

Focus
2005

the life of a writer

(a literary artist)

is

soulful, tortured, absolute,
& miraculous

we choose what has chosen us, in a sometimes loveless
always aching pursuit of passion
to honor and craft the written word.

Focus Magazine

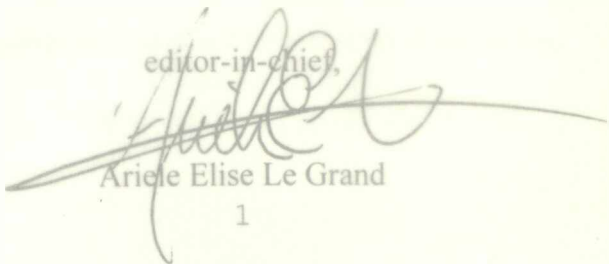
2005

this issue celebrates the writer's life.

From the budding student to the seasoned professional, we have collected work from those talented and relentless writers who are making provoking contributions to the literary community. Like those issues that have preceded FOCUS 2005, this edition strives to be a space within the creative community of color for writers with something to say.

We passionately support the small group of publications, academic programs, and spiritual endeavors that specifically sustain writers of color.

editor-in-chief,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arielle Elise Le Grand', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Arielle Elise Le Grand

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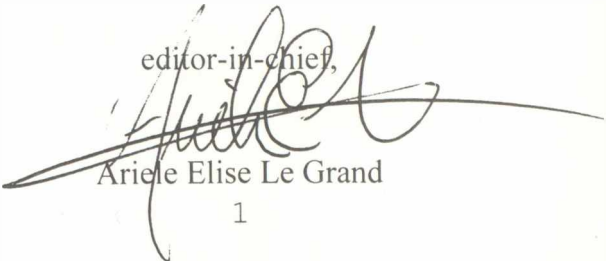
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Ariele Elise Le Grand

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to the community of students, activists, children, revolutionaries,
visionaries, teachers and artists of color
who challenge, create and critique
in order to survive

and finally

to our mothers for birthing
to our god for loving

and to the diverse body of sisters that make up
Spelman College
where Focus Magazine is born

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Live

By Corey Green

Regis smiles. He spreads his hands, palm down as if to bless the masses. Then he curses the disposable camera that shot his thumb repeatedly where his name in lights should be. He turns to Kelly, who looks through her hair that deserves its Pantene commercial, but doesn't need it, or the thousands they paid. Kelly, an Irish girl who reminds us how empty we'd make our wallets to keep that singular expression of a woman who stepped away from the dishes, the Palmolive, the framed back yard, to be

the Kelly who ignores the nuns singing on her behalf, the Kelly spinning sunny on a hill of wild flowers.

Regis is careful not to be distracted. This is his show: the guests, the lights, these chairs—he thinks, “What's with these chairs?” Says it, and swivels as if unable to find center. He relaxes at the end of his weekend and asks about Kelly's. She gleams her cloudless Kelly gleam—
“Well, ya know Mark and I went to the Trump wedding, and my dress had this white corset top. It suffocated me.” Regis's eyebrows lay heavy and wrinkled like his fingers would be if they pulled at the lacy bow of the corset and pried it open to let her breathe.

Kelly halts. The camera leans in. She jumps to the drive home, “We're not paying attention,

Mark and I, and then this girl.” (Pantene be consoled,
the hair shines through, even through the downpour.)

She continues, “We were struck—
uhm, star struck from the wedding, talking

about everybody, and my dress, and his hands, and then
thunder and this girl on our windshield. Mark, my husband
Mark, slams on the brakes. I screamed, I think I screamed,
and she tumbles off like a deer. It was an act of God.”
She leans down a little, looks as if she looks

at a body. Then up to the studio lights.
Her hands upturned to wait
for rain to wash her hands, her face.

Regis doesn't wait for Gilman. He's a character actor,
touches her leg. “I'm sorry,” he says.
But he remembers his tie. The tie
can't be associated with manslaughter.
People don't buy manslaughter ties.
He hands her a tissue. “Good,” he thinks.
“She has tissue. Good.”

Sky Blue (An excerpt from the play *Colors of Youth*)

By LaKetta Caldwell

MEAGAN/SKY: Those teen magazines with the girls wearing those belly shirts would really set me off. If I had tried wearing a shirt like that it would have been all belly and barely any shirt. I used to hate going shopping with my friends. Once we went into a store, we'd always be on separate sides of the store. The stores are set up to really mess with your mental. You look inside of the store windows and the mannequins have on such cute things. Well, those are not for you, if you're over a size fourteen. Your clothes are in a corner, lumped together. You find out you're hanging with a whole different group of people than who you came in with. Not only do you get separated from your friends, you end up paying more money for what you bought. My girls end up buying six outfits to my one outfit. It'd take me hours to find something cute that would hide my rolls and bulge. Once, when I was working at the movies, I had a woman ask me when I was due! What? That really shook me. I was like fourteen and far from being pregnant. When was I supposed to fit in, not being thin? Fat is not what the guys wanted.

