



# CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW

Volume 14, Number 1  
our Winter/Spring 2009 issue  
featuring the winners of the COR Annual Literary Prizes  
[\(more information on the prizes\)](#)

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# CRAB ORCHARD

## REVIEW

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A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE WORKS

VOL. 14 No. 1

*“Hidden everywhere, a myriad  
leather seed-cases lie in wait . . .”  
—“Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”  
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# **CRAB ORCHARD**

## **REVIEW**

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### *A Note on Our Cover*

The four photographs on the cover are by Scott David Gross, a photographer and filmmaker living in Carbondale, Illinois.

### **Announcements**

We would like to congratulate one of our recent contributors, Adrian Matejka. Adrian Matejka's poem "Tyndall Armory," which appeared in *Crab Orchard Review, Volume 13, Number 2 (Summer/Fall 2008)*, has been awarded a 2009 IAC Literary Award from the Illinois Arts Council and he received \$1000.

## **The 2009 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize**

We are pleased to announce the winners and finalists for the 2009 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize.

In poetry, the winning entry is three poems—“Tinsel Halo,” “Gesture,” and “Ossuary”—by Tyler Caroline Mills of Silver Spring, Maryland. In fiction, the winning entry is “Bethlehem Steel” by Timothy Crandle of San Francisco, California. In literary nonfiction, the winning entry is “The Missing” by J.A. Bernstein of Los Angeles, California. Finalists in poetry are three poems—“Explication de texte de sable,” “The Sandal Maker,” and “The Muezzin of Vegetables”—by Derick Mattern and three poems—“Power Girl,” “Stretch Armstrong,” and “When I Was a Lounge Singer”—by Leah Nielsen. The finalists in fiction are “Water Mommies” by Toni Kay Cole and “Mountain Top Automotive” by Michael Schiavone. Finalists in literary nonfiction are “Ama” by Elizabeth Enslin and “Falling” by G. E. Henderson.

The final judge for the poetry competition was Allison Joseph, *Crab Orchard Review*'s editor and poetry editor, and the final judge for the fiction and literary nonfiction competitions was Carolyn Alessio, *Crab Orchard Review*'s prose editor. All three winners received \$1500 and their works are published in this issue. All of the finalists also chose to have their works published in this issue. Congratulations to the winners and finalists, and thanks to all the entrants for their interest in *Crab Orchard Review*.

*Crab Orchard Review*'s website has information on subscriptions, calls for submissions and guidelines, contest information and results, and past, current, and future issues. Results for the 2010 Literary Prizes (which are closed to entries) will be announced on September 1, 2009.

Visit us at:

[CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu](http://CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu)

## **The Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award**

*Crab Orchard Review* is pleased to announce “A Strange People” by Mecca Jamilah Sullivan (University of Pennsylvania; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) as the winner of the 2008 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award. We would also like to congratulate the finalists for the award: “Riding Waves” by Rachel Furey (Southern Illinois University Carbondale; Carbondale, Illinois); “The Five Points of Performance” by Christopher Mohar (University of Washington; Seattle, Washington); and “Heritage Park” by Michele Poulos (Virginia Commonwealth University; Richmond, Virginia).

The Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award from Southern Illinois University Carbondale is an annual award competition intended to encourage increased artistic and intellectual growth among college and university students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as reward excellence and diversity in creative writing. Each year, \$1000 and a signed copy of a Charles Johnson book will be awarded to the winner. The winning entry will also be published in the Winter/Spring issue of *Crab Orchard Review*. The award is co-sponsored by Charles Johnson, *Crab Orchard Review*, and the SIUC Department of English and College of Liberal Arts.

The 2009 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award competition is closed. The results will be announced on September 1, 2009, and complete guidelines for the 2010 award will be available at:

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## Convent Boys

THEY WERE THE CHURCH FAMILIES. HALFWAY DOWN THE HILLSIDE they picked blackberries along the wall of a stone church, and Cory and his mom and little brother were with them. When Cory heard a breeze, he looked at the sunny edge of woods at the top of the hill, leaves chattering in trees, blinking light. The convent boys lived in that birch wood, in a brick house with no windows. Cory had never seen the boys or the house they lived in, but kids in town told stories. The convent boys moved in darkness like the blind. They were disfigured and insane.

Along the church wall in the shade, the berries were wet and shiny in buckets. Cory and Matt drank cold pop, wiped sweat into their hair, and listened to their mom talk in her after-church voice. They couldn't feel the breeze—it swept over their heads—but they could see the world. Fields checkered in yellows and browns to the town of Laroy. The Snake ran along one side of Laroy, and the Clearwater, beyond dead railroad yards at the far end of town, made another border, and farther on was the desert mountain.

Cory's little brother reached for a blackberry, a big one, his fingers moving like scissors. Cory plucked it and ate it himself. All Matt did was eat what he was supposed to drop in his bucket. When Cory told him a story, he shut his mouth, listening.

"The boys used to try and break in our house at night," Cory said.  
"When you were a baby."

"Did you ever see one?"

"Sure. They crawled on our roof and peeked in our windows, all night. They wanted to get Mom."

"Where was Dad? He knew about them?"

"Let's go up and see one," Cory said, "then run back down."

"I'm not going to any bad place."

"I'll tell Mom you stuck a tack in the cat's back."

Matt's face crumpled, and he sucked a breath. "We're supposed to pick blackberries. Mom's going to make a pie."

“Are you coming?” Cory said.

“Yes.”

“Look happy for Mom. Smile.”

Matt smiled. Arrow tips at his mouth corners shined red and dark and wet.

Their mom stood in tree shade with a few of the nuns and ladies. She wore the yellow hat and the pink short-pants overalls, the outfit she had changed into after church. Cory hooked a finger in her pocket and tugged until she showed her eyes to him. Under the hat, her face was dotted in light.

“Is it okay to walk on the Stations of the Cross path?” Cory said.  
“We want to pray for Dad.”

Joanna let her fingers touch his spine. “Okay, but keep a close eye on your brother. And no more blackberries—we’re going for burgers at noon, with the families.”

“Heavenly Burger?” Matt said.

They didn’t need pretend smiles now.

“Close eye,” Joanna said. “Keep on the path.”

Joanna and Marty had fought this morning after church, but Cory was on his dad’s side. Marty said there was nothing wrong with drinking beer and watching the game even if it was morning. He was back on beer, but only two or three a day—he was fine. When Joanna and the boys got in the car to drive back to the convent, she slapped her visor up and said they’d better pray for that man. She and the boys had started at a new church, the convent church, and she wanted Marty to meet people. He said no to church and no to blackberry picking. Cory saw few dads here tossing berries into buckets. Most of them stayed home to watch the game and drink beer.

Cory and Matt ran up the hill and crossed the birch wood. In a field on the other side, in front of an apple orchard, they bent over and held their knees, breathing.

“I didn’t see any brick house,” Matt said.

“It’s probably buried.” Cory grinned. “They don’t like the sun.”

A breeze carried laughter out of the orchard. The apple trees stretched off in crooked rows.

“Let’s go see,” Cory said. “I’ll protect you.”

In the orchard, at the far edge, he knelt and touched a tree, looking across the boys’ lawn.

Their house was a big green place like a ski lodge, with a swing bench on the porch and a jungle gym on one side. There were many

windows. Kids came out the front door holding cookies and paper cups, regular kids and the other kind. On the lawn, in a crowd of kids and parents in church clothes, one boy jumped in the sun and shouted at the sky, like this day was something, then trotted to pine-tree shade, where he knelt grinning with shut eyes.

Laughter and piano music spilled out the windows. They were having a party. The boys' families must have come to visit.

Matt knelt and snapped twigs to make a pile.

"What kind of place is it?" he said.

"Like a jail," Cory said. "These boys are retarded."

"It looks like a fun place. Ten times bigger than ours."

"They have to share the place. We get our house to ourselves. They don't even live with their families."

"Can we go in?"

"I guess."

Matt skipped toward the house. Inside, they were walking through the crowd, past belt buckles and purses, when Cory spotted a table of cookies and tin cans of punch.

A crayon poster above the table showed a hill with a cross on top. M-shaped birds flapped in the corners. The poster said, in wild scribbles across the top, *Jesus Dead*, then in nice handwriting under that, *And He Rose Again*.

The high ceiling went higher in the middle like the inside of a hat. Up there, a window of the bird saint sprinkled purple light, but the window was little and too far up, hard for Cory to look at without his neck hurting.

There was a long table of party-hatted boys under four windows. One bit cake right off his plate. It was sunny over there. A squinting boy leaned over his chair arm like he wanted to find shade. Next to him a staircase curved to the top floor.

Cory and his brother drank grape punch.

"Let's go upstairs," Matt said.

"This is just some regular place. It's boring."

"They might have toys."

"They don't have anything good."

"Let's go see."

A man in the crowd lifted his cup for Cory and Matt to pass underneath it, and they walked up the stairs.

Most doors in the hallway were open, to bedrooms. In the rooms on one side, glossy wood floors gave back the bright windows. On

every door hung a different picture of Jesus and children and lambs.

They were halfway down the hall when a lady in a sundress came out of a room. She shut the door, the picture clattering. The lady's new tennis shoes were white as clouds. She'd want to send them back. They weren't church dressed, like the other regular kids.

"Having fun?" she said.

Cory smiled.

"It's such a treat having the families here," she said, "the house filled with song. The boys are really enjoying themselves. They certainly won't forget this day."

"Yeah, us too."

"Library's the last door on the right. Try and be quiet, though. We have a couple of bad-feeling boys on our hands."

She crossed to the other shut door, her tennis shoes squishing when she walked. Inside she talked to somebody in a very nice voice.

Cory and Matt peeked in the library, only books. At the room where the lady had come out, Cory opened the door, saw a couple boys inside, and brought Matt in and shut the door.

On the left, one boy sat on a bed, his face touching his knees, humming. The song wasn't one Cory had ever heard, and he sang front row in the Easter pageant. The other boy slept in a bed across the room from him, under a sheet. Big pines dimmed the room. There was a jug of ice-water on each bedside table, a jar of lilacs, and a bowl of wet grapes. Coke cans lay in a cooler of water and ice. Between tall windows, a fan swept air cooling one boy, then the other, like it was keeping watch.

The lady's shoes squished in the hall, Cory held his breath, and the noise faded.

"I want a toy to play with," Matt said.

The boy knelt on the floor. His eyes were wrong. He reached for a wagon under the bed and pointed at the sleeping boy, shutting his eyes to fight his words loose.

"He is my brother, Jimmy," he said. "He eats like a pig. His mouth is always open."

Above Jimmy was an Air Force poster. A fighter jet headed right at you, black helmet in the window, KEEPING US SAFE all around the borders.

"Are they American?" Matt said.

The boy opened his mouth, tipping his head back, as if he might finish his song.

“My brother is sick,” he said. “He smells.”

“How come you get such a nice house?” Matt said.

“Our parents give money to this place,” Cory told the boy. “The convent. Some to the church and some to the convent.”

“I don’t care if Jimmy dies,” the boy said. “I don’t care. Jimmy, are you awake?”

“He’s your brother,” Cory told him.

With a short, stubby-fingered hand, the boy pushed the wagon and pulled it. A kid screamed out front, and laughed.

Cory touched the window sill and stuck his head out. He couldn’t see anything. A half circle of side-yard pine trees covered the sky.

There was a half hour till lunch, six hours till dinner. Cory shut his eyes and rushed ahead to sundown. He and Matt and their mom eating pie and talking in porch chairs. Their dad walking the yard, playing guitar. Matt flipping cartwheels and the boats throwing colors on the river. Their mom clapping, laughing.

A good mood swung into Cory. He felt like acting polite. If he invited the boy to their house, his mom and dad would see what kind of boy Cory was. Other people would hear, too, maybe the new church families.

Cory untucked his T-shirt, with a monster truck on it, and mopped his face. “Want to come over and have dinner, someday?”

“Is it far getting to where you are?” the boy said.

“About fifteen minutes,” Cory said. “Do you have a baseball mitt? We’re always playing catch in the backyard with our dad.”

“No. I stay. I don’t like dinners. People talking to me in baby talk. I’m twelve.”

“I don’t want him over.” Matt wiggled his back against the doorknob, trying to get an itch. “You’d have to ask Dad first.”

“You know the word I like to say?” The boy laughed. “Fuck. I like to say it.”

Cory and Matt raised their eyebrows and giggled.

“You sure don’t get any supper now,” Cory said, “or any pie.”

“It’s bad to say it. I like to.”

“Shouldn’t he be punished?” Matt said.

“The nuns probably punish him.”

“What if he only says nice things around them?”

The boy scooted on his knees to a window and rested his chin on the sill.

“I want to go outside. It’s breezy. I want to play with the other

guys. I played for a while in the hot, hot. I got sleepy, but now I'm okay. I don't like the parents. I wish they was gone. I wish they was dead."

"Jeez," Cory said. "You shouldn't say those things. That's called being negative."

"I don't want to see the pretty parents."

The boy pushed the floor and stood. The boy standing was a lot bigger than he was sitting, but his eyes had a watery brown blink, and Cory knew he'd never hurt them.

Matt crossed his arms tightly, shoulders lifted, watching the boy's bigness. Under the sheet Jimmy coughed and sniffled in his sleep.

"My father likes me best," the boy said. "My brother sounds like a bad bird when he talks. *Creech, creech!*"

"That's not very nice," Cory said.

"My brother is not smart. My father likes me best. He's an Air Force pilot."

"No he isn't no Air Force."

"Ask my mom," the boy said.

"Stop lying," Cory said.

"They didn't bring her today. They fill her up with light today. They plug her in today. She lives in a crazyhouse." He giggled. "She says every other Sunday 'plug-in day.' Bzz. But you can ask her Tuesday. My mom says my father is a good pilot. My mom bring the pictures last week. We saw *Navy Seals* at the drive-in. You want to see pictures of my father? He looks like me, and he—"

Cory covered his ears, saying, "Beep beep beep" till the boy's mouth quit moving.

"Let's go back down," Matt said. "Tummy ache."

Matt touched his belly, pretending.

"You're not sick," Cory told him.

"Am too. Real bad."

"Go away and be sick," the boy said. "Go to your room till you are better."

"I want Mom," Matt said.

"Don't be scared," Cory said. "He won't do anything. Look."

From behind, Cory held the boy's arms and walked him to his bed and sat him down, then gulped ice water out of the jug, his teeth hurting, and poured the boy a cup. The boy panted between gulps.

"See?" Cory told Matt. "He won't do anything. He only says stuff. You keep a close eye on him. That'll be your job. He's a prisoner. We'll

call his side the Plug-ins.” Cory squinted at the boy. “What did you mean they plug your mom in?”

The boy touched thumbs. “Bzz. They kill her today, and she comes alive Tuesday. We talk Tuesday.”

“People are either dead or alive,” Cory said.

Matt was tugging on his brother’s shirt.

“What am I?” Matt said. “Am I the guard?”

“Yeah. Make sure nobody passes, unless they have good papers.”

The boy twisted his shirt bottom and chewed it. When he fell back on the bed, his chubby belly trembled like a water balloon.

“No belly button,” Matt said. “A blue hole.”

“It’s dryer stuff,” Cory said.

“Mine’s clean,” Matt said, checking his own.

“Sit up straight,” Cory told the boy. “You can’t go to sleep on us now.”

Cory pulled his hand till he was sitting.

Next to the sleeping boy’s bed, across the room, was a dresser with a big mirror attached to it. On the dresser were a plastic airplane soap bottle with a cap on the propeller, and a pilot teddy bear in goggles and jacket, a plant with furry red leaves like swollen tongues, and a spray bottle half full of water.

Cory sprayed the mirror blurry. His face looked like it was only skin. To see the boy better, he pulled a corner of the dresser a few inches. In the mirror, the boy’s shape sat quiet and still.

“Don’t move,” Cory said. “I’ll trace your face on the mirror, in case you escape us. Then our side will know what you look like.”

Cory dumped socks and photos out of a little drawer and used it like a footstool. With a finger he drew eyes on the mirror, and the boy inside of it almost looked regular. Cory turned and squinted at him. The boy touched his forehead to his knees, how he was when they found him.

“Hey, I said don’t move,” Cory told him. “I’m not finished drawing you.”

When the boy sat up straight, it was all wrong, Cory couldn’t line his eyes and the eyes he traced in the mirror. The eyes floated with no boy connected to them.

“Almost got you, but you moved,” Cory said.

“I want to go outside. Don’t want to talk to you.”

“Why don’t you act nice?”

The boy held his breath, tipped to one side, and farted. “Fuck. Fuck. I don’t like you guys anymore.”

“Arms-like-sticks,” Matt said. “Head-like-a-pumpkin.”

“You sound like a witch,” the boy said. “You be quiet.”

“I’m telling our dad,” Matt said. “He’s a corrections officer at the prison.”

“You are poor,” the boy said. “You are homeless.”

The boy laughed, only it wasn’t a very nice laugh.

“I’ll tell the nuns,” Matt said. “I swear.”

“I know who your dad is,” the boy said.

“Stop saying things,” Cory said.

“I know him.”

“Stop it,” Cory said, “or we’ll have to punish you.”

“You eat out of the garbage.”

“Should we tell?” Matt asked his brother.

“You can slap him. Go ahead.”

Matt took the pillow and hit the boy’s head with it, then stepped back to see what would happen. The boy sat blinking. Matt slapped his face with his hand—a loud, echoey clap. Although the boy made fists, he didn’t seem to know how to use them. He breathed quickly, snot flapping in his nose. Cory took a marble out of his pocket. The marble swelled the boy’s nostril.

He was the worst boy Cory had ever met.

“Once more, a little harder,” Cory said. “Hit him in the eyes.”

Matt punched his nose, but not hard enough for the head to snap back, like in the movies. The boy clenched his teeth, air hissing in and out. A little blood trickled out the one nostril, not gushing—just enough to make his bared teeth red. After that, Matt hit him only with the pillow.

The boy’s brother, Jimmy, lifted his head and squinted. He stretched under the sheet, smacked his lips, and pulled his pillow over his face.

The room went dark when a cloud passed, then brightened. The nuns and ladies must have been strolling, done picking. Soon everybody would go to the parking lot, where the moms would talk forever and the kids would tug at purses, saying, *Mohhhm, hungry, Mohhhm, starving*.

A referee kept time in Cory’s football watch. His arms were lifted to the sky. Lunchtime. Heavenly Burger. Cory would eat so much, till all of him was full.

“That went fast,” he said. “Already time to go.”

The boy started to choke, breathing spit. His face was a red, scared thing. He coughed hard and sucked air like he was drowning. It was a noise anybody could make.

Matt held the pillow, watching the boy. He took a step back. He looked at the pillow, spotted with blood like jelly-finger stains.

“Okay, that’s enough, Matt. Stop hitting him,” Cory said, even though he had stopped on his own. “Look what you did.”

Cory stripped off the pillowcase and wiped the boy’s nose, and stuck the folded pillowcase in his shorts. Cory would throw it away later. The boy lay down, losing half his face in the pillow.

“Okay, let me touch your face,” Cory said. “Lift up a sec. I need the marble.”

When Cory squeezed his nose, the marble plopped out red and sticky and bounced on the floor, rolled under the bed. The boy’s skin was soft and wet.

“Get the marble,” Cory told his brother, but Matt was lost in a wheezy cry.

“Go away,” the boy said.

“You can keep the marble,” Cory said. “My brother doesn’t want it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“You’re the one who cussed and said mean things. You’re lucky the sisters didn’t find out. You want me to tell them, right this second?” The boy didn’t say. “You should have kept quiet,” Cory told the boy, and touched Matt’s back on their way out.

Outside, Matt ran into the sun-speckled orchard. Cory trailed his brother’s tight-fisted zigzag. Matt’s backside flashed with bits of sun. When Cory caught him, he pushed him against a tree.

“Hey, c’mon, stop it,” Cory said. “Why are you mad? Try to smile.”

Matt ran off. At the blackberry bushes, he hugged their mom’s waist. She squatted, licked two fingers, and washed off Matt’s arrow tips. Joanna had been standing by herself in the shade. The nuns and church ladies talked under a different tree, buckets at their feet.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Joanna asked. “I was worried.”

“He fell out of a tree!” Cory said.

She looked at Cory long enough to disbelieve what he said.

“Clean your mouth,” she told him. “Where have you been all this time?”

Cory wiped the stains he hadn’t noticed in the mirror. “Are we still going for burgers?”

“Home is the last place I feel like going, but you disobeyed me—I looked for you on the path. You carry the last two buckets to the parking lot, by yourself.”

“Are you still making us a pie?” Cory said.

"This is for the bake sale next week—for the convent boys." She sighed. "Let's go. I'm out of small talk, and my cheeks hurt with all this smiling."

She lifted her buckets, her skinny arms flexing.

The church wall was hot and cracked in the sun. With the shade gone, the bushes were yellow and thin, and now they were empty. Cory saw his buckets. He knew they would be heavy to hold.

He followed Joanna, and Matt followed him, the three of them moving one by one down the crooked path. When Cory got home, he'd shout Sam out of his doghouse and play with him till he couldn't even breathe.

JOANNA PARKED IN THE GARAGE AND FANNED HER HAND IN THE living room—cigarette smoke, garbage smell. A nailed-up quilt blocked the front window. In his chair, Marty glanced at their legs, his eyes weaving. He tasted from his beer and grinned, as if he only now recognized them. Sometimes Cory pictured his dad at his work desk in a tie and glasses, even though he didn't wear glasses. Matt knelt in front of the TV and Joanna went upstairs to nap.

Cory let Sam inside through the kitchen door. Sam tapped his toenails on the floor and whined, licking his mouth.

"What a good boy," Cory said. "Hungry for lunch?"

He barked yes. Maybe he was a dog, but he knew things.

Sam was supposed to eat half a wet-food can for every dry-food cup, but Cory scooped two cans into his bowl. He tugged his ears the way he liked it. Sam quit eating and lifted his head, growling over his food. While Sam ate, Cory crossed the kitchen and squatted on his heels in front of the oven. He raked his inner arm with his fingernails.

After licking his bowl clean, Sam threw him a look. Then he got sick on the floor, a cake of brown sauce. He shook his head fast, with a barking noise.

"Nobody saw," Cory whispered. "I'll throw the pillowcase in the river."

Sam smacked his mouth, as if he didn't think much of Cory, and walked toward the pantry, where he liked to sleep.

*Toni Kay Cole*

## Water Mommies

IN THE KITCHEN, GERALDINE TAKES ANOTHER DRAG OF THE SALEM Light and peeks at the red framed bunk bed in her neighbors' backyard. She makes it a habit to spy on them. They are in mourning. The mother, Hoa, screams a lot. The father, Charles, left. The priest came by twice. On the third day of the funeral, the smell of fish oil had seeped from the mourners' kitchen window into Geraldine's. The top mattress is soaked through and the Power Rangers comforters lie beside the two life-sized He-Man pillows on the toy box. The night before, it rained and rained. During the two-minute periods when the rain slowed, she could hear the lonely sobs of their Mę. Everything in the yard seems just as she remembers it in their room—toys scattered around the bed, wrestling men in fallen positions on the top bunk.

Smoke spirals through Geraldine's thick nostrils. It starts to rain again. She is like one of their green toy soldiers—glued in one position. Instead of a walkie-talkie to her ear, a cigarette is between her lips. Her lungs need to feel alive because the morning is shifting into something colder, grayer. The toy box sits a few feet from the bed. At 7:03 A.M., she counts the steps their Mę takes to dump the last of the soldiers. She notices how their clothes make a trail to the garbage like grasping hands stretching across a river. Hoa is giving them back—removing any trace of their existence from the house. At 7:14 A.M., Geraldine watches how her foot gets tangled in Deluca's red shirt as she carries both toys and cloths on a serving tray. She stumbles a bit, but maintains balance nonetheless. She has a hard motherless shell with sharp edges. At 7:19, the rain beads off the bed railing and window ledge. Their Mę stops near the bunks, and makes a motion to touch, but doesn't. She starts to cry. At 7:21 A.M., Geraldine observes the downpour from the window and wonders if the tears are real. Because how can a woman who never felt like a mother mourn?

THREE WEEKS AGO THE BOYS WAVED GOODBYE. CHARLIE, DELUCA. On September 4<sup>th</sup>, they snuck into Geraldine Brandt's backyard and

drowned themselves. They stood hand in hand at the edge of the pool and said, “This is for G.G.”, then jumped in the water, hands flailing, legs kicking. They knew how their mother kept their room clean. *They were boys with too much messy.* That’s how she would say it—*too much messy.* Charlie felt bad when the kids at school talked about her jumbled language; Deluca didn’t care. She was their Mè. They had to call her this even though she didn’t like their questions or noise. They knew of her rules to sit still after school, and eat Chinese broccoli, lentils, rice, pork, and coconut meat for dessert. They knew how sad she was about missing Vietnam, and at the age of four tried to find it with a magnifying glass in their backyard.

