

TIM KENNEDY

First Zinnias, 2015
Oil on muslin panel, 8 x 10 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

BEN BIRD First Date

Jeanine and Walter are sitting on a park bench in Montreal. Seven minutes into their date, Jeanine is debating whether or not she should take off her sweater. She doesn't want the act of taking off her sweater to carry the implication that she wants to sleep with him.

"Hey, are you all right?" Walter asks.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" Sweat tickles the stubble in her armpits.

"Oh, no reason, you just haven't said anything in a while and I wanted to make sure."

She's watching two children falling over each other and giggling in the grass. Snot hangs in a line down from the button nose of the smallest, a blond boy. Jeanine thinks of her mother, how she had treated the subject of grandkids like an industry—*Two, at least two, Jeanie! One boy and one girl, that's all I need. Two of a kind wouldn't kill me either.*

"Sorry I'm out of it right now, it has nothing to do with you. Promise." Jeanine pats his shoulder. "What were we talking about?" She likes his corduroy coat and pressed button-up, that he's trying hard for her. She could see herself lying in a bed with tangled sheets, her head resting on his chest. Maybe if he shaved his mustache. Probably not.

"I wanted to ask you a question." Walter pets the ends of his mustache with his thumb and pointer finger.

This will probably be the last time she'll entertain another one of Mark's friends from work, she thinks; not out of disdain for Walter, but rather a realization that the wall surrounding her desire to be intimate is near insurmountable.

"Shoot."

"Okay. What do you think squirrels, or really any road-kill, think before they get hit? Do you think they know they're about to die?"

Jeanine wishes for a brief moment that she had something phallic to put in his mouth. "Don't ask me that."

"It's a little late for that, I guess." Walter chuckles.

"What's up with you and bringing up death on a first date?" Jeanine pulls out her phone. There's a text from her brother asking how the date is going. She doesn't respond. "Fair enough. Mark tells me you're a librarian."

"That isn't a question."

"All right then. How do you like it? Working with books. Favorite author?"

Jeanine kicks a pebble across the concrete. She regrets not wearing sunscreen, and getting out of bed. "Here's one

*A monarch
butterfly flies
past Jeanine and
into the room.*

for you. Do you ever think that at any given moment there could be a news flash saying an asteroid is heading straight for us and there's nothing we can do to stop it? Or maybe there won't even be a news flash, just an impact and then nothing. Kind of like cosmic roadkill if you think about it. Except the earth would be the squirrel or rat or whatever and we would just be the fleas on its back."

"I've got too much to worry about without asteroids on my plate."

"Like what?" The beating sun is covered by passing clouds, divorcing the park from light.

"Well, for one, sometimes I think I'm just a brain in a vat and this is all just some experiment."

"You really think you're that special?" Jeanine smirks and raises an eyebrow. She likes the stubble dancing across his jawline.

"Life is strange, I'm not counting anything out." Walter shrugs and turns to look into Jeanine's hazel eyes.

"Can't argue with that."

Walter looks up at the sky and back at Jeanine. "I almost forgot," he says. For a brief moment she wonders if he is going to try and kiss her. Odd timing, she thinks. Walter's jaw is nearly unhinged. He takes his hand and shoves it into his open maw, as though he were attempting to swallow his arm. Jeanine watches with intrigue as the top half of his forearm disappears into his esophagus. Walter removes his arm, covered in bile, from inside of himself. The thorned stem of a single rose is clutched in his fist. Before Jeanine can accept the rose dripping with stomach acid, her phone begins to buzz repeatedly. Four separate texts from her brother line the screen:

Hey kiddo.

Grandma's not gonna make it this time.

Hope the date is going well.

Come now if you want to see her.

"I'm really sorry, Walter, I have to go. This has been strangely refreshing though. I hope I'll see you again."

Jeanine takes the rose, kisses Walter on the cheek, stands up, and dusts herself off.

"Need a lift? I've had a nice time too."

Jeanine begins to walk away, calling over her shoulder, "That's okay. Watch out for squirrels on your way home!"

Walter salutes her. She sees a cab parked across the street in front of a bagel shop and sprints toward it. A tall

man with blond hair and a pressed suit jacket walks in her path and they collide. Jeanine falls onto her back with a thud, clutching the rose in her fist. She tries to apologize, but the man spits on her shoes, runs off in the opposite direction, and yells in his thick French-Canadian accent, "Watch where you are going next time, fucker!"

Jeanine turns to flip him off but instead sees an orangutan bounding away, through the park. She gets to the cab and opens the door to the front seat. A large woman in a white tank top with red blotches scattered across her skin greets her. "Bonjour. Where are you going?" Her voice is soothing—like rocks rustling against each other.

"1650 Cedar Avenue." Jeanine asks out of reflex, "How long have you been taxiing for?"

"Just started today actually." The woman chuckles and puts the address into her phone. "The hospital, yes?"