(Pause)

They must of thought my fat made me deaf, but I'd hear the guys talking, "Man, hold on to your stuff 'cause you know she be making the earth shake!" I got sick of all the fat jokes and not being able to wear cute clothes. You know what? When any guy would talk to me, I would suck in my belly and put my arms around it. I just knew that my

weight was the reason I didn't have a boyfriend and that guys were always looking at my stomach. How could they miss it? I never thought it had anything to do with my wrecked self-esteem. I don't even know when I started hating myself. My spirit was just ripped apart ... I started hiding from mirrors because I hated what I saw in them. Piled on layers to hide my rolls. Alone in my shower, I would scrub my skin red and cry. I hated my fat. I hated me! My worth became what they fed me. I helped them with their genocide and went to war on myself. I deprived myself of the one thing that held me back. F-O-O-D. I would not eat. I did not eat. My will became too strong. Forget Atkins or Weight Watchers, I had Sky's Formula. Body was shaking to be fed. I'd yell at it to shut up ... SHUT UP! I was not going to listen to its lies. Told my body that it would not keep me from being accepted ... being pretty, being beautiful. And before my eyes, I was becoming pretty. Guys started noticing me. For the first time, I got digits. I loved this new attention and beauty. I could finally go into stores and shop with my girls. People praised my new look but they did not know what it took to make it...

GIRLS: (*Chant.*) Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who's the fattest one of all?

Sky is ... Sky is. (3X)

MEAGAN/SKY: After I finished my workout, I would stick my finger down my throat and vomit the evil out of me.

(Pause)

MEAGAN/SKY: One day, my girl cornered me. I'd been avoiding her. She pushed me into the bathroom and showed me myself. My body and face were hollow and

sunken in. I could actually see the outline of my skeleton. Mirrors do not lie ... My girl told me everybody around me was worried sick and I was being selfish. I was killing myself. I was weak ... too weak to cry. I had a choice and I chose from that day forth to live and love me. I am trying but it's still hard. I am learning to find my own definitions of beauty.

GIRLS: 1, 2, 3, 4, I got what I'm looking for
5, 6, 7, 8, What I got is really great
8, 9, and 10, Makes me so glad, gotta say it again
I love me
I love me
Who else could be just like me?
When I look in the mirror, what do I see?
A beautiful person staring back at me.

Metamorphosis

By Stefon N. Lowman

Write my name on tomorrow,
and show it to the sun.
Project it on the past
to tell 'em that a new day has begun.

*Begin:
This is the present.*

*Begun:
Time is fleeting,
so lets move on.*

The moon is rising
and setting
before the sun,
which shines
through
my
soul,
and the grass gets greener
beneath my feet
as I become me.

I breathe in deep,
inhale destiny,
and let it fill my lungs.
Hold it in for a moment
and remember faith;
who became wisdom

and married understanding
to become love.
Love, whom built imagination
with bricks of inspiration
upon a rock in my soul.
There, God has taught me to be patient.

*Yes, patience
causing great peace.
But the euphoria
makes me dizzy,
so I must exhale.*

Exhale all things that are possible
to blow away negativity
with force to cast my fears into the sea.

And the seasons change.

Now the love within can sprout

like
green leaves.
All impossibilities
died
in the past
before I
became me.

*And me?
I
am free.*

My world is mine.
I engrave my name across eternity.

The Writer's Life: An Interview with Shay Youngblood



Photo Credit: David Land

*An accomplished poet, playwright, screenwriter, and fiction writer, Shay Youngblood has won numerous writing awards, including a Pushcart Prize, a Lorraine Hansberry Playwrighting Award, an Astrea Writers' Award, and several NAACP Theater Awards. Ms. Youngblood's screenplay for **Shakin'***

*the **Mess Outta Misery** was optioned by Sidney Potier for Columbia Pictures, and her work has been described as "intelligent and erotic" by the **Washington Post** and "hauntingly beautiful" by the **Boston Herald**. Ms. Youngblood received her BA in Mass Communications from Clark-Atlanta University and her M.F.A in creative writing from Brown University.*

FOCUS: You've written everything from plays to essays to novels. Do you enjoy writing in one particular genre over another?

YOUNGBLOOD: What I enjoy most about being an artist at this point in my career is the challenge of working in new forms and genres and sometimes mixing two or three to see what happens. My first love is writing for the theatre because it is such a communal activity that engages all the senses and has a political aspect in that it has the power to inspire, open dialogue, raise questions, introduce new ideas and shift the preconceived notions in ways that can be non-threatening. In theater, a kind of community is formed and I can be engaged with other people who are also creating. Writing a novel is a solitary activity that can take an incredible amount of time and focus. I'm exploring painting now and even on canvas I find myself telling stories, being narrative in the colors I use, the images and moods I create.

FOCUS: In a way, your novels **Black Girl in Paris** and **Soul Kiss** could be described as "coming of age" works because the protagonist grow so much over the course of the novels. Are there particular stages in your characters' lives that you most enjoy examining?

YOUNGBLOOD: I'm particularly interested in looking at how a character is affected by love, how they act because of it, for want of it or because they have an abundance of it. I like watching a

character grow and change as they take more risks to get what they want out of life.

FOCUS: How many hours a day do you spend writing? Do you have a writing schedule?

YOUNGBLOOD: I'm always writing. 24/7. Even when I'm sleeping, I use my dreams in my writing and in my paintings.