The boys knew God gave them their Mè, but they loved their G.G. She played with them. For their sixth birthday, she bought them fake worms to put in their Mè’s rice bag. They knew their Mè wouldn’t laugh, and that she would call them bad cinnamon worms, but they did it anyway. On their eighth birthday, G.G. bought them He-Man pillows. The boys didn’t know who He-Man was but wrestled with him anyway. The boys knew Geraldine wished they were hers. She told them once, “We should all run away.” The boys said they would go. But on the day when they packed book bags with underwear and green toy soldiers, Geraldine just laughed. The boys knew she thought it was all a joke—that their Mè wouldn’t like that, and that they were too little to joke with anymore. For two days they whispered to each other how they hated her—how they would make her pay for her tricks. Charlie didn’t say much—he always used Deluca’s mouth. The boys knew the water mommy lived at the bottom of the pool, and she would show Geraldine where they belonged. They knew this woman loved them, but questioned why she never took them away.

As the boys flailed and kicked in the pool, they didn’t know their Mè was in the kitchen stirring duck soup, and that their father was in New York rating a hotel, or that Geraldine, at Smokey’s Bar & Grill, laughed so hard she choked from her own saliva. All they knew was that they loved their neighbor and wanted her to be theirs. In the water, Charlie and Deluca grew tired as their mother stirred in the broccoli and noticed a bug on a leaf, and as Geraldine choked so hard she almost cried. The boys knew the water mommy would reach them just as their G.G. said she would. So they resisted to stay afloat and permitted the chlorinated water to rush into their nostrils, fill their lungs, and sink their bodies. This was three weeks ago.

GERALDINE LOVED THE BOYS AS IF THEY WERE HER OWN. SHE WOULD baby-sit them on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays after school. They had karate on Tuesdays, and family day on Fridays. Patrick told her to have the pool drained during the fall months, but she liked how the ducks would wander over from the park and float around in it, making it murky like a lagoon. The boys were nine. When they were four, they found her sprawled out on the grass in her backyard blowing bubbles. They liked bubbles, and would sometimes blow with their G.G. Hoa didn't mind them spending so much time with their next-door neighbor. She did mind their noise, the chocolate smudges they left on her white Frigidaire, how they gave each other DDT's and made her watch. Geraldine liked it when the boys showed her these wrestling moves. Once she tackled Patrick in the backyard and wouldn't let up until the boys said he had tapped out.

The boys were funny. They would plant fake worms in their mother's rice bag. Geraldine would take them to Jerry's Trick Store on Carmichael Street to pick out blood gum, dummy worms, and slime balls. One time she put slime balls in Patrick's Stacy Adams. The boys loved her for that. When they told their father about her slime ball attack on Mr. Brandt's shoes, he laughed. Charles had a sense of humor, too. He was Black. He liked to watch *Mad TV* with the boys on Saturday nights. He was a AAA inspector in the hospitality industry. He had met Hoa at Northwestern University when they were both sophomores. She was an international student from Vietnam, and he was a volunteer in the Army Reserves. The boys hated whenever Charles had to go away on business. When he was gone, Hoa would make them stay in their rooms and play, if their G.G. and Patrick were out.

THREE DAYS AFTER THE BOYS DIED, GERALDINE HAD THE POOL drained. She sat in a white patio chair with big blue stripes that reminded her of intertwined seatbelts. She sat there waiting, watching, secretly hoping that the men Patrick had hired from A & P Pool Services would find something at the bottom of the pool or floating on the top amongst all the browned leaves and duck shit, something to remind her of the boys. Patrick said she smoked too much during these days. He complained how she was wasting away like a mother who had lost her children. Geraldine didn't care about hygiene, work, or wifely duties in the bedroom. But she was a mother—their mother—and that's what Patrick couldn't understand. How could he—when he was the reason she was childless?

It was clear after they tried for years to have kids God didn't think Patrick would be a good father. Children were blessings from heaven, but their nest was empty. Sometimes Geraldine had these dreams about Patrick filling white bassinettes with water that would overflow and soak into his white Aladdin slippers that curled to a point at the toe. Each time she remembered those shoes, and always woke in a thick sweat wondering—why water, why Aladdin slippers? For three years, they tried. Geraldine thought about adopting and wanted her husband to think about it too, but Patrick said he could never raise a kid that wasn't really his. At first she moped around the house in silent protest; when that didn't work she thought about artificially inseminating herself with good sperm, but when Charlie and Deluca crawled into her life five years ago, she knew her babies had come.

ON THE DAY THEY FIRST MET GERALDINE, HOA WASN'T SURE IF Charlie would go near the woman. Deluca saw her first and she knew that he had loved her instantly. But Charlie was shy like his father. He was a good boy, but Deluca would sometimes make him do bad things. He was the brave one with those curious eyes. She always wondered how she could have two boys so alike, yet so not the same. The first time Hoa held them she wanted to give them back. How could she mother them? What was to be expected of her? Charles said motherhood was a natural instinct, but she never felt it slide up her skin. Would she ever feel so much love that she wouldn't know how to contain it—like Charles said she would?

The first time Hoa was alone with them—two squirming cinnamon worms with flat eyes, wide noses, and needle-like black hair—she didn't know what to do. After two days, Charles said he had to go back to work and that she would be okay, but when they started to kick and cry Hoa was lost. She stared down at them feeling nothing. She wanted to run back to Long Xuyen so fast. She wanted to give them back. Charles' mother said, "Your boys are your life." She told her motherhood and babies were blessings from God. This woman had a lot of religion and faith and so much love for Hoa's husband that she had to believe her. But maternal feelings never slid up her skin.

When she first came to this country, Hoa just wanted to learn numbers and go. She felt so alone here. Everything moved fast, and when the people talked they talked fast. She missed her mother. She was certain nobody understood her because she didn't understand herself. On Sundays, she would take the Red Line to Cermak in

Chinatown to have dinner with her Auntie Three and Uncle One. They kept a small general store on Archer Street, but had rooms in the back as living quarters. Hoa's Auntie Three had traveled to Chicago when she was nineteen for school, but fell in love instead. She would write to Hoa's mother telling how America was different and good and how Chicago had small countries inside of it like Chinatown, Greek Town, and Little Italy. Once Hoa's aunt told how she asked her husband where was Vietnam Town, and he laughed. Her Auntie Three would help her with English, and when the boys got their first teeth, she said they should call her their *Mẹ*, and learn some Vietnamese.

DELUCA WAS THE FIRST TO SPEAK TO THE WOMAN. HOA WANTED TO see if Geraldine would shoo them away or blow bubbles in their faces. She looked wild and hairy, but beautiful. Her deep-curled hair was like a frame around her face. Stretched out on the grass she seemed very long with one arm buried under hair, the other dipped in bubbles. Each time she brought the wand to her mouth to blow, liquid dripped on her chin and slid down her neck. She didn't wipe it away. From the boys' room Hoa watched this. This woman looked like she could run very fast. Her brown legs looked greasy and smooth, and Hoa wondered if she put Crisco oil on them. Once Charles' mother said she put cooking oil in her hair, and it shined. This woman looked like her boys. Hoa knew if Geraldine wanted—she could take their picture, put it in her album, and tell strangers that they were hers. Nobody would question this. When the boys were born, her Auntie Three took one look at them and said that if she walked away from them in the middle of Chinatown, she wouldn't question it.

That day, Hoa watched how the boys stood on their tippy toes to peek over the greenery that separated the backyards. She saw how Geraldine made her jaws expand like a horn player, and the boys laughed. Hoa knew that when she beckoned Charlie and Deluca closer, they would obey. Neither one looked up at the window for her. Their little bodies just snaked through the bushes—getting hands and knees dirty. She stood at the window silent as they crawled to Geraldine with switching hips, and leafed hair. At that moment, Hoa knew her neighbor wanted them, and would give them love instantly—full and thick. This woman was a stranger to Charlie and Deluca, but they all laughed together like friends. Hoa wondered about Geraldine's children as she looked at the vacant yard with the oval pool with no plastic donuts floating under the sun. Deluca said something and

they all began to roll in the grass. Each time they turned, the boys' navels poked from under their shirts like the knuckle on a thumb. This woman would cherish them, and when all three rolled away to where Hoa couldn't see—something under her skin shifted, and she knew then Geraldine was their mother, not her.

AT 7:29 A.M., GERALDINE IS STILL GLUED TO HER SPOT AT THE window. The kitchen is messy and Patrick is an ass. These weeks have been difficult for her, but he doesn't care about mothers losing babies, nightmares of water and seaweed. He only wants normality, cheese egg breakfasts, and sex without the pressure of reproducing. Geraldine wonders if she will leave like Charles left Hoa. If she wants to go, he won't protest or cry as if a man unable to please. Even if he does beg she won't care. Patrick has denied her motherhood without feeling an ounce of guilt about his inability to reproduce. He doesn't care to fill the void left by the boys, and now that they're gone he says to her "forget." *Bullshit*. Geraldine isn't desperate for love, affection, or sex because she is in mourning and doesn't care if the sun ever rises. So yes, she will go, is what she thinks at 7:32 A.M. as she studies her neighbor, the mother of *her* boys, bringing T-shirts and pajamas in heaping armfuls to the trash.

MINUTES HAVE PASSED AND SHE SMOKES ANOTHER CIGARETTE, THEN the rain stops. The coolness of the tile becomes apparent when she shifts her feet. Geraldine thinks about her life as a smoker and wonders when did it happen, and why she didn't turn to the bottle instead? Salem Lights. She examines the green cigarette pack with the long trail of white smoke extending from the letter "L" in the word "lights." Today she wouldn't mind suffocating in a room trailed with white smoke just to get the ache out of her skin. Patrick says it's easier to cry, but all she does is smoke, stare, stand, and think. Many times she curses him to hell because he's unaware of how a grieving mother feels.

On the other hand, she wants to be obedient and follow the happy-wife performance her mother plays. Geraldine's mother is stuck in a bubble of love. Geraldine has yet to find her bubble. She married out of convenience, boredom. When Patrick graduated law school he said, "We should probably get married," and she said, "Okay." She didn't love Patrick with that *agape* love her mother said all women were capable of producing for husbands. She was okay with loving him at night, but didn't want to hear his yapping lawyer mouth in the morning. If she

wanted stale communication, she could have read the *Tribune*. When they moved to Evanston, Illinois five years ago, she wanted a divorce. After being married for only six years, she was ready for her wife-time to expire. Her mother demanded grandkids; she complained how she owed her “at least one.”

AT 7:53 A.M., GERALDINE STARES AT DELUCA’S RED SHIRT TUMBLED and wet. Hoa had left it there along with some others when she carried their remnants to the garbage, and stepped around them like pieces of shit or glue. Geraldine wants that shirt. If she sniffs it will she smell Deluca? If she holds the He-Man pillows to her ears will she hear them giggle? (These are questions without answers.) She turns on the faucet to put the cigarette out. Patrick is right—she does smoke too much. Her breath stinks, her heart hurts, and her bones need some prick of life. Patrick isn’t home. Before he left three hours ago he said, “If you don’t shape up soon, I’m not sure I can stay.” He wanted some response, but she just stood at the sink blowing out smoke.

At 7:55 A.M., Geraldine walks to the back door and twists the knob open. She needs to feel something better than any emotion associated with losing two boys who should have been hers. Outside, the wet concrete walk kisses her bare feet like little smacks on the sole, as she makes way to the greenery that separates the yards. The air feels strange on her skin. Instead of moisture, there is nothing left after the rain. She hopes Hoa isn’t peering out the window or preparing to bring more pieces of the boys from their room. If she didn’t feel such guilt in stealing away Hoa’s own flesh and bones, she would have stayed longer at the funeral to say goodbye. Three weeks ago, Hoa dressed the boys in white shirts and black slacks to lay them across the dining room table for family and friend visitation. “It was a Vietnamese tradition to have services in the home.” Charles had told Geraldine this when they stood on the front porch, and he offered her a cigarette.

In the yard, the black dirt welcomes Geraldine’s feet. She stands with her body amongst the greenery—her feet hugging wet earth. Unlike earlier, this is what she doesn’t see: two unmade beds, toys scattered on the ground, the pillows, and comforter on the toy box. Something is different. The Power Rangers comforters are on the beds nice, neat, and tucked with the pillows like little breathing bodies in the center of each bunk. The wrestling men are in upright positions on the lidded toy box. Who is responsible for this? Geraldine takes some pleasure in the dirt before moving on. She doesn’t squish her feet up

and down like a child; she just stands there in it. Just a little bit longer in the cold muck, she thinks. The boys had enjoyed the dirt as well, but liked to get down on their knees and press their hands in it.

Once after a mild rain, the boys wanted to make mud pies and Geraldine let them. In her kitchen, she stood in a chair at the cabinets to remove the china set her mother had given as a wedding gift. *Every good wife needs china.* They had gathered the dishes, some spoons, and spatulas to make pie. Outside, she had sat in the grass next to the boys; they were six and liked to talk with their hands. They liked to spread their fingers wide when excited, or make loose fists when angry. She watched how Deluca packed his bowl with handfuls of dirt while Charlie scooped his with a spoon. The boys set their bowls under the greenery to bake, and decided to paint their G.G.'s feet with mud. When they started working their way up her leg, she said the pies were ready.

After both Charlie and Deluca packed their muddy treats with leaves, they asked Geraldine for a story. This was something new. Most times when the three played the boys never wanted to sit still for long, though on this day they wanted more of her, and she couldn't deny them this opportunity of growing closer as a family. Looking at those two cinnamon faces, she scrambled her brain for a story and when nothing appeared she decided to improvise.

"Well, everybody's heard the story of the water mommy." She nodded her head toward the pool.

"Not us," Deluca had said.

She widened her eyes in surprise. "Really?"

"Unh uh, please tell us," Charlie said in a whisper.

Geraldine struggled to stifle a smile. "Humph, you guys are probably too young. Maybe I should ask Mę if it's alright."

"She won't mind," Deluca said nudging Charlie to agree. "We promise."

"I don't know," she said shaking her head. "We don't want to get in trouble do we?"

"Pretty please," they scream in unison, and she began.

"Many years ago, this place was a huge open space with sand and trees, and there was a body of water that covered all of our backyards," she said before Deluca interrupted.

"How many years ago, and what was it called?"

"I'll get to that in a minute." She looked at Charlie and he smiled. "So in this place that the people called Nefateria lived a woman who would sit near the water all day counting seashells. People would

always ask why she stayed by the water, and why she never showed her legs. But whenever this would happen the woman would simply respond ‘Seashell ivory or white?’ Years went by and the woman never moved from her spot on the sand by the water, and never kept her legs uncovered from the mounds and mounds of colorful silk cloth. With that, some people called her cocoon-lady. Then one day the woman witnessed the drowning of six children, but didn’t open her mouth to scream for help. One by one she watched how their bobbing heads sank into the murky water. The citizens of Nefateria were outraged because she didn’t try to save them. ‘Why did she refuse to speak?’ some cried when the children were never found. Even when one boy’s father stomped and broke all of her seashells, the woman didn’t speak.

“Two days later, she had disappeared and the people were still hurting, but relieved. Then a year after the drowning, the citizens of Nefateria gathered at the water to remember the children. There were those who cried and others who simply looked out into the water expressionless. All of a sudden the father who destroyed the shells began to see heads bobbing in the water. The people couldn’t believe it when they saw the children, all six, mysteriously rise from the water just as they had went in. When the boy ran to his father he told about the cocoon-lady, and how she had saved them. The parents were in disbelief, but the children all said she was a mermaid swimming at the bottom of the sea looking for ivory shells and lost children to return home. So from that day on, the people of Nefateria no longer referred to the woman as cocoon-lady; because over the year their children were missing, she had become their water mommy.”

The boys looked at Geraldine both amazed and curious. “Does she still live in the water?” Deluca asked.

Geraldine looked into their wide eyes and said, “Of course, she’ll always be there to bring lost children home.”

AT 8:00 A.M., DELUCA’S SHIRT IS STILL ON THE PATIO WALK THAT leads to the garbage can. Geraldine glances at the boys’ window, but the space where Hoa had once stood is empty. It had puzzled her why Hoa, who never objected to the boys being with her, would stand at their window and watch the three play. Once she sat in the blue and white patio chair spraying the boys with a water gun and caught Hoa staring down from that window. She would often refer to her as the lady with the blank face. Even though they had been neighbors for five

years, had shared birthday parties, and T-ball games, the two hadn't spoken more than a handful of words.

The boys' mother had refused to commune with her. She only gave these penetrating looks that raised the hairs on the nape of Geraldine's neck. Two years ago, Hoa waved her off with a sour expression. It was summer, but not a hot day. She and the boys had stretched out on the grass for a game of Connect Four. From the window, she had felt Hoa's spying eyes, and glanced up to see a slit of pale body. Charlie and Deluca had beckoned their Mè to join, and Geraldine waved her down with a smile. *Come on, it's a nice day.* The slit in the window didn't move, nor did it giggle back at the two cinnamon bodies who giggled at it.

IN HOA'S HOUSE, SHE ONLY KNOWS FOOD—WHAT'S GOOD AND HEALTHY like coconut meat. She used to know numbers, but not anymore. Charles and the boys took these things away from her—things she worked hard for when she came to this country. It doesn't matter now, boys gone—husband too. From the window in their room she stands looking down at Geraldine, the woman who should have been their mother. Hoa knows she could make their lives clean without spot or wrinkle, but her neighbor could make them laugh.

AT 8:03 A.M., GERALDINE WALKS THROUGH THE WET GRASS, AND picks up what she came for. It starts to rain and she feels alive. This is good—good and right. The boys are here. Charlie, Deluca. The boys are giggling—the sound of pool water, splashing. Charlie, Deluca. In a righteous spurt of life, she gathers the pillows on the bed, and rummages through the discarded clothes on the ground. These are her things—they were *her* boys. In her yard, she hears how the rapid drops of rain beat on the taut pool covering. She imagines how the water splashed the day they drowned, but she wasn't there—she was a water mommy unable to save. Lightning flashes and she feels Hoa's eyes, she can see her. Geraldine stares at the pale figure in the window, but knows nothing will change; there will still be this silence turning, clicking, ticking, and moving like rainwater through the air.

*Jeffrey Alfier*

## A Baghdad Sniper Dreams Himself Home

After the Sweetheart Dance, still in his full dress blues, he would bring her to his uncle's midtown bar, and take the wine from her hand, finish it at the same spot on the glass where she'd tilted it past her lips, lead them to the dance floor at the first slow song, then back to a smoky corner where the pulse between her thighs meets his vector of hope, wet fingers moving in warm hunger, that first glisten not enough to save him.

*Kirsten Andersen*

## Rhode Island

I'd forgotten the black lawns,  
the long winters with no snow,

the buckled concrete along the roads  
this far removed from the marina

running along the land  
between the prison and the mall

where my walk home  
from the middle school was straight

across the avenue, exposed  
to the cries of high school boys

who were speeding in their cars.  
I kept my short bangs curled

and lifted like a cloud,  
wore a choral jacket, dragged

a book pack, and spun to face the girls  
who broke a sand bag on my back.

The city pool was an empty bowl  
of old cannonballs and belly-flops,

facing the lot where I went to meet  
my father on his break, leaning

against his car door and looking  
at his watch. The parking lot was full

*Kirsten Andersen*

of men at four o' clock; the backdrop  
made of metal parts, pieced

into submarines for purchase  
by the navy. I saw my father

take a sip from a paper cup of coffee,  
lift my house key in the air, watch me smile.

## Blood

In our family portrait, the east coast hangs back,  
hooded with hair on its lip. Jonathan calls it grit,  
a series of common crimes, where thirty-three subjects  
form a moving reprieve from the doom of perfect behavior.  
Open the door to see the dogged face of Joan,  
notice that no one is slow and uncertain. Christopher  
modifies himself; he lights a smoke and makes up stories.  
My sleepy mother says it's been awhile. Stuck and clotted  
to my brother's face by early morning? Call it blood.  
Call him strange bait, sad owl at nightfall, it's all sinking  
out of my sight. Suzanne is foxy and unnatural,  
exploding out on top. Her Catholic school friends  
consider the myopic topics, *whisper the name of which boy*  
*you would be willing to lick in private.* On the back lawn  
the ghost of my grandfather chain smokes, dawdles in circles,  
points a finger that crumbles. My brother is my lost dog,  
a legacy of human routine—according to Paul,  
I'll have to let him loose again, all aflutter in the world,  
perforated with shiny hooks. Take a look at the scar  
four inches in length, the width of a worm spliced open  
in the dirt, rictus-like and on my father's face—a man  
who must be seated at the sight of a single needle, or any blood.

*Nin Andrews*

## The Other Girl

It was how the doctor said it, statutory rape, that I remember, his words like cold metal on bare skin, his hands wrapped in latex gloves. The nurse kept saying: *breathe. Don't scream. Hush.* I couldn't help it, I said, biting my lips. Afterwards I took so many showers and walks around my ceiling. I was afraid to answer the phone or see anyone who might see me back. Instead I thought of long lists of things I should have done or said, and that girl outside, the one who knew nothing of this. She who would never see or feel as I did. She stayed outside long after that summer day when the dusk bled all over the trees and the darkness bloomed inside me. I knew why they called it statutory then. Unable to move or scream, a statue was what I'd become. No matter how hard I tried, I could not step outside. I could not find that girl, the one who used to chase down city sidewalks, racing balls and skipping over the cracks in the concrete. The one who would never know the thing inside that hurts and screams and aches even as it wants.

## Night Circuit

All around me the sound, like dropped coins,  
of people talking. Everything by candlelight.  
I stood, knocking from my table two knives,  
a tumbler and magnolia blossom centerpiece.  
As heads turned, I quicked outside to join

the trembling rains and white-eyed thieves.  
Collar up for the chill and wet in those streets  
of tire-blackened flagstone. The ring glowed  
cold on my right hand. I resolved to walk  
with the wind until it changed. In the park

a mile down, I courted the red-flecked ilex;  
a boy stalking by with borzoi showed  
me his teeth. Then passed. I opened my flask  
but it was dry. Tracing the ice-eddied edge  
of the night-quiet river, I found the truest web:

a woman with my name in a rain-sopped dress.  
Walking to her, waking, hating all distance,  
forswearing all others, forsaking grace,  
I sank into that silky harbor. Saw the whole  
of things—my own life: thin as an instant.

*Traci Brimhall*

## **Concerning Cuttlefish and Ugolino**

You are not surprised when I tell you  
a spotted hyena at the zoo is killing itself,  
gnawed from paw to knee, and no one

can figure out why it wants  
to destroy itself. You tell me you found  
a fox's leg in a spring trap once.

You understood that a fox, in all its wildness,  
would chew through its tendons, snap  
its own bones. There are parts of ourselves

we can learn to live without.  
You tell me about a woman you saw today,  
a sadness you recognized through her veil,

and you'd wondered why, in grief,  
it's necessary to hide your face, as if  
death leaves teeth marks in your cheeks.

I wonder if hunger is stronger than grief  
and tell you that if a cuttlefish is starving,  
it will eat one of its three hearts to survive.

And I wonder if, after they offered  
their bodies to their father, Ugolino's sons  
cried as they crawled around him in the dark,

if, before he took his hand away from his mouth  
and strangled them, he studied them, deciding  
if his teeth were strong enough

*Traci Brimhall*

to eat through the red fever of the body.

When I look at you, I know you're right.  
What matters is what's left of us.

*Katie Cappello*

## **Supper Time**

She's changed her curtains from blue to yellow  
to bring spring into the kitchen.

Sitting at the window, smoking a twisted cigar,  
she lists *coriander, lavender, bergamot,*  
all the herbs growing in her window box—  
peppermint, which will soothe  
an upset stomach, abort a baby.

She dreamt a hundred cockroaches  
burst from the flowered wallpaper.  
Now she eyes the progress of a Park Service truck  
spraying the trees for mosquitoes.  
Poison coats the old oak,  
the skin-like trunks of myrtle trees,  
fronds of the banana plant,  
those monstrous green lips.

She thinks *gas mask, evacuation,*  
*wallpaper, pesticide, smoke*  
streaming from the black cigar,  
short and wrinkled like her fingers,  
feet worrying the wood floor.  
Sausages are sizzling in the fryer.  
She will add them to the beans for flavor,  
fat sinking into rice,  
juice so thick she'll use a fork to eat.

## A Changing Spell

On her way to Natchitoches,  
the cypress overcame her  
more than beads hanging from branches.

The horse kicked open its trailer door,  
dragged blood along the stretch of pecan trees  
past the men drinking Dixie beer,  
waiting for crabs to drag the rope.

Now she boxes horse muscles,  
what's left hanging from leather,  
labels them foreleg, flank, shoulder.

White lions mark the shotgun house  
sinking into camellia, confederate jasmine,  
a blue door to let luck in, knock three times.

She hands the pieces through the window,  
holding back blue curtains.

Miss Jenny Croix smiles, yellow teeth  
forming out of white tongue—  
loves the way the fresh blood  
clings to her skin,

how the dead becomes smell  
settling into membranes,  
horse being more potent than goat.

*Katie Cappello*

*That's how it works, says Jenny Croix.  
You carry your death with you.* Then

with ashed thumb and forefinger  
she marks a third X on the altar.

*Deborah Casillas*

## **Field of the Star**

*Santiago de Compostela*

In my mind I see it, not  
the actual cathedral, a towering  
mass of weathered stone,  
but as a star hanging in a blue sky  
domed over a field of grasses,  
bright poppies like scattered flames,  
in the center a white horse grazing.