"Yep." Jeanine slumps back in her seat and cranes her neck to look out the passenger window. She tries to imagine life without her grandmother. She and Mark will be the only remaining gatekeepers of their family's collective memory. She has been here, in the brief window before death claims a loved one, many times. Apparently, it never gets easier. She thinks of Walter and his goofy smile. The taxi slows to a stop as the towering structure of the hospital sneaks into view.

"How much do I owe you?" Jeanine asks.

The woman looks at the meter, then up to the hospital, and toward Jeanine's dripping rose with a look of pity in her eyes. "Why are you visiting the hospital?"

"My grandma, she's not doing well."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Go on then."

Jeanine does not remember getting out of the taxi, nor walking over the cobblestone pathway and in through the sliding glass doors of the hospital. She doesn't remember walking up to the receptionist and getting a visitor sticker with her name on it. A cold breeze of air-conditioning brings her back.

"No, I know my way. Thank you." She places the sticker on her chest and heads toward her grandmother's room—two rooms apart from where her mother was just a few years prior. The air is thick with Lysol, the scent of death covered up. Wet Floor signs are placed methodically across the overt whiteness of the hallway. Jeanine hangs a right and finds herself across from the nurses' station. A tall nurse

in scrubs walks by. Her blonde hair is streaked with gray and tied into a ponytail. Jeanine catches her name by the plaque on her chest.

"Pardon, Carolanne?"

"Oui, what can I do for you?"

"I'm here to see Marriane Joseph. I think my brother is in there with her but I want to make sure it's all right to head in."

"Of course, last I checked she was sleeping, but you're welcome to see her."

"How is she doing?"

"It seems her body is slowly shutting down. The doctor was just with her and says it's best to make her as comfortable as possible. There's not much else we can do for someone her age. Ninety is quite an accomplishment." The nurse puts her hand on Jeanine's shoulder and walks down the hallway. To Jeanine, old age is not a threshold one can breach to make death somehow all right.

A monarch butterfly flies past Jeanine and into the room. She pauses for a moment to admire its grace before following along. The butterfly is no longer there when she enters—only a small pile of ash on the floor. Mark is sitting on a small couch attached to the far wall underneath a framed photo of wildflowers. He is wearing his standard outfit: a blue-striped button-up tucked into black slacks with black loafers.

Marriane rests in the middle of the room, her back propped up by the angled hospital bed. She looks skeletal and withered, a drastic contrast to when Jeanine last visited her. *She was so skinny, your mother, just like you! I thought there was no way she would find someone to give me grandkids without any meat on her bones. But here you are. Now eat up, Jeanie. Food is getting cold!*

"She looks awful, doesn't she?" Mark puts his arm around Jeanine.

"Jesus, Mark, you scared me." She turns to her brother and wraps her arms around his side, burying her chin into his shoulder. "Where's John?"

"He's taking some time off to look after Emma and Louis, but he's going to have to go back to the office soon, which means I'm due for kid duty at any moment."

"I don't want to say goodbye." Jeanine lets go of Mark and clutches the side of the plastic bed frame.

"Don't be so dramatic, I'll see you next week."

"Shut up, asshole."

"Did you talk to the nurse?"

"Yeah."

"I take it she gave you the rundown. I said my goodbyes before you got here." Mark walks over and starts rubbing Jeanine's back. She shrugs him off and he continues, "I know it's tough, kiddo. But that's life."

"Life sucks." Jeanine caresses her grandmother's forehead.

"Sometimes, and sometimes it doesn't. Speaking of the doesn't, how was your big date?" Mark points to the rose Jeanine is still clutching.

"He's strange." She sets the rose down on the bedside table. "But I think I like him."

"Yeah, and so are you. He's cute, isn't he?" Mark nudges Jeanine with his elbow.

"I guess so."

"Are you going to see him again?" Mark pulls out his buzzing phone and his grin slumps into a frown. "Agh. It's John, I have to head out, kiddo. Love you."

"Yeah, you too."

"Say it back!"

"Love you, jerk." Jeanine can't help but feel swept up in familiar patterns when Mark is around. Her eyes fixate on the rise and fall of her grandmother's chest, her ears tuned to the shattered phlegmy breaths, wondering if the next one will be the last. She hums a song that her mother would sing for her when she felt overwhelmed.

*Do you realize that you have the most beautiful face
Do you realize we're floating in space*

Jeanine waits in the room for thirty minutes. She can't

*They pull into the
planetarium parking
lot and Jeanine
closes her eyes,
her lungs falling
and expanding
with caution.*

bring herself to get up from the couch. A balding nurse pokes his head in through the door.

"Hello, we are going to have to turn her soon. It might take a while, just a heads-up."

"Can you give me ten minutes?"

"Of course."

You realize the sun doesn't go down

It's just an illusion caused by the world spinning round.