FOCUS: What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

YOUNGBLOOD: To aspiring writers, I would encourage you to enjoy what you do and to challenge yourself from time to time to work in a creative area outside your comfort zone (if you write poetry try writing a short story, if you are a painter write poetry, novelist write a screenplay). I believe it helps develop a beginner's mind, allowing you to be fearless in a way that becomes difficult the longer you practice in only one area. Each year I attend an artist colony for a month or so where I can "live" with the characters in my work without distractions.

FOCUS: What projects are you currently working on?

YOUNGBLOOD: In the last few years, I've worked on a contemporary novel, a historical "opera" novel, and completed

over 200 paintings and drawings. I'm living in Boston working on a series of drawings and a body of paintings to exhibit in the fall.

FOCUS: What books are you reading now? What writers writing today do you feel are shaping our culture? What writers do you feel have most impacted our culture?

YOUNGBLOOD: I'm reading the Alice Walker biography by Evelyn C. White and Zora Neale Hurston's biography by my friend Valerie Boyd, these writers and subjects are among my favorites. I read a lot of poetry when I'm writing--Neruda, Rilke, and Lorca—and I spend a lot of time walking through museums wondering about the stories behind the art works. In theater, Naomi Iizuka and Daniel Alexander Jones are fearless and bold in the creation of their art. Some of my favorite contemporary authors are Ruth Ozeki, Colson Whitehead, and Tayari Jones. Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Milan Kundera, and Zora Neale Hurston I read and re-read for pure pleasure and to feed my soul and stimulate my mind.

Roughing it on Fire Island

By Tsipi Keller

VINNIE IS sitting on the long, maroon table. Her feet are firmly planted on the bench. The table and bench are long boards of wood, put together for the convenience of campers like ourselves. To the left are our dining and living quarters, to the right is our bedroom where a small yellow tent is taut against a northern wind. Green bushes outline our territory and separate us from our neighbors in the next lot. Rex, their dog, a sincere looking German shepherd, keeps barking at passers-by on their way to the sink to wash the breakfast dishes.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. She is short and stocky, her hair dark and curly. Her lips are moving, and her head is slightly bowed. Ginger and I stand still, facing her; she's going a hundred words a minute and we try to follow.

I don't know Vinnie. I met her yesterday when we packed up Ginger's car with camping gear and left the city. I met Vinnie once, months before. It was dinner time, and my husband and I met Ginger and Vinnie in a Spanish-Chinese restaurant on Eighth

Avenue. Earlier that day, President Reagan had been shot, and was undergoing surgery while the four of us feasted on noodles and crabs. He was in critical condition then, but has since reunited with his First Lady in the White House. My husband, on the other hand, declared one morning last week that he had to find himself and moved uptown to live with his brother.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. Her legs rest on the bench, her hands are up in the air. With her arms stretched out, she looms big against the open sky. It's eleven o'clock in the morning, and the bright sun is directly on top of us. I woke up sometime before, and, lying still in the double sleeping bag alongside Ginger, I listened to the calm voices of other campers. I looked at Ginger who lay straight on her back, and then over at Vinnie, curled up in her sleeping bag. I waited for them to open their eyes and so the day would begin, but they didn't. I wiggled out of the sleeping bag, crawled out of the tent, and Rex welcomed me with a short bark. I walked over to the sink and washed my face in the cold water. Alone in the morning, out in the woods, what does one do? Look for wood, I thought. Start a fire. Make coffee. But I'm a novice at this camping business.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. Her knees move as she talks. I finally got them up and out of the tent with what I had hoped was a chipper, Good morning. My voice sounded different in my ears. A chill stood in the air, and I raised my face to the sun and breathed deeply.

Like twins, Ginger and Vinnie emerged from the tent; Ginger first, then Vinnie right behind. Ginger, like a cat, sprang to her feet, stretched her body with a long, contented moan. Vinnie crawled out, slowly, muttered something to the ground, then headed straight for the table. She climbed up on the bench and sat down, her gaze, behind those reddish-dark glasses, fixed on her sneakers. She sniffed the air, and all at once she was talking, and we stood there, listening.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. She drives her watch up her wrist. "I was rolling on the floor," she roars with laughter. "This new guy on Friday Night Live is a riot, you must watch him, out of this world..." Her husky voice is pleasant, musical, and I focus on her tongue and try to catch its flight, watch it land between her teeth just where that wonderful lisp actually occurs.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. Her whole body is in motion. "Do you want ganja?" she shouts, imitating that funny guy from TV. "That's what he says, 'Do we want ganja?' and then he yells, 'YES YES YES' and the audience goes wild, ah, I'm telling you..."

Before I know it, I throw my arms up in the air, and echo Vinnie's YES YES YES. A funny sensation prickles my skin, and I feel as though I had smoked this fabulous ganja. Vinnie's lisp, the stillness of the bright cool day, and Ginger at my side, combine to lift me off the ground. I am weightless and can be placed anywhere. Just pick me up and put me some place, some place nice.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. She pushes her glasses up her nose and smacks her lips. The thought crosses my mind that perhaps she's swallowed one of her mescaline pills. I look to Ginger for answers, but Ginger's face is clear, she has no questions. I begin to laugh. Ginger laughs along with me.

"Is she drunk?" I shout.

"No," says Ginger, a tinge of surprise and protest in her voice. "This *is* Vinnie."