I picture the field in daylight,  
the way we walked the road  
marked with a yellow line  
painted under the red and white  
stripes we followed  
on this most revered  
of pilgrim routes. We didn't  
recognize the yellow arrow  
that told us what path we  
followed through country fields  
and past the long-haired sheep  
until we saw the painted cockle shell.  
Bright yellow on a blue marker  
freshly nailed to a tree, the sun  
burning overhead. We carried  
no water, so the cherry tree  
in a nearby pasture was a gift,  
its tiny fruit releasing sweet red  
juice in our parched throats.

There's more: a young pilgrim  
traveling the lonely northern way,  
a white shell tied to his pack,  
the cathedral painted on one side,

on the other, the cross of *Santiago Matamoros*, St. James the Moorslayer,  
the cross made in the shape  
of a blood-red sword.

*Compostela*, as a star, a field  
of red-orange poppies,  
a saint's pure white horse,  
wind lifting its mane.

## Nasturtiums

How can you not love this light? Gold clarity at fall's end—a hard frost due, herbs and flowers ready to blacken and wilt. One more cold snap and our birch will harden into winter silence, last leaves gone, branches etching dark tracery against the sky. Even now the nasturtium leaves are wounded, bleached and limp, though the flowers still bloom orange, gold, deep red, a muted, cream-flecked pink.

They're like stained glass windows, as if the petals were translucent. You think of sunlight filtered through leaded panes, remember the cathedral floor in Burgos tinted red, bronze, indigo. In Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes," moonlight shines through a casement window, touching Madeline's hands with rose and amethyst. When the lovers flee, they leave behind drunken revelers, the beadsman sleeping by cold ashes.

Last May below the cliffs facing Nine Mile Rock, the sandy ground was choked with nasturtiums and pearl-white calla lilies. On the beach waves sprayed foam above the rocks, nasturtiums twined green tendrils around beached timbers of old shipwrecks, jeweled flowers tucked beneath the scalloped leaves. Here in the high desert, the freeze has come at last, the garden a sodden tangle of stems and leaves, dimpled seeds spilled out like birds' eyes on the icy ground.

*Timothy Crandle*

## Bethlehem Steel

IT WAS DECEMBER, BUT THERE WAS NO SNOW. THE BROWN FIELDS LAY bare and exposed, littered with the bent, dead things of the past year. Leafless black trees stood, silhouetted against the gray of the sky.

Meg and I were in no hurry. About an hour out of Ann Arbor I pulled off the interstate, driving the two-lane highway instead. This ran alongside the old railroad line from Detroit to Chicago, through towns that hadn't changed much in generations. Mom-and-pop stores looked out on main streets decorated with Christmas lights and wreaths. A young boy with a fifties buzz cut and a missing tooth grinned at us from a faded billboard painted onto the siding of a barn.

We didn't speak much along the way. Meg had brought a collection of cassette tapes and she distracted herself with these while I drove. Breathy, chant-like music accompanied our passage through the countryside.

We passed a little church, one that reminded me of the place my parents prayed every Sunday. A few weeks earlier, we'd talked about visiting them on the farm where I'd grown up and then decided against it. I'd imagined my father extending his thick, heavy hand toward Meg as she darted in to kiss alongside his cheek.

"Maybe we should get back on the freeway," Meg said. "We don't want to be too late."

I found a ramp and swung back onto the interstate. As we passed through Indiana, the steel mills loomed over us, concrete towers rising up from the gray of the earth. The traffic grew thicker and there were more trucks, engines laboring with the weight of their burdens.

"That's the company my father worked for," Meg said, indicating a truck marked "Bethlehem Steel." We followed along behind it for some time, the great mass of the truck clearing the way before us. I had met Meg's father a few weeks earlier in New York. It seemed odd to me that a fragile man whose only work had involved pushing a pencil had made a fortune in the steel business.

"We're getting close now," I said as we crossed the border into Illinois.

Meg turned toward me and leaned against the divider between our seats. She rested her hand there. “I want you to know that it’s going to be all right,” she said. I looked to the road ahead, both of my hands on the wheel.

MEG’S UNCLE WAS TRAVELING IN EUROPE AND SHE HAD ARRANGED for us to borrow his apartment in Chicago. The doorman was expecting us. He stood up behind his polished wooden station and handed Meg an envelope with the keys. When he pushed a switch hidden beneath his desk, sliding glass doors opened before us. “Top floor,” he said.

Some effort had been taken to make the elevator look like any room in a well appointed old building. A soft light emanated from behind an ornate lip of wood overhead. The round brass handrails mounted against the polished walnut walls brought to mind the image of a coffin that had been turned inside out. Meg and I stood against opposite sides of the elevator and stared ahead.

A single red doorway marked the end of the small foyer on the top floor. Meg unlocked the apartment, dropped her bag and punched the code into the alarm. I stood on the threshold. When the alarm stopped beeping, I stepped inside.

The apartment was cold and dark. I could see through it to the lights of the city outside. Meg flipped a switch, flooding the space with light, and the city disappeared into our reflection.

“My aunt runs an art gallery in the Loop,” she said, pausing before a painting of a pastoral landscape. I stood beside a bronze of three men, exorbitantly tall and slender, walking one after another toward their reflection in the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Meg walked down the corridor and into a bedroom. “Amazing,” she said. I followed after her. She was staring at a small freestanding mobile enshrined like a museum display. Bits of metal dangled from swinging arms. “Alexander Calder,” she said, whispering. This name meant nothing to me, but I nodded as if it did.

Without looking at me, she mentioned the likely value, more than my parents had paid for their house. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “There’s life in it, even when it’s still.” She leaned toward it and blew, a whisper of breath. The metal shards moved gently, like leaves rustling on a tree.

It was beautiful but it could have been made from a beer can. It was a thing made to occupy the mind of a child, shining metal, empty motion. And yet I could see how fragile it was, how easily it might be destroyed.

I took a step back and stared at Meg. If she was nervous, it didn't show. After a few seconds, when the metal stopped moving, she blew across it again.

"I'm going to check out the liquor cabinet," I said.

I poured myself a short glass of whiskey and strolled through the apartment, fingertip tapping along the wooden wainscoting. In the bathroom, I touched the stone countertop, the gleaming brass fittings.

When I returned to the main room, the sliding glass door was open. Meg was standing at the balcony railing. "Come on out," she said, looking back over her shoulder. A cold draft blew through the apartment and I felt a shudder run through my body. I looked away from the city and back at the reflection in the windows.

"I'm going to stay inside," I said, sliding the door shut. I sat down on the couch, slouching into its comfortable depths. Meg leaned against the rail, oblivious to the cold and the height, staring out into the night.

A minute or two later she came back inside, cheeks flushed. "We'd better start," she said.

#### PENNYROYAL OIL. BLUE COHOSH. YARROW.

I arranged the sacks of herbs and the dropper bottles along the marble countertop. Meg brought down a white porcelain teapot from the glassed cabinet. She set this onto a silver serving tray and loaded it with a shining strainer.

A few days before, Meg had shown me the instructions she'd gotten from a friend. Our discussion was brief. We resolved not to mention it again and we both held to that resolution, steeling ourselves against any change of heart. I rode along in silence while she drove to a health food store in the next town. After we confirmed that everything we needed was available, she bagged the herbs, placing them in the basket cradled on her arm. Most were stocked in wooden bins marked with colorful, hand-drawn renderings of leaves and plants, giving the whole store the flavor of an art project. Others were kept in vials inside a locked glass case.

Signs posted by each herb described possible applications. One sign read: "Blue Cohosh was used by Native American women to induce menstruation and ease the pains of childbirth. This herb should not be used by expectant mothers except during the last month of pregnancy."

I stood beside Meg at the checkout as she unloaded the basket, bags scattered on the conveyor, vials standing like pawns in a chess game, nearly toppling each time the belt jerked forward.

The cashier held one hand before her like a gate and with her other hand she touched the bag of blue cohosh and then the vial of pennyroyal oil. “Be sure to read the cautions on these,” she said.

“I did,” Meg said.

Meg arranged four cups in a row on the countertop and began measuring the herbs and oils into each cup. “It’s perfectly safe up to four pots,” she said. She touched two fingers alongside the first of the four cups. Then she pointed at the bag from which I’d brought out the supplies. “Afterward, be sure to collect the dregs.”

Meg fired up the stove, filled a copper bottom teakettle and placed it onto the blue flame. We waited, listening to the whir and hiss of the water as it heated, the metal as it strained.

She touched the wooden handle of the kettle. “You can feel it before it boils,” she said. Just as the steam began to rise from the mouth of the kettle she took it off of the stove and poured it through the first measure of herbs into the teapot. The fresh scent of the herbs gave the concoction an innocent aroma, not unlike a walk through a garden, but as the tea steeped, the scent changed. When it had brewed for a couple of minutes, I poured a cup, catching a breath of the harsh, metallic scent as I passed it to Meg. She brought it to her lips, took a small sip, and wrinkled her nose. Seconds later she continued, drinking slowly.

Each time she finished a cup, I looked toward her. Each time she nodded toward the empty cup, and I poured another. After a few minutes, I pressed my fingers to the side of the pot. It was warm to the touch.

She went to the bathroom and when she came back out she looked pale.

“Any change?” I said.

“I think I’m going to lie down,” she said. I freshened my drink and followed her into the master bedroom. She was lying on the giant four-poster bed. I placed the serving tray beside her on the night stand.

I waited. She drank. After a few minutes she rose and padded barefoot across the wooden floor to the bathroom, easing the door shut after her. When she returned, I watched expectantly as she slipped out of her sweater and back into bed. I pulled up a chair and sat down beside her.

“How long will it take?” I asked.

"It could be quick or it could take hours," Meg said, "and sometimes it doesn't work."

She rested the teacup in the hollow above her breast, just below her shoulder, and she moved the cup until she found the point of balance there. Though Meg was still, the cup shifted with each breath she took, and, between breaths, there was a lesser movement with each pulse of her heart.

The pot was empty. "Should I make more?" I said.

She nodded.

While the water heated, I dropped a couple of ice cubes into my glass and poured it full.

A FEW WEEKS EARLIER, MEG AND I HAD BEEN DRIVING TO NEW YORK for a weekend away from our studies. Meg knew the city well and I was looking forward to the sound and the glow and a few hours of another world, prowling the streets with her through the night and as the sun came up. We were driving late, barreling through the mountains somewhere in Pennsylvania, making time. The taillights of a truck glowed red about a quarter mile ahead and other than that, the night was black.

I'd been driving for a few hours. I was starting to get tired, when, in the flash of my headlights, as clear as a sign from heaven, I saw what I was sure was a man. Even in the split second that he appeared, I felt my heart hammer against my chest and I knew there was nothing I could do to avoid hitting him. He slammed into the front bumper on the passenger side and flew over the hood of the car before I could do anything to stop it.

I slowed the car and pulled onto the shoulder. My pulse was racing, my hands sweating. I tried to grasp what had happened. Could a man have stumbled onto this deserted stretch of highway? There were no other vehicles around, and it seemed unlikely that a man would have walked into the middle of the lane in front of oncoming traffic. I looked toward Meg. She was shaking. "Did you see his face?" I said.

"I saw something fly over the top of the car," she said. "It could have come straight through the windshield."

And I realized then how lucky we were. Both Meg and I were unharmed.

I backed up along the shoulder of the road, trying to see into the darkness behind us. I heard the crunch of tires on gravel, but I could see nothing except the red glow of our taillights. Meg and I got out and

examined the bumper, looking for blood or flesh or bone that would indicate that this was a living thing with which we had collided. But there was only a crumpled place on the hood of the car, a gouge in the chrome of the bumper.

"It's all right," she said. "It was probably just the spare tire from that truck." She turned and got back into the car. I squatted, squinting against the glow of the headlights. I ran my fingers along the bumper, the smooth chrome and the roughened scar where we'd made impact. And then I was certain that Meg was right. It must have been a tire, dropped spinning onto the highway by the truck ahead of us.

But I was so shaken that we stopped at the next seedy motel and lay down for a few hours. All of that night, pressed between the rough white sheets, I kept seeing the shadow of the doomed man, hearing the sickening crunch of bone against metal, and flinching as he flew over the top of us and into his fate.

The next morning, while Meg was still lying beside me, I asked if we could turn back. "It won't be long before we'll need to head home anyway," I said.

"Please don't worry, baby" she said. She nuzzled against me, her lips touching my neck. "I'll make sure it's all right."

MEG WAS NOT IN THE BED WHEN I RETURNED WITH THE SECOND POT of tea. I turned on the TV without the sound and stared into the flat world of a show from the sixties, a black-and-white world where the mother cooked dinner every evening and the father wore a jacket and tie while exchanging witticisms with his politely rebellious sons. The muffled sound of Meg retching came from behind the closed door of the bathroom.

Seconds later she returned and lay down, slipping beneath the sheets as if nothing had happened. The whole world, hills and mountains and ocean, all were contained in the folds and crevices of the sheet that covered her like snow. She raised the cup to her lips like a chalice but it was empty. She placed it on the tray before me.

"Keep pouring," she said.

"I'll add some honey," I said. "Maybe it will help the taste."

"Can you turn off some of the lights?" she said.

WHEN I BROUGHT IN THE THIRD POT OF TEA, MEG WAS SHIVERING, even though the room was warm.

"How are you?" I said.

“Sicker.”

“Do you want to stop?”

She didn’t answer right away. She looked out the window. “Maybe I shouldn’t have started,” she said, “but I can’t stop now.”

I waited for her to meet my gaze, but she didn’t. “Did you know it was going to be like this?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would it have mattered?” she said.

“ONCE MORE?” I ASKED, WHEN THE THIRD POT WAS EMPTY. SHE NODDED.

A few minutes later I returned, silver tray held before me. I sat down beside her on the bed, but she didn’t reach for me or look up. The white of the sheets formed a barrier that remained between us. She nodded toward the cup and I poured.

Some minutes later I lay my hand alongside the teapot. It was empty and cold.

“I don’t understand why you did this,” I said.

She looked at me then, our eyes locking for the first time that day.

“Why didn’t you stop me?” she said.

I turned away. After a few seconds I walked out of the room and stood at the door to the balcony, fingertips touching cool against the glass.

I slid the door open and felt the cold blast of the night air. The building was moving, a slow, almost imperceptible swaying in the wind. I crossed over the threshold, looking first at a nearby building and then down at my feet with each step. I moved forward until I pressed against the place where she had stood, hands gripping the cold metal railing.

The light was different now. The rush of the day was ending and a quiet was settling onto the streets deep in the chasm below me.

To the north, a constellation of jets flickered, queuing up for their arrival into O’Hare. To the south, the shoreline of Lake Michigan was visible, a giant crescent along the edge of the dark mass of water, marked by a thinning line of red taillights. My eyes followed the line, out into the distance, to a point where darkness and light merged into one, where the dark of the water glowed with the radiance of the land and the city and the light of the night.

I felt my breath and the wash of blood within my body. Isn’t it

a strange thing, how the pounding of our heart is the opposite of reassuring? For the awareness of it can only serve to remind us of how it will one day stop.

SHE WAS LYING FLAT ON HER BACK, ARMS RESTING BESIDE HER, PALMS upward. I stood at the foot of the bed.

“It’s done,” she said. “It’s finished.” She was looking up at the ceiling.

I breathed out, a long, full sigh. I watched her and waited. She didn’t move. She simply continued looking up.

“Just rest,” I said. There were beads of sweat on her forehead. There were tears rolling down her cheeks. “It’s going to be all right,” I said. I clasped my hands together. “There will be other chances.”

I looked at the windows, trying to see out into the darkness. But instead, I saw only the image of the room reflected back at me. In the reflection, I saw myself, serving tray in hand, bringing pot after pot of tea, long after Meg stopped drinking.

And then, far out in the darkness, something flickered, a little light moving like the gossamer flash of a firefly. I stared into the blackness, trying to understand. After some seconds I realized that I was still seeing a reflection from inside the room where I stood. The metal leaves of the Calder were trembling, drifting on the air, touched only by the cold breath that passed through the room as I returned.

I knelt down at the foot of the bed. I touched my forehead to her ankles, felt the thin white sheet pressed between us. I grasped her feet in my shaking hands, pressing my thumbs into her soles. And I waited for her to speak.

*Michael Nye*

## Projection

MONICA WATCHED THE REEL CANNIBALIZE ITSELF. THREE LARGE silver platters slowly rotated. From its inner ring, the top platter unspooled the film, sending it up a slender black rail and into a canted console, where the light from the projector shined stalwart; below it, the just projected film reeled back toward the platters, first to the lowest, and then to the middle. The projector purred softly as it wound.

Monica ran all eight films by herself, working, she estimated, one actual hour out of every ten. Standing, she looked through the small window into theater four. It was the smallest theater and always showed old black-and-white films, ownership's weak attempt at nostalgia. It was also always empty. But now, one person sat in the middle of the theater, his spotless white trainers propped on the row in front of him. Her age, she guessed, with thick gelled hair and a new haircut. She looked up at the screen—a bad noir film she'd never heard of—then back down at the boy. Someone her age interested in old movies? In Ohio? Above her, the air conditioner vent burped. Pushing her hair behind her ear, she slinked back down into the booth, flopped into her chair, and reached for a half-eaten box of Raisinettes on the desk. Chewing, cautious and curious, she again peeked into the theater. The end credits flashed; he was gone.

Sighing back into her seat, she surveyed the rotating platters, remembering her intense disappointment when she first entered the projection booth and discovered the two-reel system no longer existed. Nothing ever was what it appeared to be. She thought of the Ashland County water tower, visible from anywhere in Findlay, the county name painted in black, blocky letters. To her, the water tower was a symbol of small town life, a deformed limb jutting from the grave of a bad horror movie. Driving home from college last week, her old summer job as a projectionist at the Findlay Omniplex 8 was waiting for her like a fat, dying watchdog. Mosquitoes infiltrated daily life; the humid stench creeping across the flatland like industrial waste; the smog from what remained of Findlay's industry leaving one thick, gray haze.

Her shift ended after midnight. Sweat formed on the back of Monica's neck the moment she exited the front doors. She palmed a cigarette in one hand and in the other slid a matchbox open and shut. To her right, she recognized the clean white sneakers. He sat on a stone bench, smoking. Definitely her age. He stood, waved, and tossed his half-smoked cigarette onto the sidewalk.

He pointed, "No one uses matchboxes anymore."

"Thanks for the tip." She slid her hand into her pocket and clutched her keys like a weapon. Knee to the groin; jab the keys hard into the neck. "Do I know you?"

"Sort of. Not really." He scratched his freshly shaven chin with neat, manicured nails. "I'm Philip Rehezhkov. I was a couple of grades above you in school."

"The soccer player," she said slowly, remembering. "You went to Cornell."

"Still do. I'm a little slow to graduate."

Monica frowned at the math. "Aren't you twenty five?"

"Twenty four." He winked. "So I'm in no rush. You're old enough for a drink with an old friend, right? C'mon, I'll buy you a drink."

"We aren't friends." Single moviegoers tended to be older and pudgy, losing their hair, clothes disheveled in a way that suggested indifference. Philip was wrong: he wore expensive, pressed jeans and a T-shirt that stretched across his sinewy build. "It's late."

"It's twelve thirty on a Tuesday. It's summer! C'mon, new friends. What else are you going to do in Ohio?"

The fluorescent lights illuminated the cracked macadam and the faded paint of directional arrows and parking spots. One paint job overlapped another; now, both faded, the straight parking lines angled over each other, hazy and unclear, the direction indiscernible. She listened to the distant roar of trucks racing down the interstate. It was just another common sound of Findlay, like her mother's constant tired snore or the weak wheeze of the old air conditioner unit in Monica's bedroom window. Cornell: upstate New York, bucolic, serene, far away from here. Philip too was one of the ones who escaped and, somehow, was dragged back. She loosened her grip on the keys.

"Where we going?" Monica said.

THE ANVIL BAR WAS OPEN UNTIL TWO A.M. YOUNG PROFESSIONALS in loosened ties shot pool and staggered across the sticky floors; underaged teenage girls sat on bar stools around them and chain-

smoked, sipped their beers. Dusty televisions hanging in the corners showed the Indians game. Fat truckers in black T-shirts and mesh caps sat at the bar. Monica and Philip slouched at a table by the open door to the vacant back patio, the humid outdoor air better than the bar's weak lingering smell of sawdust and bleach. They filled their ashtray with cigarettes, and round by round pushed their empty glasses to the edge of the table.

"Michigan?" Philip repeated. "Good school."

"Good scholarship. And I didn't have to move too far from home."

"Why aren't you doing an internship or something?"

Monica shrugged, stirred her gin and tonic with a finger.

"My mom would like me to be here." She sucked her finger dry, then sipped her drink. "I miss seeing her, she misses me, but after I graduate, I won't move back here. So, last summer together and all that."

"What does she do?"

"Factory worker."

"Right." Philip drank a shot of whisky, his fifth, and chased it with a Heineken. "You said your dad split, right?"

"When I was ten."

"I wish my dad had left."

Monica nodded. Philip lived in the wealthiest part of Findlay and drove a new Mustang. He had never eaten ketchup and cheese sandwiches for lunch, or wondered why his mother always smelled like wet copper.

"Like the theater?" he asked.

"It's okay. I get to read undisturbed, and drink all the free Diet Coke I want. It isn't hard. Lots of time to daydream."

"I like the weekly 'classic' they show. You know, like the one you caught me watching today. With all the shadows and lighting, how the actors faces are naked."

She turned her eyes back to Philip. How had he seen her in the projection booth? He rubbed his beer bottle between his palms, stared at the table.

"Have you noticed," Philip continued. "How you guys always play the angry old movies? I mean, you never show *Bringing Up Baby* or some shit. It's always one where the hero gets shot, where the world is bleak. Like the film color is the same as the movie: scary and ominous. Terminally real movies, you know?" He blinked at his beer as if it were out of focus. "What do you do up there in the booth?"

“Not much. Crosswords mostly. Clean sometimes.”

“You get to watch the movies for free, right?”

“There’s a switch next to the console, and it turns on a speaker, so I can listen. But, after you’ve seen it two or three times, it gets old. I prefer the silence.”

He shook his head hard, just once. “Show me. I’d love to see that.”

“Sure.” She shrugged. “Later this week.”

The cocktail waitress put down two more shots. Monica swirled her drink and breathed in the bar’s unmoving air. Frowning at the darkness outside, she said, “I hate the water tower. I can see it from my yard.”

“Yeah, so can I. Everyone in Findlay can see it.”

“Really?” She had always assumed the wealthy never had views of things like water towers. “It makes me feel branded. Like that tower is a scar or a deformity I always carry with me, something everyone can see when I’m walking around campus.” She could see the water tower then, as clear as if it were in the room, its faded yellowing curves, the county name like a blackhead ready to burst.

Philip reached for the shot, winked, and raised his glass.

“To the end of this town,” he said.

She repeated, “To the end,” and downed the shot, waiting for the burn.

SHE PUSHED HER SALAD AROUND THE PLATE. “WHY DO YOU LIKE THIS place, Mom?”

“We can smoke here.” Her mother stubbed out her cigarette.

Monica shrugged; the Midwest did still have smoking and non-smoking sections. She wondered what she would do when she reached Los Angeles or Manhattan.

“Chain restaurants are just so lifeless,” Monica said. “The cheesy décor. The uniforms. All of it.”

“Can’t we just have a nice meal?” Her mother tucked a strand of thick gray hair behind her ear. “What’s so bad about a chain? Before your father and me were married, I waited tables at this place a couple of blocks from here. Remember Vincent’s? I think it closed when you were eight or nine. Anyway, Vincent was an asshole and he ran the place like an asshole. Chain restaurants have, you know, guidelines. Things are done right.”

“Soulless.”

“Baby, I just want to eat. I don’t want to think about what it means

or who owns it. I just want to have lunch with my little girl and have enough money to leave a nice tip.”

Pointing at the pack, she asked, “Can I have one?”

“Help yourself.” Monica snatched one cigarette, and struck a match, shaking out the flame with a flick of her wrist. She breathed the smoke deep into her lungs, and exhaled. Her mother was in her early fifties and still possessed a lean, wiry build. But her decades at her factory job had turned her complexion bleached gray, and her hands and wrists ached constantly. Only stubbornness kept her mother employed, sucking down one aspirin before and after work with a glass of warm water. Massaging her hands, her mother asked how her film was going.

“Good.” Monica looked at the tablecloth. “I mean, really well. I have the actors I want from the theater department. The script is good. We’re going to shoot it when I get back to campus and then I have time to do some edits and rewrites before my thesis is due.”

“My baby’s going to be a filmmaker.”

“Mom, stop.”

“I wish they still had the drive-in. Remember the drive-in?”

“Sure. We saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* there.” She scratched her chin; the Findlay Drive-In had been vacant for seven years, then torpedoed to make way for a parking garage. “I miss it, too.”

“Do you have one of those DVD things?”

“Everyone at school does.”

“You left it there? With the colored girl?”

Monica didn’t bother to be embarrassed: everyone talked that way in Findlay.

“Say ‘black’ or ‘African-American,’ okay? And I subletted my apartment to a Korean girl.”

“I don’t mean anything by it, baby. ‘Colored’ isn’t a judgment. Just a word.”

Monica smiled thinly. From the chair to her left, she picked up her purse and fished for her wallet.