Jeanine walks toward the bedside. She tracks the stream of wrinkles across her grandmother's face and grabs the rose, placing it on her grandmother's chest.

"Hey, Grandma, I know you probably can't hear me right now, but I'm here." Her voice comes out timid, as though she could be caught talking to an inanimate object. Tears remain lodged behind her eyes. "I just want to say thank you for everything that you've done for me and this family. I mean I wouldn't even exist without you. I couldn't have asked for a more caring grandmother. I will always admire how strong you were after everything you went through. I don't really know how to say goodbye to you, but goodbye. And I love you."

Jeanine leans over and kisses her forehead. It's clammy and cold as death. A small tapeworm crawls out of her grandmother's nostril and finds its way onto Jeanine's hand. She swats it away and runs out of the room. The nurse gives her a look of concern from down the hallway.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine, thank you. She was having some trouble breathing, are you sure she's comfortable?"

"Yes, it's all part of the process when the body shuts down. We will put her on more morphine if her breathing continues to bother her." He sighs, "It's all part of the process."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks for all of your help."

The nurse smiles with his mouth shut, his black sneakers squashing the worm on his way in. Jeanine walks out of the hospital, her grandmother's face stuck in her mind. She sits on the curb, watching people shuffle into the hospital. She thinks about the tiny universes encased in everyone's skulls and how her grandmother's has fallen victim to entropy. The bottoms of her fists slam on the concrete and for the first time in months she weeps. She holds herself with her bruised hands and rolls up the sleeves of her sweater. Her nose runs as she kisses up and down her arms. Three texts from Mark cause her phone to buzz.

Hope you're doing all right, kiddo.

John sends his love and the kids miss their aunt.

Saying aunt sounds so weird, are we old now?

Jeanine responds with a heart and opens up her conversation with Walter. She laughs reading his first message to her.

This is probably strange, well no. It is strange. I work with your brother and he wants to set us up. It's hard to find brothers setting up their sisters these days. Coffee sometime? Oh and my name's Walter, by the way.

She calls him; it rings for a few seconds before he picks up.

"I didn't think I'd be hearing from you so soon."

"Hey."

"What's up?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a bit tied up with work stuff right now. Everything all right?"

"Not really. Can you get me?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in front of the hospital. Look for the woman covered in snot."

"I'll be there soon." Walter hangs up.

He pulls up in a spotless white midsize sedan. Jeanine waits a few moments before getting up from the curb. Walter gets out of the car with a look of concern. She waves

him back toward the car and gets in the passenger seat.

"Can we not talk about it?" she asks him.

"No problem. Just know I'm open-eared if you change your mind. Where are we heading?"

"Do you know the planetarium? The one on Pierre-de-Coubertin?"

"I'm familiar, but terrible with directions. Do you know how to get there?"

"Not from here, but my phone does." Jeanine pulls up the directions and dictates how to get there over the classical music playing from the radio. On their drive, Jeanine finds herself staring at Walter, the way he taps his fingers on the steering wheel as he drives, his lively demeanor. They pull into the planetarium parking lot and Jeanine closes her eyes, her lungs falling and expanding with caution. She can feel Walter's eyes boring into her with curiosity.

She turns to him, placing her hand on his cheek.

"Thank you." Jeanine kisses him as Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* comes to a close. Walter's lips are chapped and sweet. His mustache tickles her upper lip and she pulls back a few inches away from his face. "Have you been eating watermelon?"

"I can't divulge that information to civilians," he says in a voice deeper than his own.

Jeanine scoffs and points to the entrance of the planetarium. "Shall we?"

"Let's." The sun is beating down on them. Jeanine takes off her stained sweater and wraps it around her waist. She looks at her reflection in the glass doorway and starts to laugh. An attendant greets them from behind the front desk. The front buttons on his vest look as though they could fly off at any moment.

"*Bonjour*. Just so you folks know, we are closing in ten minutes."

"That's fine," Jeanine says, and she hands him forty dollars.

The man pushes away the bills. "Don't worry about it. Just be sure you start at the observatory and work your way down since we will start closing there."

"I think we got in free cuz he was into me," Walter whispers with a grin.

"Shut up, we don't have much time."

Jeanine and Walter run up the stairs, her bruised hand blanketed by his calloused one. They reach the top floor,

panting and doubled over. The domed ceiling of the observatory is screened with a true-to-life replica of the night sky. Stars dance with their usual indifference. Jeanine digs her fingernails into Walter's palm. A small trail of blue light travels across the ceiling-sky, and for a brief moment Jeanine sees her grandmother's smile.

Ben Bird is a recent graduate of the Creative Writing concentration at the University of California, Santa Cruz. During his final year in the program, he received the Best Creative Writing Senior Project Prose/Fiction Prize for his short story collection *I Can Tell You How It Ends*. When writing is off the table, he enjoys spending time with his dog, Ari, playing tennis, and listening to music from Jawbreaker to Leonard Cohen.