Vinnie jumps off the table, and is now quick and practical, her motions precise. She doesn't even see me; she looks for wood, and I trail behind, trying to catch her spirit. She walks fast, bends now and then to pick up a twig, a branch, which she examines intently, deciding its fate. She makes me think of squirrels, or rabbits, hopping along in the woods, standing still for a moment, listening to something only they can hear, and then hop hop again to the next attraction.

We go back to the camp site and Vinnie compiles the wood to light the fire. She instructs me on how twigs are arranged to form a pyramid, to help the fire catch. I'm lazy when it comes to chores, but I want to be useful. I move a twig, Vinnie moves another. She mumbles, Good, Good, and I'm not sure whether she's praising me, or the small fire that begins to ignite. I look at Vinnie, hoping to exchange a smile of common bond, but Vinnie is engaged, her only concern, the crackling sound of paper and twig, the thick smoke.

The fire catches, the water bubbles, and we make coffee. Ginger seasons the steak, lifts it up for the world, and Rex, to see, then ceremoniously flops it on the grill, with a lingering French word, "V-o-i-l-a!" We watch it sizzle, thankfully inhale its enticing

aroma. We remind each other how hungry we are; we stare at the fire, praying it will last.

This is to be our first real meal since we've left the city. Yesterday afternoon, after fighting off fat mosquitoes and setting up our tent, we met Karen, Ginger's friend, who shares a house on the island with ten other Manhattanites. While we walked on the beach it began to rain, and by the time we reached Karen's house we were soaking wet. Karen and the others went through their wardrobes, and we stripped off our wet clothes, slipped into dry, if ill-fitting, outfits. We collapsed on the couch, sipped pina colada, and watched rain drops slide down the glass doors, to join the pool of water outside on the porch. We scanned the room for possible romantic partners; one man was almost there for me, stealing glances from across the room, but never coming forward to claim me. "You've been out of circulation for too long," Vinnie explained. "These days you have to pursue them, or at least let them know you're willing."

"What do you mean, willing?"

"Just that." Vinnie smiled and smacked her lips.

It was dinner time for the Manhattanites, they were getting ready. Money was discussed. Small calculators appeared and brisk fingers punched numbers. Lists were drawn. Responsibilities were delegated for the following weekend, the last of the season. Our eyes were drawn to the kitchen where three women and two men were preparing dinner. Saliva gathering in our mouths, we watched the activities in a dazed silence, hoping against hope we'd be invited to share the food. "I feel like an orphan," Vinnie whispered, and Ginger and I nodded in agreement. We were almost part of this large, assorted family, and yet we didn't quite belong, we hadn't paid our dues.

The preparations in the kitchen reached their peak; the clatter of dishes became more frantic, the voices of the cooks more urgent, richer in volume and authority. The Manhattanites, politely, inched their way toward the table, seemingly in no hurry to snatch the best seat. We were not invited to share the food, so we decided to go out for a walk and let them eat in peace.

Outside, the rain had drizzled itself down to nothing; heaven was on our side. It was breezy, though, and we hugged each other against the cold. The narrow streets, lined with small, neat houses, were deserted. Everybody was indoors, biting and chewing by the

fire, except for us. Alas. We walked to the marina and tried to catch a glimpse of the rich life inside the big boats and yachts. "I'm hungry," Ginger shouted. "Me too," Vinnie shouted. "Me too," I shouted.

Our timing proved perfect. They were having dessert when we got back to the house. We were offered some, too. We looked away as quick hands wrapped the leftover rice, vegetables and meat. We bit into the cake. It would have hit the spot after a heavy, satisfying meal, but on a hungry tongue it tasted too sweet.

We changed into our own clothes: we were all going to the Kassino, the one and only bar in Davis Park. It was there that dates and fates were decided, but not before midnight, Karen had informed us.

When we reached the Kassino, Karen and her friends walked assuredly in, while we remained by the door like three kittens, peeping in. It was a large and bare room, except for a long bar and a few stools. In the corner, a cigarette machine and a jukebox were matched together. Several patrons leaned languidly against the bar, facing the door. One of them took his time walking across the room to cram a few coins into the jukebox. Soon, loud music

poured out, filling the room with anticipation. We turned around and walked outside to the open terrace, overlooking the ocean. It was dark and cold. We were on a small island, ominously surrounded by water.

"Let's go home," Vinnie said. "We can start a fire. Talk. Eat!"

"In a little while," Ginger said. "First let's see what this place has to offer."

We summoned our courage and walked back inside. We approached the bar, seemingly oblivious to looks and comments. We ordered our drinks in a sure, unwavering voice; after all, we were also from the city, we knew what it was all about. The bartender couldn't tell that we had only so many dollars on our persons, that we could only afford so many drinks. We even tipped him; we did the right thing

The regulars began to arrive in droves, the music got louder, and the dance floor was shaking with moving bodies. Ginger and I got drunk, fast, jerking and twisting with all the others. Vinnie was out of it: she sat on a stool, her elbows resting on the wooden bar, patiently waiting for her flushed friends to purge themselves of their stirred-up expectations. Once in a while we came over to her,

patted her on the shoulder, and half-listened to the thin, middle-aged woman, a native, we learned, who sat next to Vinnie and complained about her life on the island. She was lonely. Her husband had left her. Summers brought new faces into town, but winters were growing worse, and another was just around the corner.