“Sweetie,” her mother said, “let me get it.”

“I’ve got it. I should be able to buy you lunch.”

Her mother wilted. “You’re so grown up.”

“Just buying lunch, Ma. No big deal.”

“It is to me.”

Monica smiled, genuine this time, at her mother.

“Are you going out with Philip after work?”

“Yeah, I think so. Have a drink or something.”

“I never hear you come in anymore. I used to when you were a teenager, you know.”

“Always?”

“Always.” With a sly wink, her mother patted her hand, and Monica saw her mother, for a moment, as a young mother, when she was beautiful and laughed all the time, when her father was happy and sober, when she lifted Monica, just a little girl, high above her head and made her squeal with delight. And it vanished just as quickly, as if the image was just a spliced piece of film, and her mother stood up slow and unsteady, touching her arthritic hands together.

She accompanied her mother to the car, hugged her goodbye, and walked toward the movie theater. She tapped a cigarette loose from the pack, aware only as she held it that she had taken her mother’s cigarettes. Frowning, Monica watched as pedestrians scampered from the heat to the indoors. She craned her neck and stared beyond the “revival” district: three blocks up began an endless row of closed dress shops and cheap diners and local banks. Findlay was like a carcinogen aching for something to infect. Monica shook out her match. Her cigarette smoking was the only part of herself she believed to be distinctly Ohio. She had taken it up when she was fourteen, sneaking into the bathroom between classes; at Michigan, she smoked constantly and proudly her freshman year. Now, she was down to three cigarettes a day.

Today she was supposed to show Philip the projection room. For three weeks, since she had first spied him, they spent the late evenings together, having drinks at a different bar each night, and not once had he tried to kiss her or even touch her fingertips. She took a hard drag on her cigarette; frowning, she flung it and the entire pack into the street. Crossing the theater parking lot she frowned, aware suddenly she would have to buy a fresh pack for her mother. Philip was always there after work, he always paid for her drinks, and he always talked with Monica late into the morning and when she was honest, staring into the empty theaters, listening to the hum of the projectors, she knew that she had no one else.

Inside, grateful for the sudden burst of cool air, she zipped across the unvacuumed floor to the bathroom. Locking the stall, she tugged on her maroon polo shirt and black uniform pants; why she had to wear a uniform in the projection booth, she didn’t know. The pants were too big and rode high on her waist, no matter how many times she yanked them down her hips.

The theater went from eight shows at seven to four shows at ten; in between, she cleaned the projectors. The film, she had read, traveled nearly one hundred feet, from platter to projector then back again, inches from the floor, collecting dust as it moved. Trial and error taught Monica that the best device for cleaning the projector was a clean used toothbrush, the bristles softened from use and disinfected in boiled water; the brush, with its angled head and firm plastic, was perfect for removing debris from the gears and track. Once, films only lasted three hundred reels; now, at Disney World, they could get nearly twenty thousand showings out of one reel of film before it became feeble and snapped. She cleaned the projector lovingly, running a finger over fresh spots to verify its shine.

In the booth, she waited. She told Philip which stairs to take and to be quiet, knock softly. She finished a crossword, then another. She half-watched a Michelle Pfeiffer movie, flipped the sound off. When there was finally a gentle knock on the door, low, below the handle, she believed she had been waiting so long that she had willed it to happen.

Philip entered the room carrying a leather-wrapped flask of gin and reeking of cigarettes. He stood still and stared at the projector.

“Where’s the reel?” he asked.

“Platters. They don’t use reels anymore.”

He stared at the machine as if it spoke to him in Arabic. “They’re huge.”

“Twelve inch radius. And heavy, too. But it works better this way. The film never tears. Or rarely. Look how far it travels, how close it gets to the ground without touching.”

As if snapped from a trance, Philip set his flask down on the counter and walked slowly to the nearest machine. She became conscious of the steady, whirling noise of the film and the soft mechanical spinning of the platters. He moved his face close to the machines, looking into the projector itself and the bright xenon bulb, the corners of his mouth moving softly, as if in prayer.

“I love it,” he said.

She took a step toward him, and he turned, close to her, and reached out with his fingers and cupped her cheek. Her chest tightened; until then she had forgotten how much she wanted this, to be craved, to be wanted. He kissed her hard; she licked the gin from his lips, his tongue. He pulled her tight and she backed him against the desk. Sliding her hands under his shirt, she dug her nails into his skin and traced the

hair down his navel to his jeans. She yanked on his belt. The vents above them rattled and sighed out cold air. This is good enough, she thought. For one last awful summer in Findlay, this is good enough.

SOON, SHE WAS WAKING IN HIS BED EVERY MORNING. SOMETIMES he was there, sometimes he wasn't. When he was, they made love again, and then they smoked pot and went out for breakfast. When he wasn't, Monica dressed slowly, walking around his room, shaking out the cobwebs of sleep and looking at all the items around a bedroom that was the size of her room and her mother's room combined. Every thing was new and sleek: the computer with the extra wide screen, the stereo system, the expensive clothes hung on cherry hangers in the custom made closet. He had a large collection of Criterion Collection DVDs. Back in Ithaca, she was sure, Philip had duplicates of all this: the rich always owned two of everything. She left through the front door, undisturbed by his parents or a dog or a neighbor, and drove onto the highway, circling Findlay endlessly, imagining herself sitting in a dark room editing her first great film, a film premiere, her mother's praise and pride.

One morning, late in July, she woke to Philip holding out a palm full of pills and a glass of apple juice.

“What is it?” she asked.

He shrugged. She downed three pills and he crossed the room and turned on the television. A morning show came on and a weatherman was on a New York street corner predicting tornadoes in Nebraska, a yellow barricade corralling his cheering fans and their floppy paper signs. Philip tugged on a pair of jeans and started rocking back and forth, humming.

He said, “Do you know anything about boats? I want to build a boat.”

Monica shook her head and looked out the bedroom window. She blinked and saw dozens of red squares shift in and out of her view; the window winked at her and a Mercedes Benz lifted a wheel, suddenly a hind leg, and scratched its door handle. The fabric of her clothes felt thick and sticky, like peanut butter. She imagined great big boats cruising down the streets. She wanted to go sailing.

“...Like Melville,” Philip said. She wondered how long he had been talking. “To the garage!”

The garage floor was a clear, spotless gray, as if no one had ever changed the oil or clomped their salt-crusted boots loose of snow. Staring at the floor, she noticed she was wearing shoes but could somehow see her toes.

Philip pointed, "Grab that."

The axe, hung by two s-curve hooks that cradled the blade, rested between a hacksaw and a rake. Monica stood on the workbench, and she turned, making the wooden legs creak loudly under her weight.

"Do we need the saw, too?" she asked.

Philip ran his hands through his hair, then took his cigarette from his mouth. He nodded with vigor.

"Both. Absolutely. Hand me the axe."

Monica turned back to the tools, grasped the axe by its handle, lifted, and passed it down to Philip. She expected it to be heavy and cumbersome, instead, the contours fit her hands as if they had been molded for her grip. She liked the dark hickory handle, how masculine and solid it felt in her hands. She hopped off the workbench.

"Do we need anything else?" she said.

He lit a second cigarette with the half smoked remains of the first.

"This is a good start. Lots to do and not sure how long it will take."

She said, "Your dad has a lot of tools." But Philip ignored her and walked out the back garage door. Monica followed, carrying the saw.

Outside, she could feel the lush, full grass through her shoes, and walking felt alive and unstable, like playing in a bin of plastic balls. In the distance, she could see the omnipresent water tower. The tower's once white colors appeared yellowed, as if suffering from jaundice.

Philip dropped the axe next to the swing set. He took off his trench coat (when did he put that on?) with melodramatic flair, rolling his shoulder blades back, dropping his arms, and shrugging off his coat with a flourish. He pushed up the sleeves of his camouflage sweatshirt and picked up the axe.

"Where should we make the first cut?" he said.

"This isn't going to be enough wood. I thought we were building an ark."

"We are. Definitely. Like Noah. But, see, we have to start small, and this will be a good heap of wood. For the masthead. For starters. There are trees everywhere here, we'll get plenty of wood."

The drugs coursed through her and her body produced sweat, then she sensed it pour down her arms like a river. She exhaled deeply and her breath came out in green bubbles that morphed before her eyes into swallows and flew away. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she shook her head and wondered why there were no cardinals or blue jays coming out of her mind.

"Have you ever noticed," Monica asked. "That even in the summer

the streets are gray here? The salt from the winter plows never really fades away. Findlay is perpetually salted.”

“Use the saw to cut the rope loose. That will be good for the sails.”

The swings hung by rope, as did a small climbing apparatus that would look appropriate on a pirate ship. Monica instead dropped the saw and began to swing from the monkey bars. She craved a banana, or coconuts, something plucked from a tree. She wanted to swing through Findlay like Tarzan in the old black and white movies.

“When’s the last time you played on this?”

“Years. Ages. Another life.” Philip threw away his cigarette and climbed with the axe atop the monkey bars.

Monica swung down the bars. “Let’s sail. We’ll go boating.”

“Exactly! We’ll float! We’ll collect animals and when we flood the town, we’ll flow into the lake, up the Erie Canal, and into the ocean, back to the homeland! Lithuania, here we come!”

“My family is Irish.”

“Freedom! A theory of!”

With his feet balanced on two bars, he lifted the axe above his head, and swung it down into the thick parallel beam of the gym. The whole apparatus shook and the vibrations ran through Monica’s body, reverberating like the tremors of an earthquake.

Philip lifted the axe again. “After we do this, we’ll nuke that tower.” He pointed with the axe. “Down will come the tower, we’ll have our flood, and off we’ll go!”

Monica spun back around on the monkey bars. She kept her distance from the middle of the bars, where Philip swung the axe. She could read the word “County” on the water tower, but “Ashland” remained hidden from her view. Philip’s two cigarettes fell from his mouth, past her feet and into the grass, and she imagined the tower said something more appropriate, like “Ashtray County.”

“We’d need dynamite,” she said.

“Drive to Michigan. They have dynamite. Michigan militia love blowing shit up.” Philip swung the axe and the gym shuddered. “James Nichols lives there. That guy who helped McVeigh? He’ll probably help us out. He’s cool.”

The swing set groaned and Monica heard wood crackle like thin ice. She asked, “Should you be up standing right above where you’re chopping?”

Philip swung again and the monkey bars split in two. It opened like the ground in an earthquake and he fell through, cracking his

chin into the bars, his legs tangled between the bars. Monica, too, lost her grip and fell. They hit the ground hard in a tangle of wood and arms and legs.

“Are you okay?” Monica asked. Blood ran in sharp streaks from his chin.

“Nothing broken. You?”

He reached out for her wrist. “I’m fine,” she said, pulling away.

She stared at the ground. Next to Philip’s face, in the dirt, his cigarette, half smoked, continued to burn, and she watched the gray ash drop into a small pile. The drugs seemed to be wearing off—weak shit—and she felt sensations of real, physical pain all through her legs and back. Groggy, she sank her fingers deep into the mud.

He said in a whisper, “We’re two crazy birds, ain’t we?” He winked and rolled onto his back. “Below the deck, off the plank. We’re going out on the Atlantic, far away. The devil and the deep blue sea.”

He’s insane, Monica thought, the words billowing like cumulus clouds. Turning her head, feeling the grass brush against her cheek, she could see the water tower again, and beyond it, the blue summer sky. She pressed her head back into the ground, wishing she could just sink into the dirt and vanish.

Monica said, “I need to use the bathroom.”

She rose. An ache ran through her shoulders and knees, and slowly, she walked back into the house. She stood in the living room: the couches were thick and cushy, as if they were never sat in. Recessed lighting along the walls highlighted the bookcases and the colorfully bland paintings. Walking silently through the pristine room, she imagined it cost thousands to decorate this space, the smell of furniture polish and filtered air tickling her nose, all for no one to ever sit in. Just a private museum to be admired.

Under the soft light of the bathroom, Monica stared at the brown marks of dirt that streaked her clothes, blending into the black fabric, noticeable only now. In the mirror, her reflection showed random spots of dirt on her face, and her mascara had smeared. She used the hand soap to scrub her hands and forearms, then her face. The debris whirled in a brown vortex, out of sight, and down the drain. Monica thought she looked so young without her makeup, girlish even. She bit her lip. How long before her face looked like her mother’s? How long before she’d pull her hair back in a tight ponytail, stretching and smushing her face like those G-force rides at the carnivals?

She scrubbed the film from her face, soaking the washcloth,

inspecting every crevice of her face. With wide eyes, she observed each cool rivulet of water tingle her skin as it ran down her cheeks and neck. Clean, she surveyed her young face and, opening the bathroom door, eyes sweeping the untouchable rooms, she slipped out through the front door. On the front lawn, its color a gorgeous green, Monica imagined the road in front of her flooded with a torrent of water, trucks and telephone poles crashing down the street, cars capsized, homes sliding apart like sandcastles, all toward the lake, washing away the filth of this city, of her life. Then, Monica pierced her world, seeing unprojected through films or her wishes. And Monica saw this: a crazy boyfriend, a dying mother, and herself, still in Findlay, unmoving, and scared to be alone.

SHE WOKE UP AT FOUR IN THE MORNING. SHE REACHED FOR HER blinking cell phone on the floor. A message from Philip: he was going to Chicago for a few days, see friends, he'd call when he got back. Kicking the thin sheets loose from her legs, her eyes adjusting to the dark, Monica felt the tension loosen from her shoulders and, yawning herself awake, she opened her eyes and listened to her window air conditioner whirl. She tugged on her jeans, her body still achy and sore, dressed, and went to the grocery store.

At home, with the sun rising, Monica tuned the radio to the news. She listened, pleased she could feel like a slice of college was with her, when the events she couldn't see and touch mattered to her and everyone else. Pancakes, sprinkled with chocolate chips, cooked in a skillet; to the right, an omelet with peppers, tomatoes, and mushrooms. She chopped slices of fresh strawberry and melon, then set two plates on the kitchen table. English muffins cooked in the toaster oven. The coffee bubbled and popped. The room warmed with the smells of food.

"What's all this?" her mother asked.

Monica turned. Her mother was in her lightweight robe; Monica could see the legs of her mother's blue satin pajamas. Her thrifty mother had always splurged on pajamas. I love to be comfortable sleeping, she used to say.

"Breakfast. Fresh coffee, too. I didn't know what you would want, so I made a little of everything."

"Why would you waste all this food," her mother said. Monica watched a small smile form on her mother's face as she sat down at the table. "Are these fresh strawberries?"

“Of course. Paper’s on the table, too. Pancake?”

“Well, all right, then.”

Her mother sat down and Monica poured her coffee. Her mother took a strawberry, and chewed it slowly. The news was soothing white noise. Outside, the grass didn’t seem quite as yellow in the dawn light. A squirrel perched on the chain-link fence, then leapt into the nearest tree. Birds, what kind Monica didn’t know, chirped, and the day seemed promising and cool.

“How early did you get up?”

“Early,” Monica said. “Kroger’s is open 24 hours.”

“You were asleep when I got home last night.”

“Went to bed early.”

Her mother nodded, and didn’t ask about Philip. She knew, Monica was sure, in the way her mother always seemed to know. And she loved her then, achingly, and she fought down an urge to cry and wrap her arms around her mother’s tough, tired shoulders. Instead, she sat down, and they ate quietly and read the paper. Monica rose to get her mother more coffee, to get the muffins when the toaster sprung loud, for juice. Breakfast seemed to last for a long time; then her mother looked at the clock above the doorway and patted Monica’s hand. She stood and appeared, to a sitting Monica, to tower over her. Her mother kissed her on the forehead.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I loved it.” And then she turned and headed for her bedroom to change and go to work. Monica sat, staring at the plates splattered with syrup and egg yolk, and saw them as projection platters spinning her life right out of this kitchen, projecting the image out into the world. She wanted to cut the film, snap off the console, shut it all down.

SHE SHIFTED HER HIPS LEFT TO RIGHT, MAKING THE BOOTH CHAIR squeak as the wheels rocked. The crossword confused her today: too often, the seven-word answer came to her as a six-word answer, and her inability to add a random letter irritated her.

The reel to her right sputtered, and she looked up, hoping for a tear, for the unlikely. But it was just a flutter of dust or a sprocket not aligning properly with the reel, and the film and projector continued on, not bothering to stop and ruin the afternoon matinee. Monica sucked on her teeth. She hoped for something to go wrong, for something to be destroyed.

Philip was coming home tonight. Monica tried to convince herself

that she missed him. But she didn't. She missed having someone crazy to study and a person to go to the bars with and see the madness of this small town wrapped up into one person in a tight spiral of alcohol and drugs and money. She knew now she was projecting, aiming her anger with school and her mother and her own aimlessness at Philip. She stood and from the cabinets at her knees removed five clean white rags, cotton swabs, and rubbing alcohol. Bending to the soundhead, she cleaned with slow gentle turns of her wrist. She removed the dust from the sprockets until every crevice of the sprockets was freed from its own filth. She cleaned for what felt like a long time. The projector shined. Leaning back on her heels, a loose strand of her hair dangling down her forehead, Monica smiled. She could see herself at film school, taking notes in the theater with an illuminated pen just like the film critics use, studying color and camera angles. A good, fulfilling life far away from Findlay.

After a week without Philip, leaving Ohio seemed easy. She couldn't understand why it felt like such an oppressive burden before. Now, on her feet, the four clean projectors glimmering, Monica remembered breakfast. She could still taste the strawberries, still see her mother's smile as she eased into the kitchen chair. When he came home, Monica decided she would tell Philip she didn't want to see him anymore. In two weeks they were both returning to college anyway and she was certain he would respond with indifference.

Only when she shut off the last film did she realize it was nearly one a.m. and, checking her cell phone, Philip had never called. She emptied the trash, locked up the films, and walked outside clutching her keys. Standing outside the theater, her skin crawled. She was aware of his presence, but as if he was lurking, like a lion stalking a herd. She walked slowly to her car, scanning the lot, then slowing as she spied him. His car was parked on the opposite side of hers, half-hidden from her view. She rounded the trunk. On the pavement outside the driver's door were several half-smoked, discarded cigarettes.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Waiting for you. Hop in."

"Can we talk tomorrow? I'm really beat."

"It's important," he said, turning to face her. His face seemed refreshed, earnest. "I won't keep you out late, I promise."

"Are you fucked up?" she asked, studying his pupils.

"Sober. Tidy Bowl fresh."

She looked down at her sweatshirt. Maybe she could tell him goodbye tonight.

“Important?” she asked.

“Critical. You’re gonna love it.”

She crossed her arms across her chest. One talk and it’ll all be over. Reluctant, she walked to the passenger door and got in. Philip turned the radio on, soft, tuned it to a classic rock station. She asked what he wanted to talk about but he answered with silence. His face, serene and calm, looked straight down the road, driving smooth and sure, under the speed limit, the windows letting in the muggy summer air. Maybe he knew it was over, too. Tucking her hair behind her ear, the only thing that seemed peculiar about him was that he wore all black.

They drove out of the city center, towards the highway, and out past Monica’s house. Philip swung the car down a residential street with most of the porch lights off, then turned left down a narrow, unmarked street, and cut the engine.

“What are we doing here?” she asked.

Philip answered by popping the trunk and stepping out of the car. Monica sat, waiting. He reached into the trunk and removed two bags, then walked past the hood and through someone’s backyard, heading for the tree line. Monica scrambled out of the car and called after him.

He turned. Pressing a finger to his lips, he beckoned her to follow.

They walked silently for several minutes, and then suddenly in front of them was the Ashland County water tower. Standing outside the fence, staring at the massive steel structure, its legs held in place by bolts the size of softballs, Monica was amazed at how large it was, and that she had never gone close to it in all the years she lived there.

From his pockets, Philip removed wire cutters and began to cut the fence.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Monica asked.

“Don’t worry, it isn’t electric. It’s a pretty flimsy fence. I checked it out last week. You know, I think it has the same effect as turning the lock in your door. I mean, if someone really wanted to break into your house, you have to have a deadbolt. But sometimes, just not being obvious, like a package in an open car window, keeps people away.” The fence crackled under his wire cutters like snapping bones of fried chicken.

“Philip—”

“I’ll show you. Here,” he said, holding the fence open for her. “Walk in.”

Conscious of leaving fingerprints she jammed her hands deep into her pockets; glancing around, convinced no one was watching them, she

ducked under the fence. The grass around the water tower was yellow and brittle. Philip set his two bags down and put his hands on hips.

“This is going to be a great evening,” he said.

“What are you on?”

“Lied a little bit. I didn’t go to Chicago. Went up into northern Michigan. Got some great stuff.” He zipped open one of his black duffel bags and pulled out a tightly wrapped slab of what looked like butter.

“What’s that?”

“This,” he said, “is plastic explosive. I made it myself. Those Michigan militia boys thought I was a Fed and wouldn’t give me shit. But one of my buddies up in East Lansing is a PhD student in biochemistry, and he said, ‘Dude, Phil, you can make all kinds of shit out of plain old household goods.’ So we did. I fucking made plenty.”

Monica laughed, weak and incredulous. This simply couldn’t be real.

“It doesn’t take long,” he continued, “to wrap it around the legs. Do you want me to show you how, or do you just want to do the detonation?”

“I’m not detonating anything.”

“This was your idea.” He walked to one of the legs and bent down, sliding a long thin wire around the steel.

Was it? She frowned at the yellow grass. Was this her idea? Had she said they should blow up a water tower? And even if she did (did she?) that was talk, the way people say they are going to kill their boss or their children. No one actually did such horrible, stupid things.

She said, “You can’t blow up a water tower.”

“Not trying to. We’re going to explode the legs, destabilizing the tower, and making it tilt and crash. No mushroom clouds here. So, yes, incorrect, but strangely true.” Biting his lower lip, he contemplated her. “You sure you don’t want to detonate the charge?”

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. Furrowing her brow, she stared at the numbers as she punched 9, then 1, and as she looked up, Philip was there, snatching the phone from her hand, reaching back and throwing it in a long, lazy arc into the woods.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she screamed.

“You’ll wake the neighbors.” He walked back to the tower base. “Maybe that’s a good idea. Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey!”

Monica ran. She ducked under the fence and raced through the woods, her feet hitting hard on the dirt path, and ran up to his Mustang. She yanked the door open and reached for the ignition: no

keys. She hit the horn. She hit it again, holding it down, a long loud bleat to wake everyone. But holding down the horn, screaming now, she looked around and all the lights in all the small houses remained off. She yelled and hollered again and again, then remembering, strangely, a woman's defense class she took in college, she screamed "Fire!" No one came. No one answered.

Exhausted, she stopped. She sucked in the humid air and looked at the houses. Listening to the stillness of the city, it was almost as if the town was already dead. As if all the residents, with their shrugs and indifference, were already gone, washed away like the debris from an upstate lake and rolled and bounced through rivers and left in the ocean to sink to the bottom. Crickets and birds, once quiet, chirped and hooted, filling the air empty of human noise with their calls.

She ran. Up the street, to the corner, where she turned left, towards the north and away from the city, slightly uphill, as far from Philip as she could. When she was out of breath, she turned back. The water tower, white and brilliant, stood against the dark sky. She wondered if her mother looked at the tower with the same disdain, if she sees it, driving to and from work, and feels trapped, pinned down. From below, almost as if from the trees themselves, there was a flash of yellow and a loud booming noise. Where was Philip? Was he in his car, racing away, or did he stay and watch? Thousands of sirens wailed around her and police cars and fire trucks zipped down the dark street and out of view. The noises curled in on the water tower, spooling themselves closer. The water tower remained stalwart; there would be no tremendous crash, no Biblical wash of water over the residents. Observing the tower, her field of view widened and in a sweeping panorama, Monica now could see the entire world, beyond Findlay, beyond Ohio.

*George David Clark*

## **Statesboro Nocturne**

On the dock in foggy owl-light  
you profit your ears: katydids, a mockingbird,

the tethered jon boat knocking and knocking.  
September is the last word out

of the waking lake's mouth before she rolls over  
and spoons the spillway.

The Jesus bug, over sunken moon,  
subtle flex of waterskin at his every step, strides,

and like his namesake, says come,  
follow me over the deep water, over the slack

water, like black, molten glass, with your eyes.  
Divorced of home and insomniac,

you imagine every house on the lake naked  
of siding, insulation, walls. You picture

the whole road's host of sleepers  
exposed in their simple house frames,

spondee of bullfrogs confusing their dreams  
and fireflies let into the bedrooms,

their yellow semaphores to glint in the shag  
and the upset air about ceiling fans.

*George David Clark*

Of the contracts you made young with this world,  
all have been broken and broken. The light

like a thin sheen of milk on the grass.  
Someone, by now, should have found you.

## The Abandoned Church of St. Mary Magdalene

We climbed the rusted fence, past No Trespassing signs  
& slipped inside where the pulpit—now a pile of broken

oak—once stood, once holy enough to heal us both  
of the urges that tore off coats, unbuttoned our shirts

as if to let the falling ice that rimed the roof's bare rafters  
sheathe our bodies too. The stranger pressed me to my knees

& unzipped as the streetlight on Kingshighway kept flickering  
a brightness across my forehead, as uncertain as forgiveness

& nowhere near as warm as I needed. Above us, a woman—  
Mary Magdalene in stained glass—stood staring up

trying not to watch us, tightening her suppliant hands,  
her penitence still somehow intact after years of neglect.

