off. Rolling unhurriedly to the end of the muted street, they would then shriek off so wildly my stomach would drop out and return sheepishly once the car had disappeared. I'd bike home, the ruddy leaves and my white breath mixing together to make the pink of my cheeks.

Months passed and then I was watching police comb the deep field behind the smoldering bits of the house. The men and dogs washed out towards the murky tree line and back in.

Black smoke creeping higher into the silver sky. Condensation on the fur of whining dogs, on navy shoulders, on the grass. Three girls with their heads bent low. They no longer looked like tall attackers; they looked small. They looked like girls who would ask for help after something bad happened, just like the guidance counselor said we always should. But I mean, we were also supposed to be independent, you know, to do things on our own. To take things into our own hands. But not this.

## *Samah Rash*

### **Fall Friend**

I'm feverish and fading fast – I suppose I'm mimicking Autumn, yet my sweat is hot, and it's cold. There's one leaf left on the very top of the birch tree that lies directly perpendicular to my bedroom window. It flaps around quite confidently as the cool currents toss it back and forth. I can see the potential in the delightful nature of the leaf, but I strongly dislike the way in which it seems to mock me in its theatrical gestures. It's been going on for two weeks now. All the other leaves have completed their annual fifteen second pilgrimage from tree-top to soil, but this leaf is different from them all. This one is the Hercules of flora. He holds on tight to his feeding-tube of a stem and hasn't let go since Spring. All the other trees are either completely naked, or still quite populated. I only noticed this particular leaf because I like seeing things in two's, and this lone leaf stands out quite sorely. It irks and angers me the same way leftover chalk does on the black board when professors do not quite finish erasing the base of a "t," or suddenly decide to switch the motion of their erasing. One minute they're wiping in a circular pattern from right to left, and then the next moment they decide to make prolonged zig-zagging patterns across the board from left to right.

With each passing day, the leaf seems to be turning a more vibrant hue of mustard-sunshine yellow which seems to magnify its flapping, causing me to want it to stop even more. The more the fibers in this leaf hold on dearly for life, the more I feel pressured to apishly climb the tree with my bare hands and feet until I can rip it off myself, and possibly swallow it to amplify the significance of its defeat. Such petty things we humans spend our time thinking about. How truly shameful it is.

I jumped out of bed again this morning, thankfully I landed on my feet this time. Icy sweat drenched my collar bones. I think it was another fever-induced nightmare, or maybe I was hungry. It was cold in my room; I knew that the weather had changed overnight. The light which strained to enter my bedroom window today was a whole new shade of despondency. It wasn't as strong as it was yesterday. It was quite dim and lifeless, really. Dizzily, I looked around. My eyes were like windshield wipers – trying to blink away the foggy stupor. I reached for my favorite socks which have bicycle prints on them, and slipped them on. I started stumbling out of my room to go make some green tea since apparently it's good for everything ranging from bloating, to weight-loss, to depression, when the birch tree that lies directly perpendicular to my bedroom window caught my attention. I scanned it up and down, and up once more, but the leaf wasn't there. It must have fallen sometime last night. There was a stinging pain inside of my chest, almost as if a dozen bumblebees went for my heart at once.

How could something that brought me so much annoyance, cause me to feel so much eagerness as well? I felt hollow without it. I felt the way a tea cup must feel when it's patiently waiting to be filled with steaming water only to find out that there is just one drop of condensed vapor left in the kettle. It's quite absurd, I know, to find a friend in a leaf, but that's the beauty in our creation. We can make friends with anything. We can find the splendor in anything. At least we have the potential to do so. The trees are our kin, our father is the sky, and the universe is our mother. We are galaxies, each and every one of us. I know that I was rather cynical in the way I let such a small facet of nature to cause me so much agitation, but it also caused me to realize the impermanence and simplicity in it all. There's no more room in this tightly-packed planet for animosity, but surely there's enough room for affection. So next time you find yourself agitated with something so minuscule and harmless, remember that you are a galaxy, and that tree is deep inside of you, within a solar system, on one small planet, in a corner of the forest. Galaxies know better than to be vexed by one lonely leaf.