On the dance floor, Ginger and I pushed for elation; we were open to suggestions, polite suggestions.

No suggestions came our way. The Irish lady moved to another stool and was telling her story to some man at the bar.

The late night early morning found us on the beach, flying toward Watch Hill, racing the moon to our camp-site. Half-held, half-pulled by Ginger and Vinnie, I tried to visualize the inside of the cooler and what I would do with its content.

Our little yellow tent was still up, but needed some stretching to better withstand the wind. Vinnie crawled inside and came out to announce that the tent's floor was wet. Ginger and Vinnie went right to work, while I, with shaky hands, opened the cooler and tore into the bread, the cheese, the large, juicy tomatoes. Soon Ginger was next to me, tearing and chewing, calling out to Vinnie

to hurry up and have some before it was gone. But Vinnie was busy securing the tent, getting it ready for the night, all the while muttering, talking, cajoling the tent and the wind to comply.

Finally she joined us, and together we devoured a whole loaf of rye bread, a hefty chunk of Vermont Cheddar, and a few home-grown tomatoes from Vinnie's mother's garden in Brooklyn.

"Too bad we finished the bread," Vinnie said. "There'll be none left for the steak tomorrow."

We gave pause to this new information, and went right on chewing.

"Too bad we finished the tomatoes," Vinnie said. "I was going to make tomato salad with garlic. It's a great combination."

"Too bad," we agreed.

Vinnie is sitting on the long maroon table. Her legs rest on the bench. Her whole being is in motion. She spreads her legs and hands, bringing to life that funny guy from TV who answers his own funny questions with YES YES YES, or NO NO NO. Soon we'll make coffee and have a juicy steak for breakfast. We'll go for a walk and meet a family of three deer, grazing on the grass. When

the deer move on, we move on. We then pack up our tent and sleeping bags, say goodbye to Rex and board the ferry, with Vinnie sitting next to me, French-braiding my hair, and Ginger looking out to sea.

Borrowing

By Chantal James

i went to your wake
broke, i rode with a friend
of yours.

she called you stupid, selfish.
she wondered with what money
you could afford a funeral
with whose checks—what did you have to sell?
sex?
something artistic?
you were bad at both, she said.

i cannot damn you
though i kept you at bay
 (forgive me?)
in third grade you gave me
the most exotic flower i'd ever seen
for my egg salad sandwich.

i cannot remember who i was,
before then.

Champagne Sheets, a Blond & a Cigarette (the day the plane crashed)

By Ariele Elise Le Grand

-1- Elise

His eyes are the first part of his body to transition from sleep into the weary first few minutes of a new day. We can only have it once. Quarter after eleven. The almost afternoon that will have to substitute for morning. He is like a baby in a queen sized crib, unblinking eyes consume everything. He notices me first, notices my fetal position that could be mistaken for defensive. He notices my own searching eyes and knows that I am also awake. I have left sleep from the same place where I found it last night--in his bed, nestled into any available body space that I could find. He can look at my face now that it is not buried into the narrow fleshy groove of his lower back. He realizes, already half knowing, that I am fine.

I am there with him for the new day. Now, shift back into his own silent space. What will he do with his first only-once hour? He rolls over and turns on the television. News. A plane crash in our neighborhood. Now we are absorbed not by each other and the unchanged room, but by the news of a plane crash which is the same on three channels. There were two people in the plane. I make my first noises for the day, which are breathy gasps and half moans in response to the crash. I sit up behind my now upright boyfriend and squint at the TV over his shoulder. From behind him, I press my breasts into the still warm space on his back.. I hold him as we watch the interrupted morning on the corner of Boulevard and Edgewood. But our usual first instinct of the day has been derailed. We are not having sex because a plane crashed. Neither of us have ever seen a plane crash on a familiar street. Even now, we are not really seeing it because we are watching the *televised* version. And almost anything can be televised. No one is impressed by anything that you *only* saw on TV. Still, I am interested. I am wondering what the store owners on boulevard were thinking when a plane came careening downwards through

layers of periwinkle air, like too many paint brushes stuffed into the dipping water and the whole scene is ruined by black filmy water. Because all colors dissolve to black eventually. I know that because my hair rolls up when its wet, and because my sweet boyfriend makes white girls sweat just by noticing them.

His next thoughts are of speeding snowboarders who jump off rails or even run into walls as he guides them through icy x-box land. He disconnects us from the news to play a muted video game. Muted so that I can't complain. I lie on the carpet now since we are no longer lying in bed. Twenty minutes after noon. At least two people have died and our morning is gone.

My cell phone rings and I get up to answer it but I can't get the crash out of my mind. The enormous curls of dirty blackish smoke...they must have flooded out of the busted steel stomach of that plane like a million plastic cups of dirty dipping water. I imagine the smoke spreading across the pavement like all the gray paint from the bottom of each cup. Smoke that must have flooded Boulevard and soiled the bottom halves of all of the pedestrians. It is the first thing that the emergency workers will have to deal with.

Less people will be interested, coughing, crowding the scene to watch two possible fatalities once the smoke is gone. It's the first thing people notice, like an invitation. Or the piece that stays behind, like a cheated lover or a lung cancer. Like the truth.