I looked as I worked until I could not see my wife's eyes  
as pained as that saint's. But when he came cursing

there she was as always, faithfully waiting outside the cave  
of her shallow sleep for my figure to part yet another night,

to carry home my constant *Noli me tangere*. The stranger  
cleaned himself, left me there alone with Mary Magdalene

still pleading with a sky too blank & close to ever answer her  
& it was a long time before I could rise again, begin dressing.

## **Money at the End of the Month**

Having not visited our lot for days,  
we wake early and drive, hoping the framework  
for our house is complete.

Saturday morning in February—  
the air bites my ears;  
it makes me think about my wife.

Right now, she wants a mango for breakfast.  
In the San Joaquin Valley,  
in winter, they cost \$5.00 per pound—

a thought I can't stand as the mangos,  
at King's Market, tease me—  
their skins bruised and scarred

like my wallet stuffed with coupons,  
grocery lists, receipts, and a \$.32 stamp.  
Too much to bear.

In the bottom of my pocket,  
I find \$3.00 wadded like tissue.  
I smooth the bills and hand them to the clerk

as if the flat money, a polite gesture,  
will ensure I'm not caught short.  
One mango and one carton of orange juice cost \$3.03,

so I pinch a nickel from the tin can labeled  
“Take a penny, leave a penny.”  
Later, at the AM/PM Mini Mart,

*David Dominguez*

I want a fresh cup of coffee and one gallon of gas.  
My wife fingers through the coin purse  
clutched against her chest and hands me \$2.26

as I resign myself to the fact that if I want French roast  
after puttering home, I'll have to brew it  
with yesterday's grounds.

## **After Installing Tile All Day, All Night, and into the Early Morning**

More exhausted than anything,  
I sprawl myself across the roof's slope  
and stare at Saturn until my eyes begin to close.

From the top of the house,  
the orchards and vineyards seem bound by nothing  
but dust, furrows, and stars.

I am aware of the lamps along the streets,  
the high beams brightening the roads,  
and the glowing porches where the newspaper will soon sit.

I am aware of the abundance that this house, this neighborhood,  
and this town will bring to my life,  
but right now, I want none of it.

I want the summer of my seventeenth year—  
the year I worked at Red Carpet Carwash.

I want back the days I could wash windows for ten hours,

and after work lift weights for two more.

Now, my knees ache, the tendonitis in my elbow squeaks,  
and my rotator cuff makes shaving difficult.

I wish I didn't need sleep—

I wish I still had the energy I took for granted  
when I'd stay awake until 4:00 A.M. so I could spot

Saturn's rings through a telescope  
and still clock in at the carwash by dawn.

I want the strength to finish my house—

*David Dominguez*

to lay the last tile despite my bleeding fingertips,  
and because I feel the need to finish  
before my body breaks down bone by bone,

I take a deep breath and let Saturn fill my eyes with light  
so that my mind is clear  
except for what moves me most:

the desire to see my wife under our own roof,  
her hips slipping between our sheets,  
and the moon coming

through our windows and landing on our walls  
where our shadows  
will wrestle throughout the night.

## **Local Man Hit by Train**

Later, they will tell us it could have been avoided  
as if each morning sun burns away pieces of night  
like those 1950s movie reels melting white  
before the eyes of Saturday matinee children  
tossing popcorn to be snapped up by other  
boys and girls unwrapping Charms  
to stick the candy squares of purple and red  
and yellow, orange, blue, and green  
on the subdivision plot of tongue most conducive  
for color, as if we control the coming of day  
by our behavior, minding our mother  
and father so when we un-stick from  
the picture-show-soda-syrup seats and run  
the aisle toward eye-closing brightness  
on the marquee sidewalk, our parents  
will be waiting to take our hand and walk us home  
or gather all our friends into the Dodge  
gray as the post war and drive us to our new  
neighborhoods, slowing to caution  
when the one stoplight blinks yellow,  
then, further, waiting our turn at the crossing,  
the train tracks' flashing warning  
like a preschooler shifting one foot to the other,  
needing to go but holding back, holding on.

Here, trains swagger through town at 70 mph,  
their great Cyclopic eye never closing,  
the bellow of their horn the exhalation  
of a deep sea creature bursting into a thinner  
atmosphere, the cry of a leper—*Unclean! Unclean!*  
The shout that shames and saves. *Mea Culpa.*  
Flee from the wrath that comes upon us,

that cannot stop on a penny, that takes eighteen football fields to clatter and squeal to rest, maybe a foot or two less if making contact with an object on the tracks.

The young wife in the north side apartment next door, the owner of the café he frequented, the congregation of the church of Welcome Ye Who Dress In Seamstress-Hemmed Short Shorts And Knee-High Athletic Socks said the man with the “shapely legs” walking (or jogging if it brings more comfort) on the tracks, North First and Mockingbird, was not daring the train nor out pacing his destiny, nor too innocent to recognize the impact of locomotive wailing what iron and steel seemed to know was physically impossible to climax other than what it screamed at the man on the tracks about to pass into the collective recollection and supposition of onlookers idling at the crossing arms holding back, for now, law-abiding educators, pastors, civil servants, profit margin-ers, healers, mothers carpooling children pressed to windows for a lesson they could not expect nor forget.

And even those of us who did not know his name believed we knew him when we read the headline and saw the photo of the train and police officials gathered as if posed to stare at something we are spared the unnecessary sight of, knowing it is what remains with each of us—this one we all knew from the corners of our lives as we drove past glancing in side mirrors, afraid to linger lest we recognize kindred thoughts and desires.

## **Fourth of July**

It was a sidelong glance through the fissure,  
The errors, the mangled tassel some  
Mistook for wrought devices I had gathered,  
Or memories one kept in cigar boxes.  
Father hardly flexing joint or muscle  
Managed only a labored turn, turning tight  
His neck of crinkled chamois moistened  
For car-washing and wringing dry—  
Doubtless that tired chorus we sang sounded  
Dirge-like for Mother's 80<sup>th</sup> happy day  
Though we dragged the notes with lissome  
Smiles, hatless heads while cameras snapped  
Like fireworks in the distance, small puffs of light.

And my mind wandered back to what John Ashbery  
Once said about Miss Moore, the tricorn-hatted poet  
Who "gives us the feeling that life is softly exploding  
Around us." Though around us are only shadows.  
There in the arid gray underneath a doorframe,  
Father stood solitaire in his pressed pants and polo,  
Being and not being, whose every step cancels  
Each other out just as the traveler's destination  
Is only one part of the journey, or that the well  
Is always empty except for the hollow sound  
It contains which is more drink to the soul  
Than to the parched mouth of my father whose  
Pose registers neither salutation nor surprise.

*Eamon Grennan*

## Hedgerow after Roadwork

What was the ragged hedgerow of sally trees  
has become an open wound of broken branches—  
white gashes, torn leaf and muddy root exposed  
and open to the weather, appalled by light.

Thinking it the way of this world, you take  
one look, shrug your *noli me tangere* shoulders,  
and walk on by. Mist thickens  
over the green of Letter Hill, blanching it,

and a robin hops about in the wreck  
of its hedgerow, chanting a canticle of praise  
to that *deep but dazzling darkness* that  
shapes the maze of what happens, the lord

who holds the bird in hand and the two evicted  
from the bush, holds the savaged sally tree  
itself, not to mention the worm that—turning  
away from this fresh bewilderment of light—

feels for only a moment the scorch  
of robin-breath, comfort-touch of wet earth  
that is all it knows on earth and all  
it needs to know before the dark closing.

## Landscape with Sacred Cows

Where you live, the ditches brim with meadowsweet, loosestrife, montbretia, fugitive dog daisies, forget-me-nots and the washed purple glow of heather. One cow stares over the fence at your staring self. In the rushes, six cows lie in wait for rain: when it starts to fall they'll rise slowly, crooking their knees, and put solid glum foreheads to the ground, fashioning one of their shapes for prayer.

## **Small World, Big**

Rain here is the way of daylight, taking the hill  
to its heart so all is mist, the leaves  
of the sycamore shiver in it—greens, greys  
and scorched edges become a crowd  
of little whisperers when a single-for-  
sorrow magpie shakes its tailfeathers  
to a flash of black and white or this indigo  
iridescence that could be metal, a few inches  
of tank plating, maybe, where Gaza is  
a daily heap of rubble and dust, the desert  
bloodied as ever, the region all one  
common blaze. But here in this garden,  
its only rain is the way of daylight, where  
even tears are dried for a while by the sudden  
outburst of blackbird or robin, singers  
that want none of our muddled world—although  
your own mind first thing in the morning, last  
at night (full moon a luminous, silvered peach,  
sky riveted with stars) has to grasp at it.

## **Balikbayan**

Nearing evening in Quezon City,  
naked toddlers chase chickens  
as skeleton boys squat on roadsides smoking Marlboros.

Slipshod shanty towns slide in the sweat  
of pockmarked street hawkers  
balancing bags of brooms and bike tires.

Leather-faced mamas feed sullen babies curdled rice  
strained from fingers caked in mongo beans and pork fat  
discarded in market trash.

In rice fields, the gray rinsed sky  
pours over culled husks and malungay blossoms  
whisked violent-white among jungle greens.

A bruised sun sets over nipa huts,  
*sari-saris* sell shampoo samples,  
chiclets, choco flakes, chicharrón.

From open windows, fluorescent white streams  
like bones aglow in the languid humidity,  
flood rooms filled with creaky folding tables.

I once crawled under a folding table,  
heard the scrape of folding chairs, watched  
Mama and Papa fold up our suitcases.

Transplanted in American soil, spoon-fed fertilizer,  
I bear leaves that blanch against glass  
greenhouses where the jungle is manmade.

Now I return to these barrios,  
this island country's crevices,  
its littered cities and dusky villages

searching for the self I'd left,  
any sliver of childhood  
left rooted in my native soil.

I'll take anything, any inkling for what it feels  
to swoon in this heat, to feel I belong here,  
my skin matching the masses,  
my speech a lilting soliloquy of perfect Tagalog.

**Note:** *Balikbayan* means homecoming. Literally in Tagalog, *balik* means “return” and *bayan* means “hometown, place of birth.”

*Mark Halliday*

## The One about the Zinxal

That poem of yours—I really liked it.  
The one about the self as a zinxal  
flying through the black treetops of memory.  
That was really good, the way you made it  
not allegorical but with a flickering taste of allegory

like the shadow of leaves thrown across yellow grass.  
I sent you an email when I saw that poem in a journal  
didn't I? I know I meant to. And I used it  
in several classes—not just one class—  
I'm sure I used it in 1999 in a class on metaphor

and in at least two workshops since then; probably three.  
So yeah. A good poem. I was glad to see it  
in your book, a couple of years ago. One of your best,  
I still think—not that you don't have others that are,  
you know, really good. But just that that one struck me—

the zinxal—the way it pauses on a branch  
and blinks alertly as if to detect a pattern  
in the throng of leafy boughs that fill the dark on every side....  
That poem. So yeah. Really good. So then  
why do I feel sad

when I see an old photocopy of it in a folder in my cabinet?  
Sad? Or guilty? Guilty? What for? What am I supposed to do?  
The poem turns its head and stares straight at me  
through a gap in the wildly blooming foliage:  
what does it want me to do? I used it

in a class on metaphor and in at least two workshops.  
Probably three. And next year—well, yes, I might use it again  
although there's some impediment, actually, only because—  
it won't be new—your zinxal can't be new next year for me  
even if poetry "stays news"—I mean I suspect

I can't be with the zinxal up there in the dark trees  
the way in 1999 I sort of was. But I think  
the problem is me. Not the poem. In fact the poem,  
as I recall, made me feel  
how the problem was me. So anyway—yeah.

So. Are you writing much lately?

*Michael Schiavone*

## **Mountain Top Automotive**

**M**INDING THE BEER BOTTLE WEDGED BETWEEN MY BOOTS, I SECURE the fan belt around the pulleys. Since Dale brought over deer steaks for supper, I'm doing this job for him free. He killed two deer yesterday with his new bow. Tells me venison tastes better when there's no gunpowder involved.

"Start her up," I call to Dale.

The engine roars and I watch the serpentine belt zoom around the pulleys.

I live on top of Gambrill Mountain with my second wife, Lita. You can see all of Maryland from up here. Sometimes my two girls live here too. They're in the basement now, playing Sony PlayStation with Dale's son, Gunther. The girls aren't much for nature so they get bored on the mountain, but I believe they'll take to it someday. It's only ten minutes into town so it's not like we're in Siberia, which the girls are fond of saying. We've been up here for three years now and I'll be damned before I go back to apartment life.

I step to the side and give Dale a thumbs up. "You can kill it now."

He's staring at the backs of my hands. "Your skin's like a gator's, Tuck."

"It's not needlepoint," I say.

The hard part about fixing cars is forcing your hands into cramped spaces, feeling your way through the tight caves of an engine, getting at the right angle to perform the task. Most people have the strength to unscrew an oil filter, but few can get a clean grip on it and twist it off. It's about angles. It's about perspective.

I work at Red's Tire and Auto in Frederick. Been there for three years. Before that I was a crane operator, but I got bored sitting down all day so I decided to learn about cars. Red doesn't pay well so sometimes I fix cars right here in my garage. Mostly for other mountain people. Little side jobs since I don't have all the right equipment and also because a car that doesn't run right would have a heck of a time trying to get up here without a tow. Folks like coming to me because they

know I'm going to tell it to them straight, which makes me feel good because straight is one thing Red isn't. He can turn a fifteen dollar oil change into a three-hundred dollar job, but that's not my policy. I shake hands with my clients after a job, look them in the eye, which is better than any receipt Red offers.

For fun, Lita made me up some business cards at the copy shop where she works. She called it Mountain Top Automotive. The phone number is our home phone. The box of cards stay in the desk drawer with old credit card statements and the kids' report cards, which usually don't grace the refrigerator door.

"Green bottle?" Dale asks me.

"Sure," I say, and grab the six-pack of Heineken from the tool shelf.

I've known Dale for almost twenty years. We were the only two freshmen to make the Frederick High Football team in 1983. He lives like a nomad, moving every couple of years, but always makes real effort to keep in touch and I appreciate that. He's been living in Frederick since his second marriage to Connie.

Dale helps me drape a tarp over the air hose, which I lugged up here from Red's a week ago. It'd been collecting dust in the storage closet at work so I decided I'd bring it home where it could get some use. I dismantle the hanging flashlight and place it in the kids' old play chest, which is stuffed with belts, motor oil, spark plugs, brake pads, orange rags, and the kids' forgotten sports equipment buried underneath Red's parts. The exhaust systems are hidden underneath the porch out back.

Red's stopping by later with a gift since he screwed me out of a Christmas bonus again, which means I gotta make the garage scarce of his parts. Dale and I give the garage a once over before shutting the lights.

Inside, Lita's wrapping presents on the carpet in front of the new wood stove. I installed one in the basement, too. No heat bill this way. It's freezing upstairs so we've been sleeping on the living room floor in front of the stove. It's cozy. Lita and I haven't been in our bedroom since September. When the girls are here, they sleep on the couches in front of the basement stove, falling asleep to the hum of television.

"Who's that for, hon?" I ask.

"My Dad. You think a belt buckle makes a good Christmas gift?"

"Hell yeah," I say.

Lita takes a long drink from a 7-11 cup. Sighs. "Thank God I got a raise this month."

“Run, godammit, run!” Dale’s wife, Connie, shouts at the TV.

“What’s the score?” I ask.

“Twenty-four all. Three minutes left in the fourth.” Biting on two straws, she cracks her knuckles with her thumbs. “This no huddle offense confuses the shit out of our defense.” Dale steps outside to the deck for a smoke. He doesn’t like to deal with Connie when she’s watching the Redskins.

“What time y’all wanna eat?” Lita asks me.

“Soon as the deer’s done. Maybe ten minutes,” I say. “Dale’s on the grill right now.”

Lita tapes up the last present and slides it across the floor, underneath the tree.

“Kids still downstairs?” I ask.

“Where else? Playing those goddam video games all day.”

Lita’s good to my girls but doesn’t want any of her own, which suits me. Mandy and Jill are plenty.

I kneel down and give Lita a peck on the cheek. Whenever I sense she’s starting to head sour, which isn’t often, I offer a small gesture, like a kiss or a squeeze or a kind word. Sometimes, she’ll take long baths when she’s down, and I’ll know to leave her alone. When that happens, I’ll usually hang out on the porch with a six-pack, point a flashlight into the woods and try to catch deer eyes.

“Kids!” I shout down into the basement. “Kids!”

I feel the icy draft as Dale comes back inside.

“What’s up?” he asks.

“Kids. They don’t give a shit about nothing.”

“Last of the pond hockey generation,” Dale mumbles.

“Huh?”

“Kids don’t go outside anymore. Not like we did.”

Dale’s got a sober look about him, although the law would beg to differ. I turn away from that look, down the stairwell.

“Kids! Get up here or I’m coming down!”

“One more game, Dad!” Mandy shouts. She’s the older one. Thirteen. Getting breasts on her. Been dating some kid named Josh. I don’t get too involved with all that. As long as they’re white and don’t beat them, I’m okay.

I grab my beer from the dinner table and head downstairs. The cover is off the pool table again, which makes me grip my bottle tight. The three of them are lying on the cover, faces fixed on the thirty-six inch screen I bought for sports, not video games.

"Y'all shut that crap off and get upstairs. You're not having Skittles and root beer again for dinner."

Mandy turns to me and gives me that baby face I'm a sucker for, but I remember the pool table cover.

"Don't give me that look, Mandy. Y'all got three minutes to get your asses upstairs. And that cover better be put back on the pool table where it belongs. It's no beach blanket for you to lie on."

I move in front of the screen. Gunther pauses the game.

"Three minutes. If I have to come down again, you're all going to bed."

My old man never bought us video games. He'd make us go outside and play, freezing rain or not. My mom once told me I wouldn't have a proper relationship with the kids until they're in their twenties, which doesn't seem right.

Sometimes, before I fall asleep at night, when the house is still, I think about the money I've put away for the girls' college fund. My mom said I should save money just in case, that I didn't want to go crazy looking for loans at the last minute. Five percent of my paycheck goes to a stockbroker and he promises to make it grow. It's a good chunk of change now, just under twenty grand. Hell, Lita and I could take a vacation somewhere warm. I also wouldn't mind owning a summer cabin in Caribou, Maine. Dale once showed me pictures of Caribou from one of his hunting trips. There's more wildlife there than people. Makes our neighborhood look like the city. I don't think Lita would like Caribou, though. She'd probably joke with me, saying she'd send me a postcard from Florida, that she's not about to spend her summers living like Daniel Boone.

Part of me hopes the girls won't go on to college. Part of me wants them to find guys who'll work, guys who'll take care of them. My mom thinks education is their only hope, but most people I know that went to college are either unemployed or looking for more schooling. It seems to complicate lives. We have lots of kids bringing their cars into the shop, coming down from schools in Pennsylvania on their way to Baltimore or D.C. for the weekend. Mostly Jeeps. Some guys give them a hard time, like Buddy Mac who's always telling them something's off with their lincus rod and that it's going to cost them plenty. Eventually he lets them in on the joke, saying there's no such thing as a lincus rod and asking, "What are they teaching you up there in Pennsylvania?" I turn away when Buddy does this. Makes me sad for him. Anyway, it's hard for me to picture

Mandy or Jill in college. They both know damn well there's no such thing as a lincus rod. I've seen to that.

Back upstairs, Connie and Dale are slow dancing in the corner, beer bottles pressed against each other's backs. Skins must've won. Lita's scrubbing a pot in the sink.

"Kids will be up in a minute," I say. "How you doing, babe?" I massage her sides. Then shudder as something pokes my back. My daughter Jill. The younger one. Nine.

"Where's your sister and Gunther?" I ask her.

She purses her lips. "It's been three minutes, Daddy. You should punish them."

"I should, huh?" I lift her up by her armpits, nudging my head into her stomach until she giggles. "Ten seconds!" I shout behind Jill's back. I hear Mandy and Gunther shuffle up the stairs, relieved I don't have to punish anyone.

We gather round the table. The deer filets shine under the light. I tap my beer bottle with a fork. "Anyone wanna say anything before we eat?"

Gunther burps. Connie smacks him on the kisser. Dale laughs. In this way, we begin our meal.

Mandy serves herself potatoes. Jill's having salad, everything picked out except the iceberg lettuce. They've recently claimed to be vegetarians which excuses them from eating proper meals. My ex-wife says she'll take me to court if I force them to eat meat. Gunther's gnawing on a slab of venison, brown juice coating the sides of his mouth. Seeing that makes me wish I had boys instead. Connie starts on about Darla Potter, who's living in town with an eighteen-year-old man, saying that's just wrong, that a woman who's thirty should date her own age group, even if she did fall from the ugly tree and can't get anyone else. Pointing his knife at her, Dale marvels how that boy can handle Darla on account of her breath smelling like an old bait bucket. This makes the kids laugh, and Connie asks Dale how he'd know such a thing. He tells her that everyone knows about her breath, that it could kill roaches. The kids laugh again, and I wish I could be as funny to them as Dale, but I know better than to open my mouth. If I try to make a joke, the girls give me a look like I just cut the cheese.

"Darla's got a nice smile, though," I say. "She can be pretty."

"Pretty at closing time maybe," Dale says.

Mandy and Jill are now scooping strawberry pie onto new plates. That's what being a vegetarian is all about. Getting to dessert faster.

Mandy pulls out the strawberries, mashing them with a fork before eating them. Jill cups the pie wedge with her hand, stuffing it into her mouth. I stop chewing my meat.

“Can we be excused, Dad?” Mandy asks me, teeth caked with pie.

“Yeah, can we, Mom?” Gunther asks Connie.

We all look at each other. “Go ahead,” I say. They dart off.

I help Lita clear the table while Dale cleans the grill. Connie’s picking up around the living room.

“Dinner was great, hon,” I say, squirting Cascade into the dishwasher. Lita stops sponging. Wipes her forehead. Then she shoves a bulky cutting board into the top rack.

The phone rings. One of the kids, probably Mandy, scampers for it downstairs. Boys call for her at all hours. They hang up if I answer. Outside, I see Dale and Connie making their way down the road, pointing a flashlight at the ground ahead of them. Walking after meals is part of their new health plan. I sip my coffee, tasting the bite from a splash of Jack Daniels. As I turn toward the kitchen, the room fills with light. Headlights. A truck making its way up the driveway. Sounds like a Ford.

“Red’s here,” I shout.

I lace my boots and go to the door. Before I open it, I take a full breath and remind myself to be polite.

“Season’s greetings, Tucker,” he says, looking over my shoulder. “Felt bad about there being no Christmas bonuses this year.”

He hands me a brown paper bag.

“Thanks, Red,” I say. “Thoughtful.”

“Say, Tuck. Mind if I come in for a minute? Cold snap tonight.”

“All right, Red. Just for a bit. I gotta put the kids to bed soon.”

He steps inside.

“Evening, Lita,” he says. She smiles politely and makes her way downstairs with a load of laundry.

Red sits down at the dinner table. “How about one of them beers?”

“All right,” I say, pulling out two cans from the brown paper bag.

“So, guess who came by the shop this morning before we closed?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“Jon Lorrie. Came in for an oil change. I realized he hadn’t been by in a while. A man with a ’74 Ford LTD should be coming in once a week. He had a lot of new engine parts, though. So, I said: ‘Hey, Jon. Why you taking your business elsewhere? We always done right by you, haven’t we?’”

I finish my beer. Pop open another one. Jon was by here last

Tuesday for some new brake pads. He knows to keep his trap shut, but he's not too keen.

"Jon says he's been taking his car to a shop in Baltimore. I said: 'That's kind of far, isn't it, Jon? Kind of a long way to go to get the same parts and service you get right here in Frederick.' I asked him the name of the shop there and he said he forgot. Then he started sweating all over his forehead and it had to be twenty degrees in the garage. Didn't look right."

Red takes another sip and holds it in his mouth. I hear what sounds like rolling thunder, but then realize it's the kids making that racket. Mandy's chasing Gunther and Jill up the stairs with an orange soccer ball held high in her hand, ready to peg them with it. I remember I gave her that ball for her ninth birthday. She used to kick it against the garage door on weekends. Sometimes I'd play goalie, letting her score most of the time.

They're all wearing rollerblades and Gunther's sporting my old hockey helmet which is bobbing off his head since he's got it on backwards. It's filthy. They're skating around the dinner table now, around Red and me, wheels skidding on the linoleum floor. Sitting back in my chair, I grin. They take another lap and then head up the next set of stairs, toward the bedrooms. "Truce!" Jill shouts. Then it's quiet for a while.

"Kids," I say to Red, who looks dazed.

"Anyway, where was I?" he says. "Yeah, I was talking to Jon. So, I'm saying to myself: Where's he really taking his business? And what's he trying to hide?"

I think about the other auto shops in town, figuring I might have a new uniform soon in light of Red's talking. It wouldn't be any different working anywhere else, though. Guys like Red own them all. It'd be the same story.

Red finishes his beer and rises from the table. I stand too, ready.

"Any chance we can see what's in the garage, Tucker?"

"What for? Nothing in there but cold air."

"Just a quick peek just to calm my imagination. I'll sleep better knowing we're straight."

"Suit yourself." Grabbing the remaining beers, I lead him to the garage. I feel a cramp in my lower back. "After you," I say, nudging open the door.

We step inside and I switch on the light and somehow I'm not surprised.

The halogens spotlight Red's fan belts, which are piled in front of the kids' play chest. His welder and jack are to the right of the belts. Grease rags cover the cement floor. A pink hula hoop hangs on the back fender of my truck. Looks like a bomb went off in the play chest, but a bomb would have been more subtle than the kids.

"Well, Tucker," he says, rummaging through his parts. "It's a goddam Red's auction in here." He bends down and rubs his wheel aligner.

I stand still, waiting for the right words, but there are none. There's nothing I can say without sounding stupid or sorry and I don't want to be humbled in my own home. I keep quiet.

"No news to me," Red continues. "Just came by to see for myself."

I begin picking up the orange rags from the floor since I can't figure out how to look proper for this kind of a situation. Folding them in squares, I place the rags neatly by the toy chest.

"Here's what we're gonna do," Red says. "You're gonna bring all my stuff back to the shop first thing Monday morning. This here mountain garage is closed." He picks up a deflated football and tosses it in the chest. "Then we'll figure out what you owe me," he continues. "And then we'll see."

Red moves past me, into the kitchen. I collect all his parts from the floor and conceal them back in the chest. Then I shut the lights in the garage and wish I could stay there in the dark. But I resent my urge to hide so I turn the lights back on, unashamed, and follow him to the front door where he takes his jacket from the coat rack.

"See you Monday morning," he says, grabbing a handful of M&M's from the candy dish on the side table.

The kids' rollerblading upstairs shakes the light fixture above our heads. The thudding makes Red squint. I'm happy they're doing something, even if it's skating over carpets.

"Maybe it's time for me to move on," I say, recalling once saying those words in front of the greasy bathroom mirror at work. "Start something for myself."

"What are you talking about, Tucker? Start what? A mountain garage?"

I think about shutting the door on him, but that won't make me feel good later on. He's asking the same questions I've been asking, and so I might as well answer him. My stomach rumbles and I think about the deer steaks in the fridge and how they're probably still warm.

"I think I could do something good up here," I say. "There'll be no swindling."

“You think people want a thief working on their car?”

“I’d ask you the same question.”

“You got two kids,” Red stammers. “A wife. This house must handle a hefty mortgage. You think a mountain garage will cover those costs?”

“I figure it’ll cost me more if I stay with you,” I say. “We’ll get by.”

“I’ll still expect you Monday with my stuff. I’ll press charges if you don’t show. Don’t think you’re getting any parting gifts.”

“I’ll be there,” I say, thinking about the exhaust systems underneath the porch he’d missed.

I picture Red struggling to find a transmission man as thorough as me. He’ll have to get under the hoods himself on Monday and that’s one man that doesn’t like getting dirty. This change will be hard for him too; I suddenly feel sorry for him. But the pity fades fast as I think about the knots that formed in my gut after I’d fix something on someone’s car that didn’t need fixing. I’d justified it by saying it was Red’s garage, his dirty work and not my own, but I think there’s no separating the two. Maybe I can change that now.

I close the door and lean against it for a while. The house is silent. Then Lita comes up behind me.

“What was that all about?” she asks, biting her nails. “I thought I heard y’all in the garage.”

“We were just talking. It’s all right.”

“Talking about what?”

I brush Lita’s hair away from her eyes. She looks tired. “Me, I guess.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, LITA’S SWEEPING UP PINE NEEDLES FROM UNDERNEATH the Christmas tree. A black-and-white movie plays on the muted TV. I throw two more logs in the wood stove. My hands look old in the fire light. Mangled like they’ve been in a wood chipper. My fingernails are black and no matter how many times I wash them, no matter how much kerosene I scrub them with, they’ll always be black. But I don’t mind.

“You warming up, hon?” Lita asks, crawling toward me.

“Yeah. My hands are stiff.”

She kisses me on the forehead and walks toward the kitchen. She’s wearing new jeans. Tight.

“Lita.”

She turns around. Tilts her head. “Yeah?”

“You got a nice ass.”

She smiles. Then dumps the pine needles into the trash can.

Back in the garage, I think about all the parts I'm going to need, what Mountain Top Automotive will cost me. I'll need insurance. The kids gotta have doctors. They both want braces. And more space. How am I going to house a bunch of cars? Probably require some permits to have my own shop. And what about Lita? I'll find a way to explain this to her soon and she'll probably be okay with it for a while, but what if this move squeezes us some. Love gets awful complicated when money's short. No sense getting nervous yet. I can't turn back anyway. I gotta fix on the good or else there'll be trouble.

I turn on the air hose and press it against my shirt, watching it suck in the thick, plaid cloth. In a year there might be a line of cars outside my garage. Maybe there'll be a small waiting room with decent coffee and good magazines. Might even need to hire on some help. We'll see how the kids turn out. Who knows? Maybe they can give me a hand.

This might be what we need.

*Mecca Jamilah Sullivan*

## A Strange People

WE-CHRISSE WILL LET THE WHITE MEN SEE AND TOUCH OUR difference. She will smile for doctors and handlers like Mrs. Susan's old china trinket dolls, tilt her head just so and laugh, her hand grabbing at our hemline. In the next town, we'll see banners and broadsides proclaiming our *charm*. We-Millie will not understand why they would write us that way. She will taste the word like coffee grinds in her mouth and wonder how they can print it so small and neat below the headlines: "Double-Headed Darkey," "United Negress Freaks," "Two-Headed African Beast." We-Chrissie will not have these questions. She will know that the nice words are for her. She is the one who has always hated us.

When we were young, decades ago, We-Chrissie wrote her version of our story, and everyone who knew us was surprised. She got most of the facts straight, told about our slave birth and the scandal we caused on our first master's farm, how we were sold from Master John and Mrs. Susan, then slipped like a wet hunk of soap from hand to hand, master to master, growing up and filling out the carnival circuit, seeing things most North Carolina nigger girls wouldn't even think to dream of—the darting English steam cars, the white-choked winter at the Cirque des Champs-Élysées. We-Chrissie spent a few words on the best time in We-Millie's part of the life, when we ended up back in Mrs. Susan's arms. She said a couple of things about our life on the midway, the place between the circus gates and the big top, where freak acts wander about and ballyhoo, preening and fanning their freakhood, squeezing awe from the norms' eyes like milk from a fat cow's udders.

We-Chrissie is an all-star bally, has always been. She preened and flaunted in her story too, playing our difference up and down like a yo-yo tossed to thrill a child. First it was a "malformation," then it was a "joy." Our join was a curse we were proud of, she said, painting on our minds the paradox of our body. And she refused to let them think for a second that the slightest drip of difference ran between we-two. "We are, indeed, a strange people," she began her story, and it continued

on like that—"a people," two, but one. She refused to tell anyone it was she alone who had written the story, without so much as letting We-Millie touch the pen or smell the ink when the manuscript was done. We-Chrissie wrote then, and will tell anyone who asks now, that there is only one heart in the body. We-Millie sits silent when she says this, and lets her go ahead with her show. We-Millie knows, though, that our hearts are separate. Our wombs, our backs, our hot puddles and buttons come in and out of each other like corset laces; We-Chrissie feels We-Millie's itches and We-Millie rubs on We-Chrissie's aches, but for We-Millie, our hearts are separate things, different as the sun and the moon pinning down the ends of a long day's sky.

It is obvious to everyone that We-Chrissie is the charming one. She is the one the newspapers talk about when they say we are alluring, delightful. We-Millie is the one that scares people, we think. She is quiet and unsure, and if we were not us, if we were norms, or nigger girls at least, We-Millie would never find herself within a stone's throw of a stage. We-Millie speaks German and Spanish better than We-Chrissie, better than Mrs. Susan, who taught us. But she stays quiet, the small, silent half. We-Chrissie is stronger; We-Millie is frail. We-Chrissie is pretty; We-Millie is darker and with a gnarling nose. While We-Chrissie smiles at the doctors and invites them to probe the body, We-Millie plays along and feels her heart burn in its cage. It is her feebler puddle, her crookeder pit in which they will splash and plunge to their hearts' content.

While We-Chrissie talks to reporters, doctors, midway norms, We-Millie moves her mouth and smiles along, but sends her mind inside. Both of we-two make up stories. We-Chrissie likes to say hers, shout them out from the stage, read them in the papers, write them down in books. We-Millie keeps her stories to herself.

When Mrs. Susan heard about We-Chrissie's story, she smiled, her soft pink cheeks glowing like the Virgin's as she chuckled. "I know I tried with you-all, but you couldn't have convinced me that *that* one ever learned to read. Least not by my hand. Don't know what you-all picked up on the road, I suppose." We-Chrissie has never been bothered by Mrs. Susan's comments. We-Millie gulps down Mrs. Susan's words like iced tea. We-Chrissie always took Mrs. Susan in sips, swishing her around in slow judgment whenever the woman was around, sometimes spitting her out when it was just we-two alone.

The biggest fight we-two ever had happened the morning of Master John's funeral. We-Chrissie wanted to wear our star-spangled taffeta

costume to the service. She said we'd be the blow-off, the grand finale of Master John's long-lived show. To her, he was a freak on his own, and a gaff at that. She said he passed for a kind master, an innocent roped into managing us like a child lured to the midway with candy and fairy tales, but that he was really a mastermind who had plotted our course from the time of our birth, calculating our lifetime's revenue by the time we were two months old. We-Millie liked her skepticism, but got hot at the thought of disrespecting Mrs. Susan by wearing the dress. We-Millie has loved Mrs. Susan forever, in the way that norm women, she thinks, love the people who take care of them, make them feel like the secret of life lives between their two limbs.

We-Chrissie loved our midway life, and We-Millie liked it well enough too. Although it was clotted with people and noise, We-Millie enjoyed the camaraderie that came with a traveling pack of freaks. Zip Johnson, "The Whatsit," adopted us as his niece, visiting our tent in costume after his "missing link" show, spinning us around in pirouettes and sharing some of the bananas he was paid to hurl at his audiences. Bearded and fat ladies of all heights and temperaments mothered us, pressing our hair and teaching us how to send our minds away from the body when norm men came to us with their pointing parts and probing smiles. For We-Millie, Miss Ella Ewing, the Missouri Giantess, was heaven itself, and the nook between her chest and her yardstick arm was a personal paradise. Miss Ella had traveled with Buffalo Bill's show, and it had filled her with stories we-two drank like raindrops. We-Chrissie loved to hear about the high, steady pay she received, and the handsome Indian men she performed with. We-Millie simply liked the sad, deep moan of the giantess's voice. She dragged the body to her every chance she got, just to curl into that nook and hear her thunderstorm breath and earthquake heartbeat.

We-Chrissie has always insisted that we have no real family, though she didn't write that in her book. We-Millie sees it differently. For her, the midway freaks and the circus staff, the managers' wives and children, and sometimes men like Barnum himself make a collage of a family portrait we can hang proudly enough on the wall of our life. We-Chrissie's face sours when We-Millie says these kinds of things, and she spits. "You also insist on thinking that the man who sold us to the stage loves you." We-Millie thinks, *Yes, I have to think that, and I have to think he loves you too.* But she doesn't need to say it, of course, because We-Chrissie knows.

Mrs. Susan and Master John hold our story together like bookends—we both agree on that. They were there just as life set us whirling about like a spinning top, and here they are again—the lady, the ghost—now that things are starting to slow down. Master John was still living when Mrs. Susan and he came to England to get us from Lars Rachman, the most recent man to have crept into a tent and taken us in the middle of the night. Master John was brusque as usual, but kind enough, returning We-Chrissie's buttermilk smile as he ushered us out of the Liverpool courtroom. Mrs. Susan was slower, warmer, as was her way. She rose at us like a pan of biscuits, pulling the body toward her with her scent and her feel and her promise of home.

We were too young to know then that home doesn't exist unless it's far from you, that either it or you must disappear the moment you return. North Carolina after the Civil War was like a rabbit shank after a wolf attack, and Master John's house was no more a home than a floor tile was a pike road. We-Millie will swear it was the shock of our return, and the swelling presence of Mrs. Susan's misery that first brought the fever and the cough to her side of the body. We-Chrissie has always laughed those claims off, not so much to dismiss her as to keep her focused on the tasks at hand. Master John died of gout before We-Millie had a chance to feel all of her pain, and our status as breadwinners for his family and for ourselves became official.

We-Chrissie became our manager, making contacts with the North Carolina showmen we'd known before we left, dazzling them all with her smile and laugh, running her bally to keep them interested. Her act was tight and she always got her *ding*, as circus folks say, the clink of whatever capitol she sought against the rim of whatever pot she passed around. We needed money, of course, but We-Chrissie was smart. She knew that a few dollars weekly from a traveling sideshow gig was all right for a pair of young nigger-girl freaks without the need or right to do for themselves, but we were grown, almost old, and as free as we would ever be. We needed money, We-Chrissie knew, but it was information that would make us. She enlisted the help of Ron Samuel, Master John's old stableman, and set the body flitting about the marshlands of Columbus County with her ear to the tracks of the circus world, dropping Master John's good name like maple sugar candies whenever we needed white norm protection.

It was in a saloon near Soules Swamp that we heard the news We-Chrissie thought would change our life. The barmaid was a woman who had ballyhood for P.T. Barnum's show years before, when we

were being billed as the “Two-Headed Cherub Monstrosity.” She was a kind woman with a ruddy face and a mess of wheat-colored hair piled up on her head. She always liked Master John and Mrs. Susan, and We-Millie thought she was nice enough to us, though We-Chrissie insisted she was simply trying to get on Master John’s good side, which for her meant the inside of his pants. Still, she smiled when we shuffled sideways through the door, and offered us a glass of lemonade, which We-Millie decided we would drink.

“You girls know ‘bout the nigger show?” she asked, watching We-Chrissie’s face for evidence that she felt or tasted the lemonade. We-two shook our heads.

“Man behind Buffalo Bill—not Cody, but the money man, a Yankee. He’s doing a big show about niggers. You-all’d be perfect for it.”

We-Millie could feel We-Chrissie’s smile spread on the skin. We-Chrissie thanked the woman and yanked the body toward the door so quickly We-Millie had to pinch the spine to slow us down so she could pay. The woman smiled, and We-Millie felt her eyes on the body as we ambled out the door, We-Millie glad to be heading home as always, We-Chrissie dreaming of New York City, plotting the course of our life anew.

THE FIRST THING NATE SALSBURY SAW AS HE STEPPED TOWARD HIS office door, a hot mug of coffee in his hand, was the shadow of what looked like a lightening-struck bonsai tree hovering on his wall. The dark shape startled him, then drew him in. He paused at the doorway and gripped his mug, hoping to keep from dropping it or spilling the coffee, as he’d felt scattered and off-kilter since his morning meeting. But as the shadow began to twirl along the wall, he decided to sip for a moment and watch it move. A perfect bonsai, he decided: mangled even in its symmetry, purely exotic, fine and lovely, but no less than grotesque. As the shadow rose and began to twist, he moved with it, slowly catching its rhythm, hurriedly catching his breath.

“I heard you were a dancer,” he said, setting the mug beside his leather blotter. “But I could never have dreamed a figure of such brilliant grace.”

The creature smiled with its slightly prettier head and halted, one half dipping into a curtsey which the other half mirrored perfectly.

“How can we respond to a compliment from a man so discerning and worldly as yourself?” the fairer head said. “We can only invite you to examine us as long and as fully as your least whim would have.”

Salsbury smiled, taken aback by the pointedness of the creature's charm. This head was clearly the showman, he concluded, and the businessman as well. The other head was engaged, nodding and smiling throughout, but it seemed to maintain a certain distance, watching the scene as though through a cloud.

He had heard about this creature, touted as a Negress version of the two-headed Oriental that had hit the circuit so hard some years ago. The comparison was logical, of course, but seeing this creature before him, he saw that that description missed much. The fairer head in particular had a clawing spunk that even the more animated half of the Oriental could never have aspired to. Some things about her he had seen in Negro women, performers and not, before. She had the bite of a Negro woman made tough and mannish by years of work, yet too smart to relinquish the last dregs of her girlish charm. Other things, though, he had never seen in a Negro, or an Indian, or talent of any kind before. This creature seemed to see itself just as a showman would see it, locating the lair of its dark allure and subduing its other parts to keep all eyes on the money spot. The creature bent its hind legs leisurely and fanned a smile, awaiting his response.

"Well, Miss McKoy, I am obviously honored by your offer," he said, settling in behind his desk. "But of course you'd want to know your talents were fully appreciated before having them committed to the whim, as you say, of a stranger. I hear that among your many gifts is a literary talent. Is that right?"

The creature nodded its heads, and the sullen face seemed to brighten up.

"Oh, yes," the fair head said eagerly. "We know the best parts of Spenser, and many of the Sonnets, as well as the major works of Molinet, and du Mans, as well as all of the Lay of Hildebrand, each in the original language, and in translation, of course."

"And," the plain head interrupted dryly, "we compose our own poetry as well."

"Yes," he sighed, leaning back. "I'd be delighted to hear an original composition from the very four lips of the poetess."

The creature opened its mouths, offering for the first time a taste of their vocal harmony. Salsbury had expected, at first, some tonal dissonances, as one often heard in the first few seconds of group auditions. The creature made no false starts, though. It launched flawlessly into a compelling rhyming bit about its life, its two voices perfectly pitched and ringing clearly as a single bell.

As the creature spoke, Salsbury felt his mind skip like a phonograph back on its track to the morning's meeting. He had had in this same office what initially impressed him as an unremarkable group, also auditioning for his new Negro show. He had put word out weeks before among colleagues and busybodies that he was putting together history's largest Negro performance, to match dollar for dollar and ticket for ticket his success with Buffalo Bill, and to exceed that show in quality as well as moral heft. This exhibition, he had told them all, would showcase the finer qualities of the Negro. It would bring to the fore the darker race's evolution from African jungle savagery to New York civilization, and would recall all the delights of his character at each stage. The advertisements would mention the Negro's darker days, but would also herald his resurrection. Audiences the world over would be thrilled by all parts of the spectacle. They would cull joy from the Negro's triumph, and be relieved from their own pains by the utterly black drama unfolding on stage.

He had to acknowledge that it was a brilliant idea each time he thought about it. It was going swimmingly, and after only two months of planning, the first performance was nearly cast. The best minstrel actors had been recruited from the length of the eastern seaboard, and New York's highest-grossing writers were at work on scripts that would bring the high drama of the Negro's history to the stage. He was now in the more relaxed phase of booking specialty acts. As well as things had gone up to this point, the moment in which he found himself now was strange. Here he was, requiring himself to choose between this Negress freak, an embodiment of error, and the ostensibly unremarkable group he had seen this morning. And even as the cloven creature sparkled eerily before him, reading what was turning out to be a shockingly competent poem, he found himself pulled toward this morning's less-than-spectacle, a group called "That So Different Four."

He had expected the group to shuffle into his office at least five minutes late, as was the Negro way. His first surprise, then, was to find them dressed to the nines and reading newspapers casually beside his secretary's desk when he walked in to the office, twenty minutes before the meeting time they'd arranged. The surprise did not end there, but rather grew into shock as he heard the group speak and watched them perform. The two men and two women moved as a unit, and spoke as clearly and articulately as the creature before him, which, from the freestanding Negroes, was even more of a shock. The two-headed creature was made, sent even, to thrill and bewilder. But

a pack of well-dressed, well-spoken darkies, mannered and reading, and operating together with an almost mechanical precision—this was the kind of spectacle no audience member could forget. The two-headed old Negro girl would alarm audiences, for sure. She would scare them and smile at them as they left the theatre and returned to their lives. But the dandies—no, not dandies, one couldn't really even call them that—the “Different” negroes, with their finery just on the slight side of decadence, would bring the audiences to their edge, where jealousy gave its last agonized shout before dribbling into the childish mockery that proliferated on the minstrel stage. They would not let men and women tumble from theatres contentedly into their days. They would haunt them as they haunted him, their dark eyes flashing from wall placards, campaign posters, family portraits on parlor walls, or worse—and chillingly better—from the looking glass itself. The thought scared and thrilled him, and he found himself eager to see them at a distance, behind the fourth wall of the stage. They were performers, darkies on stage like so many, for so many years before; and yet unlike those darkies, or the black lump of oddity that sat before him, the “So Different Four” were not so different at all. They were black, of course, but otherwise, they were nearly...almost....

When the creature’s poem concluded, the prettier head gave a confident, expectant smile, pushing the upper portion of her side of its body toward him.

“Well, you certainly are talented.” Salsbury stood and walked toward her. “I can’t imagine what man could be disappointed by such a treat. Thank you for your time, young lad...” he stammered, then put his hand on the creature’s back, making sure to get a grab of the fleshy wishbone spine as he ushered it out the door.

WE STAYED IN NEW YORK FOR THREE WEEKS AFTER OUR MEETING with Salsbury, boarding with a friend of Mrs. Susan’s who promised us privacy and discretion, and who, for the most part, delivered both. We lived off of money Mrs. Susan loaned us, though We-Chrissie refused to call it a loan, as all of Mrs. Susan’s money, she said, came from us at the end of the day. When we didn’t hear from Salsbury after a week, We-Chrissie asked the friend to carry us back to his downtown office, where we waited with his secretary for two hours before being told that he wouldn’t be able to see us that day.

It was a cool, rainy, afternoon, the kind of day we have only experienced in the American North, where the wind feels mean and

lazy at once, and the rain seems to pinch angrily at the skin. We-Millie had been feeling lower and lower, her fevers coming stronger and more frequently since we'd left home. The coolness and the wetness seemed to make things worse on her side of the body, and, feeling it too, We-Chrissie promised that we would return to Columbus County as soon as we signed a contract with Salsbury. Once signed, she said, we would insist on staying home with Mrs. Susan until just before the opening of the show.

Leaving Salsbury's building, we stopped near the entranceway to fumble with our umbrellas, each of we-two working to find an angle at which to hold our separate shields while making sure to cover the join. We-Millie had turned to protect her hair from a particularly fierce spattering of droplets when the finest group of niggers we had ever seen waltzed toward the threshold. A man and two women trailed behind, and at the head of the pack was a tall, slim brown man with eyes like pools of sweet milk trimmed with long, fur-like lashes. We-Millie felt We-Chrissie's blood rush, and thought for a second that she might move so fast toward him she would tear the join.

The man's name, it turned out, was Carlo, and he was the lead performer of a new musical group. We-Chrissie gave Carlo a smile We-Millie had never felt before, a smile that seemed to buzz over the entire surface of the skin and burrow deeply into the knots of the body's flesh. Both of we-two eyed the two women, though We-Millie kept her gaze up only briefly enough to see that neither of them looked kind. Both were dressed finely, in smart streetcoats with silver buckles. One in particular looked to We-Millie like a flower vase, her body curving in and out in ample stretches. We-two felt instantly ashamed, though we were wearing the best costume we had—a black and blue suede number with beadwork and embroidery at its empire waist. We felt the women's eyes fall on the body, felt their lightly nauseous pity. We-Millie, of course, wanted to leave the scene, to find dryness and warmth and wrap the body in it. After a few minutes of conversation, though, We-Chrissie determined that the two women were Carlo's colleagues and nothing more, and, in some way that We-Millie could not understand, this meant something important to We-Chrissie.

Carlo said that he had heard about our act as a child, and had thought of us as icons as he dreamed about an entertainment career. This news fell on We-Chrissie like a marriage vow, and she began to gush her compliments to him, being sure to work in details of our life that would indicate—in case he was too dumb to know, We-Millie

thought—that we were single and available. We-Millie gave him the address of the friend with whom we were staying, and suggested that he call on us to chat about our experience in the business, or anything else. He thanked her with a deep bow and proceeded with his company out of the rain, leaving us to continue the business of keeping ourselves dry, and giving us another call to wait for. As We-Millie's fever broke like a cloud into sweat showers and the coughs from her side of the body began to produce a pinkish phlegm, We-Chrissie added days to our stay in the North, promising that Salsbury, or Carlo, or *somebody*, would call at any minute.

We-Millie finds it needless to say that neither call ever came. We-Chrissie resents this feeling from the body's other half.

What is remarkable, for We-Millie, at least, is the course our story was taking, even as we dallied in New York, holding ourself up for sale like the last rotting piece of fruit at the produce market. What is remarkable, even We-Chrissie can't deny, is the shock, still with us, of returning to Columbus on a Saturday morning, to be met with Ron Samuel's stricken face and shattered voice, announcing in an auctioneer's bewildered monotone how Mrs. Susan had passed, alone, late Friday night.

We did not know something like that could happen. We-Chrissie did not know how painful it can be sometimes to get one's way. We-Millie did not know that one's own powerlessness could have its effects in the lives of the people one loves.

But we knew Salsbury like we have known all the masters and handlers and doctors, all the white norm men all our lives, including Master John. And somehow, Carlo now seems like one of them, no more sincere than Salsbury, no kinder than Master John. We should not have been surprised by Salsbury. We-Chrissie had felt his ambivalence as he eyed the body while we spun around his office, doing our most difficult dance. We-Millie felt him stare at us as though he expected gold coins to pour from between our legs, smelled his disappointment when they did not. We knew these crashes with normness. We knew these shocks and the feelings they brought, but we needed money as badly as Salsbury wanted it. So We-Millie stayed quiet while We-Chrissie brightened her face and stuck out her bosom, waving the body in the white man's face like a flag before a firing squad.