-2-

Maya

“Oooh...oh my god. This fucking traffic...what the *fuck*? I swear to god I am going to get out of my car and walk, in like, six seconds. What the *fuck*? There better be a motherfuckin' accident.” Maya pulls down the cosmetic mirror and watches her lips move as she taps the horn with a closed fist. “I can't believe this. Lemme call this boy. I can't fuckin' believe this.” The phone rings eight or nine times. She hangs up and calls again. And again. She reaches into her purse and caresses the smooth plastic wrapper of a box of very old Newports. Unopened. Extremely tempting. Maya resists and calls her boyfriend one more time. Then one more time. “*Fuck!*” She throws the phone down on the seat beside her and presses her now open hand on the horn with all fierceness that has

been sloshing around inside of her like the first tremors in the ocean before a tidal wave erupts.

It seems as though every other car, stuck in their own privately interrupted situations, are now also muted by the long nasal bellow of Maya's car horn. Muted so that they can't complain. She allows a lot to pass through the horn's voice, and for a moment the world has no other sound. When she feels temporarily saner, and glares from other drivers finally penetrate the blaring tantrum that could not be contained in the car, Maya releases the horn and cries. Where is Jonas? How could he be so far away from his phone when he's expecting to see her any minute?

As soon as the first tear reaches her chin Maya unfolds the cosmetic mirror again. She turns off the car and begins to spread almond colored foundation beneath her eyes. The damage is minimal for now, but she can't sit by herself any longer. She picks up the phone again. It only rings twice this time.

"Hello?"

"Elise?"

“Hey girl...what’s goin’ on?” Elise’s voice sounds sleepy. Maya checks the radio clock on her dashboard. 12:21. At least someone has had a peaceful morning today, she thinks to herself.

“Elise, you will *not* believe what my day has been like. I mean, what it’s *still* like. Are you sleeping?”

“No.”

“You and Neil are probably curled up in that nasty-ass apartment, so sleepy and so in love that can’t neither of y’all smell the trash in his hallway!” Maya laughs now, pulling down the mirror again since her careful eyeliner could be ruined by tears of rage or joy.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” Elise questions, halfway kidding.

“Girl, I’m sorry.” Maya turns the ignition, as it seems the traffic is letting up slightly. “Don’t go...I need to talk to you. Why you sound so groggy?”

“I don’t know.” Elise pauses thoughtfully. “I mean, I have been awake for at least an hour...I think. I just, we haven’t really started the day yet. What are you doing?”

“Sitting in traffic,” Maya snaps.

“Where?”

“Up over here on Boulevard. I don’t know *what* the fuck is goin’ on. I’m supposed to be seeing Jonas. I told him I was gonna be over there at noon. But I’ve been on Boulevard for like, half an hour. This is so crazy.”

“Oh...” Elise’s voice suddenly sounds awake.

“What?”

“Neil and I were watching the news this morning...”

“Ugh...girl...” Maya unapologetically interrupts and continues on.

“I just know he’s with that bitch. I just...I fuckin’ know it. I’m gonna run up in there and kill them both.” Maya’s voice trails off a little bit as she begins to refocus on the traffic. “I think there’s like a detour, or something...”

“Yea.” Elise chimes in. “There was a plane crash over there.”

“What? A plane...what are you talking about? Hold on a sec.”

Maya puts the phone on her lap and struggles to find some lip gloss in her purse.

“Are you in there smokin’ your lungs out over this boy Maya? I don’t know how you put up with his nonsense. Who--what girl are you talkin’ about...the white girl from--”

“Yea,” Maya purrs, adjusting the cosmetic mirror. “That bitch.”

“So, you goin’ over there now?”

“Yea, I’m not smoking though. Swear to God, its been like three months.”

“Stop acting like you don’t know exactly how many days,” Elise laughs.

“Ugh...eighty-four...and a half.”

“Goin’ strong.”

“Yea, girl lemme go. I’ll call you and let you know what’s up.”

“Alright.” With Elise’s help, the last couple of minutes were a little less tortuous. Maya was unconcerned with the details of the situation, the plane crash or whatever Elise was talking about. She was now rounding the corner by the lofts where Jonas lives and already craning her neck around to see if she could find an incriminating car in front of his building.

Jonas & that bitch

Jonas has one of those digital clocks with the glaring red numbers and the blinking colon. It doesn't do anything besides tell time. The alarm and radio both stopped working when Jonas once knocked the clock off of his night table trying to get an extra five minutes of snooze time. It's also been known to fall behind a couple of minutes every so often, but today it's right in sync. It's promising face reads 12:10pm when Jonas rolls out of the champagne sheets on the king sized bed that takes up the majority of the space in his studio apartment. "Is that right...that can't be right." Jonas thinks out loud as he sits upright now, moving a plastic bottle of banana flavored lubricant from in front of the clock. He moves the bottle cautiously, hoping that the time could possibly be 10:10 or 11:00. Even 12:00 wouldn't be so bad, he could work with that since Maya usually runs late. But the clock reads 12:10. Ten minutes after noon.