We-Millie tries to be understanding as she reviews this scene. She tries not to think of Mrs. Susan, just as she feels We-Chrissie trying not to think of Carlo, the nigger show, and all the other things she feels we've lost.

“We were stupid to think it could work forever,” We-Chrissie sighs, her head falling onto We-Millie’s shoulder. “We were stupid to believe they would always want us. How dumb to think we could be just the right blend of bile and sweetness always, that tastes and people and times would not change and leave us here in this wet, black torture box, alone. We were silly to act like we didn’t wish we were better. We were dumb to pretend we felt like the glint in God’s eye. How stupid we were...”

*You were stupid.* The thought slices like a knife into the body. Then We-Millie says it aloud.

“You were stupid to think they wanted you in the first place. *You* are the stupid one. I am only your prisoner. I have never been your twin.”

The shoulders twist. The heads roll apart. We are sharing a brutal wish.

*There is no point in being angry now.* It may have been one or the other who tempted the barrage, but we feel the shrapnel in all quarters of the body. The back hands reach for each other and stroke themselves. A hot sweat slicks up on the spine, a chill rushes down from the tender crevice of the join. We have never shared this wish before.

We-Chrissie’s heart is slowing. We-Millie feels hers quicken.

*Janice N. Harrington*

## **Pinch**

In a room bright with sunlight, an aide feeds  
purée to an old woman in a wheelchair.

The old woman, blinded by cataracts,  
spools the brownish mash between her lips.

The aide scrapes the woman's lips and chin  
with the spoon edge and pushes the spillings

between her lips again. But the old woman  
does not want to eat, or perhaps needs more time

to swallow, or perhaps does not like the brown mash,  
and instead she spits. The aide spoons more mash

between her lips, and the old woman, reaching,  
snatches the skin on the aide's bare arm

and squeezes its fold hard between two  
rooty fingers, smiling. She thinks, by this small

violence, that she has won, that she is the victor  
of the contest, not to be ignored, not defenseless.

But *this* aide pinches her back: fierce and sharp.  
The old woman widens opaque eyes,

straining to see this scorpion, this scissor-beaked  
bird, this awl and mirror image—this enemy,

but in her eyes are cloud banks, splinters  
of dazzle, and shadow. She sees nothing

*Janice N. Harrington*

and feels...feels pinpricks, ice, broken glass,  
and hate, hate, hate. They spar, pinch for pinch,

until the eyes draw their curtains, until at last  
there comes a cry that no one hears but the aide

who takes the tray and clears the puréed splatter.  
Whatever is uneaten remains so. Whatever

hungers goes unfed. Below the aide's sleeve  
welts rise, signs and auguries, the tracks

of a small mammal, furtive and scurrying  
over a bank of snow.

## White Slips

She remembers them, the old women,  
good immigrant stock, slips as white as altar  
cloth starched sharp enough to cut,  
their drawers of white cotton slips folded

and creased. Oh, how they loved order.  
She remembers their long braids wound  
into labyrinth, the greasy silk she combed  
in slowing strokes, singing to them

with plastic and boar bristle, these old, white heads  
and the solemn sweep of hand and arm, stroking,  
stroking, until they were girls again.  
She did that for them when there was time.

Between her fingers, they found their way  
home again, the old tongue returning  
like a prodigal son, the ghost of a brother  
lost to war, a husband to cancer.

It was *scheisse* when rough hands hurt  
them. *Schwarz!* to the aide that lifted  
them, and *mein Gott, mein Gott* the blues  
they sang from wheelchair to bed,

those vowels never forgotten but worn as close  
to the skin as a cotton slip. *Scheisse. Schwarz.*  
The words came and they cradled them:  
*Ja, mein Gott, mein Gott, mein Gott.*

*Mein vater in himmel.* White cotton slips  
pressed, composed, and smooth—fierce  
precisions—the good order these old heads  
have kept against their skin like penance,

a hard white carapace inviolate and reassuring,  
the fruit of scalding water, lye soap, and Argo  
Laundry Starch, signs of rectitude lifted  
and shaken loose by dark-fingered *schwarze*  
who care nothing. *O mein Gott, mein Gott.*

## Pockets

*after Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried*

They carried tissues, latex gloves, and tubes  
of A & D. They carried buttermints, sticks of gum,  
keys, and a wristwatch with a broken strap.

They carried ointment, lubricating jelly, syringes,  
a washcloth, bandages, a comb, lists, a cookie  
wrapped in a paper towel for break, rubber bands,  
safety pins, a loose button, a tongue depressor,  
and death. At least, she had once imagined,

*What if death follows me? What if death clings  
to an aide's hem or the seams of her collar?  
What if an aide bears death from bed to bed,  
death that slips into an aide's pocket  
and out at bed check? What if her pockets  
carry the unending dark, the Great Beyond,*

or the peace to come beside the rubbery  
arteries of her stethoscope? She considered it:  
I am death's avatar, death's agent, its white-  
hemmed messenger, *Swing low. Yes, swing  
low, sweet chariot.* She walks softly.

She listens at each door for signs:  
a stuttered breath, a sheet, a rattled rail.  
Moonlight sags the edge of her pocket.  
It slips in unnoticed, another weight to carry.

## Three Odes

### 1. To MS

The brain blooms gray-white,  
its spiny stalk branching out below  
twice, then twice again, each end  
a delicate splay, a dexterous plume  
of muscle, cartilage, neuron, bone.

Commands filter through  
the narrow filaments: *raise the hand*,  
*or sing*, and the tongue trills  
its lovely notes and the shoulder  
lifts the arm and the arm, the wrist,

and so on, until the fingers  
flutter through air, until day  
no longer follows night. Unyielding  
darkness decays the body's  
spores, scatters dendrites like seed

husks. Desire's idle thought:  
*see the chair across the room, walk*  
*to it* becomes a need, and then  
implacability. Still the legs  
stay still, resolute. The cleft body

petrifies, though tremors rustle  
its branches. Without instruction,  
axons aimlessly drift in dark hollows  
of the brain's trunk, widening  
the distance between body and chair.

## 2. To Oranges

A housewife stands  
at her sink, in her hand  
an orange, rind resistant  
as skin. A vial of insulin—  
opposite of vile  
its homonym—a haystack  
of syringes,  
the needles sharp as needles,  
are arranged for practice.

Deep inside her own  
boy's body, buried deep  
inside his pancreas,  
the Langerhans Islets, once  
plump jewel-cases of fuel,  
have shriveled, their ducts  
the cold smokestacks of a defunct  
factory, its façade eyelets  
of broken windows.

A drop of sweet, the yield  
of one attempt, seeps through  
the wound. The orange  
never winces. Any mother  
can inject one. She stabs  
the orange again  
and again, until  
all the sweet is gone,  
no little boy in sight.

### 3. To Bipolarity

Cans of iron-stiff paintbrushes,  
walls half white, half black, bare.

You memorize every wing of the Met,  
echo grand plans daily through its halls.

Only to repeat six months in bed,  
your hotline calls greeted by name,

dirty hair and dirty room, the pills  
befogging, focusing, happy, hindering.

*It's a good day to die, you chant,  
I want to live forever.*

No groceries in the house,  
you buy a hundred oranges.

Checks bounce, why not  
adopt two Persian cats;

you all eat out of cans.  
One day you vacuum the rug

eight hours. Affect effectively drug-  
flattened, you've found an outside job

filng: two weeks, the same alphabet.  
You miss believing you can fly

until you believe you can fly, and  
dive into the Hell Gate tides

from the East River cliffs. Before you sink,  
seizing up in cold panic, you soar.

The authorities pick you up  
and lock you down.

## **Beckett Howl**

Dead three years now, has he kissed redemption like a girl?  
Held to her as if it were his own life he was clinging to? The kiss  
light, at first, on the cheek, but the rest, the embrace and the arms  
gathering the other, more pained, more desperate, like metal  
strapping containing a box. Because at some point he must have  
longed to leave his body—not in death with others standing,  
doing nothing, having just watched him die in that cold room  
packed with machinery above the river, and me there breathless,  
staring down at his Beckett howl—but in a different place, the  
way he did as a child, midday, the morning's chores done—his  
mother's words like mayflies on a punched-out screen, moist and  
vivid at daybreak, but papery and dead by noon. The feel of the  
milk cows still against him, head in a flank, flesh upon flesh.  
Ghost-child, 12 or 13, smokes crimped in a pocket. Mother ladling  
out soup. Father on a cot by the stove for a snore-riven nap, hard-  
on riding his stomach. Another dumb animal from the yard.

## Cruel All Moons and Bitter the Suns

*Arthur Rimbaud, The Drunken Boat*

My father swims the Wapsipinicon—body of  
a child, body  
of a poet, upon the body of the stream—

Southern Iowan Drift Plain, his white hands,  
white arms,  
the beginnings of a canvas sheet. In another

zone, another wash, talus slope—the cannibal  
histories:  
the collared lemming, remnant

skull-work, the heather or mountain vole,  
layered as the current  
is layered,

twisting through the hillsides. Still he floats. An animal  
presence—  
a herd of cattle—companion field—

lies down in his lungs. Pressure of rib and  
water and  
longing and breath and grass. The waters let him

go his own free way. There is a wing  
in the shadow of  
evening, a black wind in his hands that fashions

a bleached-white bone. Dutch Creek fissure, washout,  
Empty Fissure  
nearly devoid of sediment

though there is something dark, dense, organic-rich—  
a light, orangish-red silt  
that appears to be *in situ*.

*Sound of his singing beneath the torn up sky.*  
Daylight fading,  
a colony of doves;

star-infused, bleeding Sea.

He wants to show his mother a gold fin  
hanging in a blue wave,

a flower he can shake through the barn in a tremble  
of pollen,  
twig bark so water-logged

it peels off in chunks. Sheath of the water flensed  
from the sheath  
of wood, like a snake's slow kiss

into cooling moistness...decaying body  
of a swan.  
“O countless golden birds, O Force to come”—

he's out of the water now, running, his pants  
hitched high:  
class amphibian, *dirty child*....

At the doorway, gilded threshold, his mother's  
flesh recoils—  
class reptilian, fragment of shell....

He puts his head down into the hearth's lap. It is  
late, it is  
evening. He watches firedogs flicker,

*Dennis Hinrichsen*

flake....What he loves best: slurs  
of run-off  
mirroring clouds in the mown-down  
fields, spitting bird bones through the flesh of his teeth.

*Cynthia Marie Hoffman*

## Burning Paper in Lazarus Cemetery

The woman who works in the cemetery in her blue smock  
bends over to pick a strip of paper from the earth  
and drops it in the barrel as a god would drop  
a bird into a sputtering volcano. A white smoke  
rises and disappears. All around her,  
crosses are popping up like crooked weeds.  
Listen to the little river swish  
along the walls of the canal. Nearby, a fresh grave  
is plump with flowers, a mound like a dozen girls  
fainted in their ruffled party skirts. What better place  
to be set into the ground? The trees  
lower their long necks to the water, their many flat faces  
nodding at their own reflections. The woman bends.  
Another bird is lit afire.

## The Heart of Sintra

*To see the world and leave out Sintra  
is to go blind about.*

—Spanish proverb

At the heart of Sintra, at the Royal Palace,  
a pair of enormous chimneys surges into the sky  
like ravenous birds thrusting their elastic hairless necks  
out from a cool nest of stone woven by moors and kings.

High above a nearby cobbled street, a woman  
whose hair is white and thin as a bonnet of lace  
draws open her windows. The pigeons have already  
assembled in their hustling flapping manner, slapping their dry  
orange feet along the roof. The air in the alley is awhirl.

She disappears her hand into a heavy sack and returns it  
to the sill heaped with black and golden corn. Who is shy  
in the presence of this delicate palm, pale as the apartment's  
peach façade from which each day, alleluia, it emerges?  
Not the feathers which bear the pigeon upon the air,  
the pointed beak that dips into the human cup.

When the woman raises her head, finds me on the balcony  
of my hotel, she smiles, lifts her hand to stroke  
the slick airy creature, where deep inside  
churns the thrumming current of the heart. From here,  
her face is blurred by the flock, the eager swirl of wings,

as if she herself were the axis upon which all winged  
things turn, the small breath of air at the core  
of a knot of birds. Even the frescoed swans  
and magpies who dignify the palace's shadowy halls.  
Even the giant chimneys clamoring toward the empty sky.

## The Island

*Must I thus leave thee, Paradise? Thus leave  
Thee, native soil*

—Milton

At last, I stole away with nothing, glanced back only once to see, a final time, the orchids' lucent faces through the night. Glistening rain held fast to shaking leaves. The earth was dusty where I went: inland citrus, jagged mountains, Joshua trees. No mud, no slickness underfoot. Wasps stitched their needle-bodies through the air. Once I sat and sucked an orange, then at least six more. It felt inevitable—deep in rows of jutting roots at dusk on a breezeless day—that I keep tearing at those fruits. And when I rose to go, what blazed airily down were rims of sunlit cloud.

*Francisco Aragón*

## The Nicaraguan Novel

*What I needed was perhaps to approach my homelessness  
as an asset, not as a stigma.*

—Ilan Stavans

I WAS FOUR OR FIVE THE FIRST TIME THEY TOOK ME TO SEE HIM.

And then the visits stopped—for reasons I wouldn’t learn of until the day of my mother’s funeral over two decades later. What survives is my father in a snug, white T-shirt—Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Once, he handed me a gun. I remember my father producing from behind his back the shiny black object, feeling its blunt weight in my palm where he placed it. The hammer of the pistol somehow dug into the base of my thumb, causing a tiny patch of skin to balloon with blood. I don’t recall the words he murmured to offset the pain. But I remember he spoke to me in Spanish.

Maria, my oldest sister, was ten when he left. Martha was nine, Tomás was seven. The story goes that despite his departure from our lives, my father would sometimes appear at my mother’s bedroom window, climb in and stay the night—or not. After one such visit she found herself pregnant with me. By all accounts his definitive absence, or rather, my mother’s definitive refusal to take him back, was a welcome respite in our home. My father’s drinking and jealous streak didn’t mix well. My sisters confided what a relief it was to have him gone. My brother recounted a memory of his own that also involved a handgun—this time brandished, accompanied by shouting and threats.

Of the few anecdotes my mother shared about him, one involved arriving home from Woolworth’s to find him seated at the kitchen table, Budweiser in hand. The grin gracing her lips caused him to blurt: “¿De qué te sonries?” *What are you smiling about?* And then, louder: “¡¿De quién te sonries?!” *Who are you smiling about?!* Imagination fueled mistrust. But my mother never spoke with a shred of resentment. “Tu padre está enfermo,” she would say, claiming he was unwell. Thanks to her, and because I never shared a roof with him, I inherited my mother’s lack of resentment. And yet once, over the phone, when I was

reticent on the subject, my mother thought me hostile and said, “You shouldn’t hate your father.” The most she ever admitted was that he had a tendency to raise his voice. As an adult, I would sometimes prod for a more nuanced portrait of him, a more nuanced portrait of them. But she was reluctant to speak.

HOURS AFTER WE BURY OUR MOTHER, MY SIBLINGS AND I SIT IN THE front room of our home in San Francisco, trading mental images of her. The guests gone, Maria shares one from before the time I was born—one that includes our father. She is six and standing in the doorway of their bedroom. She sees his arms raised; sees his arms bring down the flimsy nightstand—the wood splintering over her mother’s head.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER MY MOTHER SUCCUMBED TO CANCER IN 1997, I returned to Madrid, where I’d been living for nearly ten years. Sergio Ramírez, the former Vice President of Nicaragua, had just won a prestigious literary prize for a manuscript based, in part, on the last days of Rubén Darío’s life and whose title, *Margarita, está linda la mar*, is taken from one of Darío’s poems. Ramírez was someone I’d been well aware of but whose work I’d neglected. Nevertheless, one afternoon I walked into Casa del Libro in Madrid and bought the book of his I was able to find: a novel that chronicles a day in the life of a Nicaraguan village.

WHEN MY FATHER BOARDED THE PLANE IN MANAGUA IN 1956, HE was leaving behind a bride with child. Six months later, he sent for her. Shortly thereafter, Maria, the sister who would always be ten years older than me, was born in San Francisco—a city that’s mentioned in Sergio Ramírez’s novel, suggesting ties between Nicaragua and the place I was born and raised in. Here’s a passage:

“[...] Y San Francisco no es país, es una ciudad donde suben por una cuesta empinada los transvías sonando su campanilla, y fue de uno de esos transvías que me pareció ver bajar a la desaparecida Victoria Mercado; y queda allí también el Golden Gate qué es un Puente colgante que sale, pletórico de luces, en las tarjetas postales.” [Un baille de máscaras, pp. 102/103]

Ramírez himself would confirm these ties during a chat we had at a book fair in Madrid in the months after my mother’s death. He

mentioned a “Victoria Mercado” (as the passage above indicates), and I imagined hers was a name he’d heard as a boy, the name of a relative, perhaps, who made her way north—as my father’s older brothers did, paving the way for him.

THE POOREST COUNTRY IN CENTRAL AMERICA WAS ALWAYS A PRESENCE while growing up. In 1972 the black-and-white console in our living room flickered with images of twisted beams and rubble. Many years later, Polo, my father’s younger brother, would share the story of a cousin whose bedroom walls buckled before coming down, crushing him and his new bride, both of them perishing in the earthquake that killed ten thousand. We had relatives who survived, who lived on the outskirts of the capital, including my grandmother, who’d lived with us for six months when I was four. It was also in the seventies when I first heard the word—that name: Somoza. Nicaragua had been in the grips of a dynasty since the thirties, a dynasty locked in place by U.S. Marines. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the last of the Somoza clan to rule Nicaragua, hastened his own downfall by swindling the money the world had sent after the quake. When he was finally overthrown, I was about to enter the eighth grade. I devoted that summer to basketball, to improving my left-handed lay-up. Magic Johnson was set to begin his rookie season with the Lakers when the Sandinistas trundled into Managua on flatbed trucks to cheering crowds waving red and black flags on July 19, 1979.

With this struggling revolution as backdrop, I discovered the poems of Ernesto Cardenal. He’d been appointed Nicaragua’s Ministro de Cultura. In the eleventh grade, I played hooky to hear him, turning left at the corner at the top of the hill to walk down 24<sup>th</sup> to the BART station. But instead of stepping onto a train heading towards Daly City and Riordan High School, I boarded a convoy on the opposite side of the platform: one going downtown before coursing along the floor of the bay, before re-surfacing as an elevated train through Oakland, and then dipping underground again into downtown Berkeley.

Wheeler Auditorium, the large lecture hall I’d sit in as a freshman in two years time, was packed. People sat in the aisles to see and hear the white-haired, trimly bearded poet-priest in a beret. He recited poems about the “busy” days following the triumph. The translator standing beside him, a woman, read English versions in what I remember was an engaging manner, though without overshadowing Cardenal’s commanding presence. I remember feeling slightly smug at

being able to follow both his Spanish and her English. It wouldn't be an understatement to say that sitting in that auditorium as a truant high schooler was, as an aspiring writer, a seminal moment. I remember taking BART back to the city, gazing out over West Oakland before the train sloped into the bay, imagining how our lives might have unfolded had my father not boarded that plane, choosing, instead, to raise his family in the country that raised him.

IN 1984, SERGIO RAMÍREZ BECAME VICE PRESIDENT OF NICARAGUA and my stint at UC Berkeley began. If I sensed in myself an inclination towards the humanities in high school, that preference honed into a love of literature and the written word in college. As a sophomore, I enrolled in my first poetry workshop—one with Ishmael Reed. Verse became my genre of choice as a reader. This, coupled with my skepticism of literature written by politicians, kept Sergio Ramírez at bay. Whenever I wandered into Cody's on Telegraph or Black Oak on Shattuck, I was more inclined to browse the poetry section. Anytime I stepped into City Lights in North Beach I'd walk straight to the Poetry Room.

And yet, in the end, it would be a novel by Ramírez that would do what a poem never has.

I WALKED TO THE FRONT OF SAINT JAMES CHURCH TO UTTER A FEW words. I was addressing my mother's friends, at her funeral. I spoke Spanish standing behind her casket, expressing how grateful I was that she'd raised me *in* Spanish. I read a poem by Rubén Darío, one in which he recalls the golden "Nicaraguan sun" of his childhood—prompting me to envision the dusty sunlight my mother likely played in as a toddler in Granada, where she was born; or to imagine a bright day in Managua in the fifties when she met my father—a bookkeeper for Orange Crush.

But despite my fluency, I'd been, until college, illiterate in Spanish—unable to read or write it. The Ernesto Cardenal I'd read in high school were the English translations available from New Directions. Over time I married my love of literature with my love of the Spanish language, laying the groundwork to study Spanish literature as a major. I began to study the language formally, struggling with the subjunctive like everyone else. But it wasn't until I lived, traveled, and worked in Spain that I began to inhabit the language—translating Lorca, reading Cervantes, corresponding with my mother. Spain, for the better part of the nineties, was home. Or was it the language that was a homeland of sorts?

Whenever I opened my mouth it was immediately known that I wasn't *from* Spain. Venezuela?...Colombia?... "No," I'd say. "Soy de California." The look in their eyes would puzzle me: did they think all Californians looked like someone on *Baywatch*? Nevertheless, I did have friends in Madrid who were very aware that Spanish was common currency in my home state. They referred to people like me as *hispanos*. On my visits to San Francisco, usually at Christmas or in summer, my mother's friends would tell me I sounded Spanish. "Habla como un español," they'd say to her. Curiously, they said it in such a way, it seemed, as if my mother should feel proud.

THE X-RAY SHOWED A MASS IN THE UPPER REGION OF HER RIGHT lung. My mother was 63. I was spending that summer in San Francisco. One afternoon a few weeks after the diagnosis, my brother walked into the kitchen and told my sisters and me that Gloria, our father's second wife, had passed away from leukemia in the last year. Her illness had brought them financial ruin. Dad was surviving on welfare and food stamps, diabetes beginning to take root. All this according to the aunt he'd run into, an aunt whose home on Potrero Hill I'd visited as a child. She was my father's sister. We mentally filed this new information. There was an unspoken understanding (my mother's prognosis wasn't good; she was given, at most, a year) that we'd eventually track him down to help. The past was the past. He was our father.

MY MOTHER WORRIED ABOUT ME. I HAD A BACHELOR'S DEGREE FROM UC Berkeley and a masters from New York University and yet was barely scraping by as a language teacher in Europe. That I was also making a go at reading, writing and translating poetry didn't especially register as an activity with a future. She was right, of course. In the weeks before her diagnosis, I tried to lessen her anxiety by announcing that I was slated to pursue a diploma in English Language Teaching awarded by Cambridge University. I would be taking a year-long course in Madrid. This would allow me, I told her, to earn a better wage and charge more for private classes.

I started the program a few days after she began chemotherapy. I sat beside her in Dr. Newman's office at UCSF during her first session. Earlier in the day I'd bought us some turkey sandwiches at Say Cheese in the Haight. Martha would later share with me how mom raved about those sandwiches, the fancy mustard the man at the deli had spread on thick slices of wheat. The next day, after her

first session of chemo, I flew back to Madrid, my summer vacation over.

By December, she'd lost most of her hair. Arriving home for a visit, I walked into her bedroom, gave her a hug. She did little to disguise the hair loss. Out of doors, she wore a beret. Those were ambivalent days for me as I weighed whether or not to return to Madrid. Whenever I brought up the possibility of not going back, she would hear none of it. I had to finish the course and get that diploma. I'd be back in San Francisco in May, she said, and she'd be fine. The doctors said she had at least a year, she reasoned. *You are going back to Madrid.* So I spent all the time I could with her during those two weeks, accompanying her on various errands, often in a cab. I remember the weather as mostly rainy and gray. At night, I'd hear her. I slept in the bedroom across the hall from hers, her breathing the sound of a creaking boat.

A week or so after I was back in Madrid, she was in the hospital. It was early January and the doctors revised their prognosis, giving her between three weeks to three months. Enrique, the owner of the British Language Centre, my employer in Madrid, granted me a leave of absence. Needless to say, I had to abandon the diploma course. I arranged to fly to San Francisco exactly one week after receiving that phone call from Martha telling me I needed to come home. What's the rush, my mother said over the phone, thinking, perhaps, I could squeeze in a few more days of my course—emphasizing, to the end, the importance of getting as much education as we could. She'd gone as far as the sixth grade.

DURING MY YEARS IN SPAIN, I BECAME CLOSELY ACQUAINTED WITH TWA's terminal at JFK. I'd make it a habit of placing calls from a pay phone to family and friends during stopovers, straddling Madrid and San Francisco all those years.

I dial the number. Maria picks up the receiver. *How is she?* "She's a little short of breath, but okay. Tomás set up the hospital bed in the living room. She asked to have it propped up so she could see the plum trees planted out front a few months ago. Do you want to talk to her?" *No, let her rest—I'll see her in a few hours. Who's picking me up at the airport?* "Martha. She'll be at the gate."