Jonas turns around to look at the streaks of blond hair spread across the pillow in bed beside him. Her hair looks beautiful to him against those sheets. It was as if she had come in the package. But she didn't, she was actually an unlikely bonus. She was about to be the very likely cause of a disaster if Jonas couldn't think of something quickly. "Hey...uh...you should, we should probably get up, don't you think?" The urgency in his voice did not translate and the sleeping pile of golden hair remained sleeping on his pillow. Jonas rubbed her perfectly unsplit ends between his thumb and his index finger. He wished she would wake up. Her hair completely consumed her face. It consumed everything. He imagined that he was drowning in a sea of blond waves. Hair everywhere, wrapped around his neck--and hers, squeezing the future fatherhood from his penis, slicing his skin into wounds that would never heal. And Maya's face in the moon, moving those seething waves back and forth and back...

"Hey--" Jonas started to whisper into the hair. But as soon as he got close enough to see a nose, he was instantly repelled by the smell of hot vodka breath. Musky, stringent morning breath. He

drew back. “Damn...she’s probably down for the count.” Just when his mind began to work through every possible option, the sound of his name from that blond mess of hair became the sweetest alarm he had heard in sometime.

“Jonas...did you say something?” Her voice was muffled, treading the smudged line between sleep and consciousness. He couldn’t lose her.

“Hey...” he bellows. An over-exaggerated smile following. “Rise and shine!” She turns over and looks at him. Just as he opens his mouth to offer her some cab fare, the phone starts. “Oh Jesus.” He knew it was Maya.

“Why don’t you answer your phone?”

“Oh yea, I’m gonna grab it.” Jonas moves to the edge of his bed. 12:20. That has to be her. He watches his cell phone nearly vibrate off of the nightstand.

“Jonas, answer it. Why don’t you *answer* it?” The bottle of lubricant falls to the floor. Now she is fully awake. “I thought you broke up with her.” Jonas crawls back into bed.

"I did." He murmurs, and lays his head down on a couple of stray blond hairs that have fallen onto the sheets. She rubs the back of his neck and he turns away from the clock, waiting to hear the voicemail chime on his phone. Nothing. She didn't leave a message. Maybe she isn't coming, Jonas thinks and smiles a little.

"You wanna go get some breakfast?" he asks, figuring the best thing he can do is leave, and blame Maya for her chronic lateness when she forces him to explain.

"No" she answers, "We have leftovers in the fridge from last night. And besides, I'm not quite ready to get out of bed yet." Jonas rolls over and pulls her on top of him. With her naked body perched atop his own, a curtain of honey-kissed, sun-bleached hair creates a curtain around them. He can no longer see the clock, only layers of hair and two happy, ripe breasts full and looming above him. Her body is forbidden fruit right now. Her happy breasts are like white coconut halves. The nipples remind him of the soft, vulnerable pinkish color of birth.

Maya, Jonas...and that bitch

Maya huffs all the way out of her car right up to the front door of Jonas' apartment. She takes a moment to gather herself and contemplates between using her own key or knocking. She listens at the door. Nothing. Then she swears she hears someone breathing. Maya opens her mouth and forms her sticky razzleberry lips around his name, "Jo...na...s." But quietly. She whispers to herself so she can determine whether the breathing noise is coming from inside the apartment, or from herself. For a few moments, nothing. Maya can already feel herself struggling in that livid flood of knowing. It begins to drown her from the inside as she stands outside of Jonas' door, waiting. She feels her stomach fill up first and she starts to feel nauseous. Her lungs pinch with each cautious breath. She imagines what might still be pink now consumed by black and blue. The air around her is so tight and scarce that her body really begins to hurt. She puts her hand up to her chest and feels her heart swell. Then, a whimper. It unmistakably comes from the apartment.

Maya bursts. She bursts right through the door in an uncontrollable sea of rage. Paintings come down. An empty vodka bottle is swept off the counter. The apartment cannot survive her. "Jonas!" She screeches, tearing into the bedroom. He jumps out of bed, startled and not wanting to seem like it. "Maya..." he starts. "No! Fuck you! Fuck you and *that bitch!*" Maya leaps onto the bed and grabs the naked girl around the waist. All that Jonas can see is a hot current of fury and wet blond hair. Maya has pinned her to the ground in a matter of seconds.

"Maya! Maya, Jesus Christ!" Jonas takes her by the arm but realizes he needs all of his strength to deter his crazed girlfriend.

"Maya!" he yells again. In one hand, a fist of blond hair. In the other, she beats coconuts breasts until they're pink. Raw. Two women covered in hair and tears. Maya's face is war painted with streaks of black mascara down each cheek. She has covered the terrified, pleading face beneath her with black tears too. When

Jonas is finally able to pry her away, she still can't be touched.

"Get the fuck away from me!" Jonas backs away and crouches down on the floor to comfort the trembling body beside the bed.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” Jonas carefully gathers a blond pony-tail in his hand and pulls the sheet off of the bed to cover her naked body.

“Don’t you fucking dry her tears with my Egyptian cotton!” Maya screams, while grabbing the sheet off the bed and rolling it up in her arms. “Fine, if that’s what you want Jonas. I don’t give a fuck about you or that bitch!”

With a very expensive, very stained sheet tucked under her left arm, Maya storms out of Jonas’ apartment. It will take a long time to clean up. She charges out into the parking lot where she promptly dumps the sheet on the ground and breaks into the emergency Newports in her purse. She smokes without thinking, barely finishing one before she lights up another. By the time she gets home, she has gone through half a pack and vomits in front of her door. “Oh...*fuck* him,” she cries and collapses on the porch. In a brief moment of clarity, she decides to call Elise. No answer. “I wonder if I should just go over there...” Maya moans to herself. But instead, she lets herself into the house and crawls into bed. Her body crashes against the mattress and begins to slip into the solace

of sleep as she turns onto her side and sucks fervidly at a cigarette. She closes her eyes with the taste of smoke and salt water on her tongue.

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Elise

Our day is over. We only left the apartment once today. I wanted to drive over to Boulevard to see what it looked like, to really see it. We waited several hours after the news this morning to do that, since Maya told me how bad the traffic was. It looked the same. It's amazing what a clean-up crew can do. I think that I was able to smell the aftermath still. My boyfriend thinks it will hang around for a few days. Even though they were able to clear away all of the rubble and get traffic moving again, it would be impossible to erase the smells and terror that spread the moment the plane touched the ground.

We find ourselves in bed again, it's early for us, ten minutes after eleven, but we are both eager to get into what the crash derailed earlier. The x-box is unplugged, my eyelashes are still wet and matted from the shower. I am lying against Neil's

chest, with my legs stretched out besides his under the covers. I am holding his large cold feet between my own, smaller but warmer in socks, when he abruptly sits up, leaving my face in sheets. He reaches around for the remote and turns on the television. "Neil!" I cry, in an authoritative whimper. I really do not want to be put to sleep by the TV.

"No..." he reassures me. "I just need the light. Look at this floor. I gotta use the bathroom real quick. *Real* quick." He gets up and finds his way around a full ashtray and the remains of McDonalds among other garbage strewn around the room. The eleven o' clock news is on. When I realize what the anchor woman is talking about, my body freezes. I can feel myself wanting to cry but I can't even do that. My breath is stuck inside my throat.

"Neil," I whisper, "She's talking about Maya. Oh my god.

Oh...god."

"What baby?" Neil comes out of the bathroom and sits beside me on the bed.

The anchor woman's voice was like steel. They all sound the same--those news reporters, except when they're describing

someone that you know. Then they sound like cold, distant news-spitting robots--like this woman on channel three.

"A twenty-four-year-old woman died in her home in East Atlanta today. Police say the fire started when she fell asleep while smoking a cigarette."

"Oh...god." I grab onto Neil who is already holding me and listen to her with hard tears in my eyes. Fucking Jonas. I feel like I might choke.

"Apparently, the young woman, now being identified as Maya Soreno, died of smoke inhalation. Her body actually suffered minor burns, but by the time paramedics arrived, she was pronounced dead. She was found at around five o' clock, earlier today. Her family has been contacted." As soon as she says that, I lunge for the window sill. My hand only finds a dirty tissue and then I notice my phone face down on the carpet, partially hidden by a sock. One missed call, 3:34pm. It was Maya.

About the Writers

LaKetta Caldwell received her B.A. in speech communications from Southern Illinois University and her M.A. in educational theater from New York University. As a member of New York University's prestigious educational theater company, the Creative Arts Team, Laketta helped at-risk young people deal with "violence among peers, prejudice and racism, child abuse, and gang-related issues." Laketta's first produced play, *Colors of Youth*, sold out at every performance. Currently, LaKetta works as Lead Teacher for the second largest children's theater in the country.

Corey Green has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and his work has been featured in storySouth, Diner, RedActions, and Poetry Motel. Corey was raised in Bee Branch, AR, but is currently "eating up Atlanta like red velvet cake."

Chantal James loves love and life. A North Carolinian since the age of six, she feels richly and deeply connected to the South. She reads William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rita Dove, and David Eggers, among many others. She is a sophomore Philosophy major here at Spelman, and plans to spend next semester studying dreams and identity in Morocco. She is learning to be free; she is closer every day.

Tsipi Keller's short fiction and poetry translations have appeared in various journals and anthologies. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowship, of an Armand G. Erpf award from the Translation Center at Columbia University, and of a CAPS and NYFA awards in fiction. Her translation of Dan Pagis's posthumous collection, *Last Poems*, was published by The Quarterly Review of Literature (1993), and her translation of Irit Katzir's posthumous collection, *And I Wrote Poems*, was published by Carmel, Israel (2000). Her novels, *The*

Prophet of Tenth Street (1995) and *Leverage* (1997) were translated into Hebrew and published by Sifriat Poalim, Israel. Her novel, *Jackpot*, has just been published by Spuyten Duyvil (9/2004)

Arielle Le Grand has served as the editor-in-chief at *Focus* magazine for three years. She is a senior at Spelman College majoring in Comparative Women's Studies with a concentration in media studies. She writes creative non-fiction, short stories and poetry. She has represented Spelman College in poetry readings both nationwide and internationally, including a bi-lingual poetry reading in Panama City, Panama. Originally from New York, she hopes to return there someday and make a career as a writer.

Stefon Lowman is the co-creator of Creative Mindz, a popular poetry and art section in the *Famuan*, Florida A&M University's campus newspaper. The author of the novel "A Million and One Stories to tell," Stefon currently lives in New York City where he works at HBO and is at work on his second book. To date, Stefon has written over 700 poems.

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