When I emerged from the walkway—those large accordion-like contraptions attached to the doorways of planes—I saw my sister seated in the lounge, Tomás beside her. They both got up and walked towards me, my brother speaking first, softly:

"Mom died two hours ago."

## The Last Days of My Visit

I

It wasn't so much the rain

but the lack of light  
was getting to me  
                a miserable  
absence of blue  
                That,  
and the way her breathing  
had quickened—the short  
moans at night from across the hall  
even while she slept

With her one day in a cab going  
to Paratransit  
for taxi vouchers, my eyes  
settle on the few

wisps of hair  
                straggling  
out from under her black  
beret  
                ... *rustic men*, I tease,  
*wear them—it's called*  
*a boina in Spain...*  
                as we  
approach a stop and I  
turn away  
                Water  
weaving  
                down glass,

the city a gray blur

II

And yet the day before I flew  
back to Madrid  
that low coastal layer

dispersed, the sky radiant that morning  
as we drove up Parnassus  
taking her in for an MRI.

Walking the carpeted halls, I paused  
at the banister looking  
through the glass, hardly believing the scope

of the view: on the far, far right, downtown  
a glimpse of City Hall; and panning  
left, the spires of USF while in

the foreground tiny joggers circled  
the rust-colored track  
at Kezar; and taking the pan further

the de Young, peering just above  
the park's oblong thicket  
of green—all of it somehow

soothing, before my eyes came to rest  
on the Pacific Ocean  
as I hope it might have been, weeks later,

for her: brother wheeling the bed  
into the living room,  
propping it up to face, she insists,

the windows facing the street:  
the two slim sidewalk  
trees—Purple-Leaf Plum—

Friends of the Urban Forest  
at her request  
had planted in front of our home  
  
on Fair Oaks

WE KNEW HER AS TÍA GINA, MY FATHER'S SISTER—THE ONE WHO'D relayed the news of his plight following the death of his second wife, Gloria. In the weeks after my mother died, word got back to us that one of Gina's granddaughters was turning eighteen. Her mother, our cousin, was flying in from New Mexico with her daughter to throw a party. It was to be a family reunion of sorts for relatives in the Bay Area on our father's side. We were invited. Cousins we used to play with as children would be there, cousins we hadn't seen in decades. Two of my father's brothers would also attend. My leave of absence was for a maximum of six months. In theory, I could have promptly returned to Madrid and resumed my course and gotten that diploma. But I'd lost interest in teaching English. I wanted to meet my uncles, see if they had any leads on my father.

It was at that family gathering that I learned the name of the town where he lived—enough information to begin my search. No one we spoke to that afternoon had seen my father in years. Evidently, he'd estranged himself from his family. I chattered the afternoon away sitting on a sofa with Tonio and Polo, uncles I'd only heard of when I was a child. Mouthing the word *Tío* felt both gratifying and strange. Conversing with them felt like a revelation, as if a part of myself that had been dormant for most of my life had begun to twitch. In a few weeks, I would hop on a Greyhound to see their older brother—my father—whom I hadn't seen in twenty-five years.

I had several phone conversations with my father in the weeks leading up to the first of what would be two visits in the spring of 1997. He was in his early sixties; I in my early thirties. In the end, I spent a total of twenty days with him over those two visits—visits, no doubt, I will write about and attempt to portray, along with the conditions we found our father living in.

My willingness to forge a substantial connection with him was possible because I'd had virtually no contact with my father throughout my life. Unlike my brother and sisters, I'd never lived with him. In other words, I didn't have any “baggage”—not yet. From my

siblings' perspective—above all, my brother's—any attempt at reeling him back into our lives was a humanitarian gesture, little more. Any intention of re-establishing emotional ties with him was, given his history, problematic. But not with me—I dove right in.

My time with my father underscored how blessed I felt for having kept my Spanish. During the months we were in contact with him, I became the liaison between my father and my siblings. I was the one who spoke with him regularly. For reasons he could never adequately explain, he and Gloria, who was from El Salvador, had raised their two sons in English, despite the fact that English wasn't their native tongue. With Gloria dead a year, my father hadn't really spoken Spanish *in a* year. And so conversation between us during our twenty days was, naturally, in Spanish—and nonstop. I felt grateful that *my* first grade teacher, Sister Mary Stevens, had *not* paid a visit to my home to tell my mother that she should be speaking to her children in English. It was as if Spanish—my retention of it, my further study of it—were meant for this occasion: to connect with the father who'd never been a part of my life. Hearing him, hearing the inflections in his voice, his accent, the rhythms of his speech was, in a way, like hearing my mother, over whom I'd not yet really begun to grieve.

## Dogs

Or the one Maria found, trotting  
along the banks of the Yuba—  
assuming the river's name, red

scarf around the snowy neck  
that week of camping, coaxed  
into the car and taken home...

He speaks of one—*de raza alemana*, he says  
and I'm almost charmed by the voice:  
telling how he'd tie his German

shepherd to a pole, escort her  
to church: Plaza Santo  
Domingo flanked by the park, kiosk

beside the roasting beef, pleasant  
olor de carne asada wafting  
to the bench after mass

where they talked—she mostly:  
her sewing, her trip to Panama  
in search of wholesale fabrics...

—I'm trying to picture it: Managua  
in the fifties, around the time  
my father's plane lifts off, touches

down, sending for her months later,  
big with Maria, as I'm also  
trying to picture him

on the other end of the line: in his  
sixties, portly, sugar  
in his blood, a whiff of something

on his breath as he speaks  
of the Sacramento  
River: pole & gear, sixpack,

Rocky and Comet slinking behind...  
—but the car's busted now, he says  
busting in gravel

near Chico. He gets to bed  
past three, watching *Cristina*,  
the Tuesday Night Fights, sunk

in a beat-up armchair:  
replay of that memorable bout, Aaron  
Pryor delivering a blur of shots

to the head, Alexis Argüello absorbing them...  
During the phone call  
we talk dogs. He had three,

we had two—something  
I suppose, in common;  
this talk of ours

a first.

I OPENED AND SPREAD THE PAGES OF *EL PAÍS* ACROSS THE BLACK marble tabletop. Minutes before, I'd given the vendor at the kiosk my coins, a round green kiosk a few feet from Metro Bilbao just in front of Café Comercial—one of Madrid's vintage establishments, open since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I began reading an article about Sergio Ramírez. One of Spain's most prestigious literary houses was set to publish his winning manuscript, which had just captured the inaugural edition of their Premio Alfaguara, a prize open to any novelist in the world writing in Spanish. It caught me off guard. I hadn't thought of Sergio Ramírez in a very long time. Yet there he was: a Nicaraguan novelist in the news months after I buried my Nicaraguan mother, weeks after seeing my Nicaraguan father. His winning work, according to the article, had two narrative threads. The first recounted the last days of the Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío, who'd returned to die, in 1916, in the colonial town of León where he was born. The second told about the last days of a lesser-known poet, Rigoberto López Pérez, a young man who'd decided to take his nation's fate in his hands by assassinating, in 1956, President Anastasio Somoza García—also in León. Both, then, were based on true events.

The recent conversations with my father still brimming in my head, my interest in Ramírez and his work was suddenly aloft. It no longer mattered that his genre wasn't poetry nor that he was a former politician. His winning an international prize, I admit, cast him in a new light. I remembered having seen in bookstores a few years earlier a volume of his titled, *Un baile de máscaras*—the novel I would track down and purchase in Madrid's largest bookstore. It narrates the events of a day whose crescendo is a masquerade ball in the Nicaraguan village of Masatepe. The action takes place on August 5th, 1942, which happens to be the day Sergio Ramírez was born.

It was, simply, a delicious read: a chorus of characters whose names often included a defining *apodo*—nickname. Here are a few:

Inocencio, *Nada*, an albino who looked as if his body, every hair on his body, were bathed in milk: called *Nada* (nothing) “porque de tan blanco Inocencio *Nada* parecería no existir”; Filomela Rayo, *la Sorococa*, who, one day, decided to exchange day for night and night for day: at sundown, she turns on the lights and begins domestic chores while husband and children sleep, and at dawn sits at the kitchen table to write instructions to her family on what should be done while she sleeps; Perfecto Guerrero, *El Emperador Maximiliano*, who sells, door to door, portions of the sea; la muy gorda Amada Laguna, voluptuously abundant resident who belts out arias without a moment’s notice; Tobías, *el Encuerado*, the village shoemaker, who, when drunk, parades down the street in the nude, cobbler tool in hand.

These and others embody the ordinary and the extraordinary: the story of the deceased Priscila Lira, wife of Santiago Mayor, the doctor who delivers Masatepe’s babies. Because local authorities refuse to provide a permit to transport her casket by train to her native town of Masaya, Santiago seats his departed wife’s body, fully dressed and made up, in a first class cabin, causing a crowd to gather on the platform to catch a glimpse of the doctor’s elegant wife about to embark on her final journey. But later in the day, the gossip spreads:

*“Pues ha resucitado Priscila Lira aunque no quiera creer.... resucitó en el tren, después de pasado el tunnel de Catarina; se asomó por la ventanilla a divisar la laguna de Apoyo... y le dijo al doctor Santiago Mayor: qué belleza de lugar. Así con toda naturalidad. Y el Doctor Santiago, en lugar de asustarse, le contestó: estos paisajes naturales de Nicaragua son divinos, no tienen rival en la America Central.”* [“As unbelievable as it sounds, Priscila Lira has risen from the dead...she just opened her eyes on the train, after it passed through the Catarina tunnel; she gazed out the window at the Apoyo lagoon...and said to Santiago Mayor, matter-of-factly, what a lovely place. And doctor Santiago, instead of dying of fright, answered: these Nicaraguan landscapes are divine, unrivaled in Central America.”]

And at the center of it all is Pedro, *el tendero*, the village’s general shopkeeper who, midway through the day, puts on his costume for

that evening's ball. For nearly the rest of the novel, he's referred to as, Pedro, el beduino del desierto. He dresses early because his many errands may not give him time to dress later—errands that, in one way or another, are attempts at righting wrongs, or reconciling fellow villagers: trying to persuade the town jailer to release a drunk friend into his wife's custody; arranging a rendezvous between his pregnant sister and the unborn child's reluctant father; securing a substitute doctor to assist with his own very pregnant wife's delivery: since Santiago Mayor's wife had come back from the dead, they'll be staying in Masaya a few extra days to celebrate...

Laughter percolated to my lips, café patrons at nearby tables hearing it float free as I read. At other times, the book just plain spoke to me—deeply. Towards the very end, after the masquerade ball falters into chaos because of a suicide and torrential rains, Pedro el beduino makes his way home and takes off his costume to become Pedro el tendero, the shopkeeper, and then finally becomes Pedro—a new father. When he learns that Luisa, his wife, has given birth to a boy, his father-in-law, Teófilo, asks if he's thought of a name. And so the narrator allows us to enter Pedro's mind and past—sketching out that moment when he decided what his first born son's name would be: the name of an endearing cross-eyed boy he'd encountered on the street many years before, a young mother calling him in from play.

*Se va a llamar Sergio*—says Pedro, el tendero.

And so Sergio Ramírez's *Un baile de máscaras* was a love poem from the author to his father.

The novel was a timely miracle. My mother had been dead a few months, my father was alive in California. And yet I felt like they were both speaking to me—their voices like warm air rising off the pages I turned and turned in that Madrid café. Reading that book was the most personal and moving experience I'd had with literature. And it couldn't have happened in a language *other* than Spanish—that is, *Nicaraguan* Spanish. I hadn't realized it until then: my years in Spain, years of speaking “peninsular” Spanish had distanced me from certain vocabulary and verb tenses, the vocabulary and verb tenses of my childhood. And yet in the previous few months they were reverberating from listening to my father's voice for days on end—both on the phone and in person when I'd met him, really, for the first time.

I needed to return to the United States, even though I often harbored, in those years, the sentiment that the United States wasn't

*Francisco Aragón*

home. But the idea of going to California was okay. My father lived there. And it seemed like a relationship with him, the possibility of a relationship with him, existed.

*after Richard Rodriguez*

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## The Missing

IN MARCH OF 2005, I WAS SERVING AS A COMBAT SOLDIER IN THE Israeli Army. I was deployed in the Occupied Territories, just west of Bethlehem, and my unit was stationed at the Tunnel Roads checkpoint. The checkpoint was manned by about twelve individuals, including a couple of police officers and some Army Reservists, who were frequently called up to serve with us. It was the height of the Second *Intifada*, and tensions were running high. Most of the men at the checkpoint, including myself, had heard stories in recent months of checkpoints being ambushed, and about a half-dozen soldiers had died in the region. In one incident, said to have occurred a couple of years back and later verified through articles, a Palestinian walked up to the checkpoint at which we were stationed. He unfurled a carpet from his back, took out a Kalashnikov rifle, and shot out the neck of the soldier who was manning the front post, killing him and another. Then he drove off in a getaway car and was never heard from again.

Any Israeli who has served in the Territories, and probably any modern-day soldier, for that matter, will tell you that his gravest fear when guarding is the weather. In my unit, men were assigned to guard on a rotating basis, or what was known as a “6-6” shift. We would guard for six hours at a time with full vest and gear and then return to our base, which was about a kilometer down from the checkpoint. There we would scrub plates or wash floors. If it were nighttime, we would sleep for several hours, depending on what time the transports had arrived, whether there were any missions to be done, and whether the space heater was working in the barracks. It was cold in Bethlehem, especially during winter months, when the temperature wasn’t quite low enough to produce snow—just that cold, drizzling rain which always seems to gather at the most inopportune moments, like ten minutes before guarding.

There’s another anxiety which most soldiers face and which tends to get overlooked in media coverage, particularly non-Israeli accounts

of the conflict. Israelis hate guarding Arabs, much less having anything to do with the Territories. To the extent they volunteer for front-line service and the combat that goes with it, they do so because the thought of seeing “action” is far more appealing than its alternatives: sealing crates for three years, or rinsing mud from the tanks. And while there is undoubtedly “action” on the line, particularly in a place like Israel, a soldier’s service is more appropriately characterized as one of unending tedium, punctuated by spells of blistering heat and agonizing cold. The bulk of his time is spent standing guard in such conditions, pondering things like his footsores; what to do with his next paycheck—approximately \$38 per month, for the enlisted man; why it is that he’s expected to spend the prime years of his youth—ages eighteen to twenty-one—staring at a wall—usually concrete and slatted—when practically every other Westerner his own age, at least in the developed countries, is off at a college, or working, or going to a party; what it is he’ll eat for breakfast upon returning to the base—usually a cold egg and bread, along with a warm cabbage salad; exactly how many months he’ll have to work upon finishing his service, usually as a bellhop at some dingy hotel in Eilat, catering to Westerners, so that he can go visit Thailand, and possibly stay there; and how best to make amends with his girlfriend, the likes of whom he hasn’t seen in several eons and who’s undoubtedly dating a *jobnik* (one of the rear-line soldiers, who generally get leave more). These are all considerable problems.

This is not in any way to justify the treatment of Palestinians by soldiers at the checkpoints, nor to justify the checkpoints themselves, nor in any way to make the soldiers come across as victims in this affair (though, to a certain extent, they are). Rather, the point is that when a man is on guard duty at a checkpoint, be it Johannesburg or Jerusalem, he’s bound to think certain things, and very few of them involve the occupational army in which he’s serving.

In fact, on the night of March 2, 2006, at roughly 4:27 A.M., I was playing a game on my cellphone. Backgammon, to be exact, because it is the one that came standard on the Nokia flip-phone. I could no longer afford to surf the Internet, given that my monthly Cellcom bill had amassed 7000 NIS of debt, or roughly forty months of service (which forced me to eat canned tuna during furloughs, as well as hitchhike). Regardless, I was playing backgammon, and doing quite well at it—seventeen wins in a row, from what I remember—when I heard static on the radio and shouting from the guardblocks.

The post I was in was actually a camouflaged lookout, dug into the side of a hill overlooking the checkpoint. There were canvas tarps draping the cinder-block walls and a synthetic leaf net through the windows. It was dark out. I had an M4A1 assault rifle with a telescopic sight and a bipod (I was a squad sniper), and my nominal assignment was to provide cover for the checkpoint. Needless to say, I considered it something of an accomplishment to be awake at that point—and for which I should personally thank Nokia. I was also half-conscious, or possibly doped up on the caffeine pills that I had used to stay awake in light of the drowsiness caused by my allergy medication (the pollen there was hell). I also had severe burning in my eyelids brought on by said allergies (which was unusual for late March). It was raining. I was thankful to be under the tarp at that point, unlike my compatriots, who were standing with more or less ghoulish expressions beneath the thin light of dawn. Most of them were addicted smokers, and going six hours without nicotine—a prerequisite for concealment—is tantamount to depriving your basic carnivore of red meat. Nevertheless, of the twelve men on duty that night, one was an officer, a couple were reservists, and all of us were freezing.

Except one.

We would regularly rotate positions at the checkpoint, if only to stay awake more, and earlier that night, I had been standing at the roadblocks, speaking with one of the reservists. It turned out that he was a colonel by rank and seventy-seven years old. He had volunteered to serve at the checkpoint, having well superseded the required age of call-up (which is forty-five). He spoke rather tersely, in the manner of a man who has in fact seen six or seven wars in his life and actively fought in three of them. He was gray-haired, blue-eyed, with that same withered gaze and sun-baked complexion that seems to characterize all former soldiers. In fact, it was impossible to determine his age without asking, because a fair number of Israelis go prematurely gray. It isn't because of the water.

He told me that he had several grandchildren, including one who was my age and now living in the U.S. (I explained to him that I was a twenty-six-year-old American, and that I had come from Chicago to volunteer for the army). He seemed less than impressed by that fact, whereas most Israelis my own age just assumed I was crazy for coming. Of course, I realized why: he was a volunteer. In fact, the entire generation which had built this country, from Dayan to Ben-

Gurion, were ostensibly “volunteers”—to the extent one can be called that in the face of Fascist persecution. He said he had emigrated from Austria, fought in an underground unit and then with the army regulars. He lived on a kibbutz just south of the Kinneret, the same one he’d come to as a teenager. I asked him how he felt about serving in the army, given that he had been doing it for, oh, sixty some years. He answered with the same reply that any Israeli, regardless of his age, will give when faced with that question: he shrugged.

After about an hour of standing guard in the rain, he in a vest and a slicker, me in a vest and a green-padded jumpsuit, the kind normally reserved for airline baggage handlers and about half-a-foot thick in diameter, he asked me: “Why did you come here?”

“I don’t know,” I told him.

He didn’t seem to like that reply, and he furrowed his forehead.

“I guess I just thought it was like, um, part of my duty, or something.”

The man could tell a lie when he heard one (serving in several wars will give you that perspective). I then explained to him that I was a writer, or trying to be, and I was interested in the war, wanted to know what it meant, or how it could go on for so long, and I guess as a Jew, I felt some modicum of conviction, though I wasn’t really certain.

“You is come here, like I did,” he said. “It doesn’t matter why.”

That was probably a better way of putting it. I then asked him what kind of battles he’d seen, which is a question that currently-serving Israelis will never ask one another but properly defer to their elders, if only as a sign of respect.

He shrugged.

“You were here in ‘48?”

“Yeah,” he said.

The whole time, he was staring out at the blackened road before us, as if he were acutely aware of something. He was clutching his rifle higher than the others, and he was standing several paces behind one of the cinder-lined guardblocks, heaped up with sandbags. No Arabs had come through in the past hour, minus a few truckers with produce. We naturally waved them on, occasionally stopping to inspect their papers, but more to make sure they weren’t carrying people in back, or large nuclear weapons.

“In ‘48,” he said, “I was fighting with men in Jerusalem, near to where you live”—I explained to him that I lived on a kibbutz near

Jerusalem in the West Judean Hills, and he said that he fought in that forest. He was a platoon commander, newly arrived, and he said, “The problem we had was weapons. We had all kinds of bullets and all kinds of guns, and none of them matched. And no one knew how to use these weapons or fix them. Plus, they were always getting dirty.” He said this as a stream of cold rain dripped down from his forearm. Mine, of course, were both covered in liners. “And when the Arabs attacked, one of my men had to take the machine gun”—he gave a name for this weapon in German, which he still seemed to speak. “It misfired or didn’t work. When the Arabs came, it was bad.” He tilted his head left and studied the sky. One got the sense there was more to this story than what was being said, because his cheeks curled up in that particular angle, almost hugging his ridged eyes. “And yeah, it was very hard, and not good.” He looked at me squarely, probably the first time he had done that in talking. Then he looked at the sandbags. “It was a long war,” he said.

“I know.”

After about thirty minutes, I went back to guard in the lookout, and the thought of that conversation kept me awake for at least another twenty. I was actually amazed that a man of that history and time could fit so well into character. He really was like something out of a Leon Uris novel or one of those images they supplant you with in American Hebrew school sermons: the hard, grizzled veteran, the founding father of Israel, the kind who actually toiled his whole life on a kibbutz, and then, when he was well into the twilight of his years, decided to spend his last remaining ones standing guard at what is probably the least desirable place on the planet: a checkpoint—a hotbed of spit, sweat, despair, although in this case, a cold, freezing rain.

I SHOULD ALSO PROBABLY SAY THAT BEFORE COMING TO THE ISRAELI Army, I was a hard-and-fast Leftist, still am. In college, I was reared on Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, and when I got to Israel, I actually worked, initially, for an Arab human rights group. I was under no illusions that what the Israeli Army was doing was glorious, either then or before. So when he explained to me that it was a hard war in which he fought, and that he had seen many killed (which he earlier explained), I took that to mean Jews as well as Arabs. Moreover, given that he was a kibbutznik, as well as an atheist (which he also pointed out), the odds were pretty good that he was Leftist—

although in Israel that tends to mean opposed to occupation, not Zionism. Nevertheless, as I returned to my lookout, sitting down by the warmth of a space heater—for which I would have gladly donated the remaining sum of my paycheck—I remember asking myself how I could possibly encapsulate this man or retell his experiences. I couldn't, I knew, which is why I brought a tape recorder that night and recorded everything that he told me, including a more detailed account of his war story than the one I am now giving. I thought that someday, when I returned to the States, I would get started writing a novel about this conflict, perhaps even a historical one, depicting in non-romantic terms the pursuits of Israel's founders—the men who truly were “heroes,” by any sense of the word; the men who fought not just with their backs to the wall, but literally upon one another, as this man implied. And unlike the Americans or British who might have labored so heroically in Normandy or East Asia, there were no replacements in this army. They were it. That the Israelis won in 1948 is a miracle that is largely uncontested by historians, even the most Leftist. While the Arabs might have had lesser equipment and training, and certainly a reduced motivation, there is no disputing the fact that the Jews faced far greater odds, and their efforts in the war were inestimable.

That said, Israel has fought wars since that were largely ones of aggression, where the goals were more complicated (and by that I mean less survivalist), and where the conquest was less doable or even desirable. The history of Israel is controversial and not something I wish to delve into here, but suffice it to say that my own position at the time of serving was at best ambivalent and at worst opposed to the “Zionist Project.” At the same time, I did, and still do, marvel at the effort of Israel’s founding fathers, as lionized and distorted as they may have become in their nation’s history. In short, I have to admire the kind of man who stands guard in the rain for sixty some years, regardless of his cause or his politics.

It was then that it happened: a couple bleeps of static were followed by someone shouting at my lookout, “They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?”

“*They’re* coming.”

“Oh.”

Whoever bothered to tell me at that point—one of the soldiers, shouting up from the trenched staircase that led to my lookout—did not translate very well into English, although he said something

about Arabs and Shin Bet, something about a warning, that people were coming, and that we had to be careful. “Terrorists” was the word he used.

After four minutes of more or less gut-wrenching silence, I was looking out through the window, surveying blue fields with my vision, examining wet hilltops and grasses. The sky in Bethlehem takes on this peculiarly purple hue at night, which might explain the generation of prophets that have arisen there. The rain had let up, and it was frighteningly still. I could see my own breath in the crawlspace. My rifle faced south, where a grass plain descended the slopes of Beit Jala and met with the road to the checkpoint. To the right was a canyon—a deep, winding gorge that snaked through the hills down to Hebron. My lens was fogging up—possibly steam, or the breath from my face as I touched it.

As I studied the foothills, I heard a loud bang. It came from the checkpoint below, where a car was driving through—a shiny, blue compact. There was a soldier on the ground, and a couple more men running after it, chasing. The car skidded through the cones and around the divide and hurried off fast down the highway. It was getting smaller quite quickly, about a hundred meters down, when I heard a quick popping: gunshots. They were actual rounds being fired from the soldiers. I steadied my rifle and took aim at the car. I centered my scope on the backseat—what appeared to be a head or a cushion. Through my left eye—I had run out from the dugout and stood along the wall of the trench—I could see a couple soldiers running out, including the lieutenant. Behind him, the older reservist was jogging. He stopped and took aim from his hip. Gunshots crackled out in bright yellow.

I steadied the gun on the base of the wall, and, in my scope, I could see the car fading. I centered the cross on the bumper, then higher, and I wasn’t sure if I should shoot, if the soldiers were running, if I’d hit them, or if I’d be able to hit anything from this distance (it was probably 800 meters). The car was moving fast, rising up slowly. I hesitated. I pressed my finger to the trigger and felt it, and I could feel my own heart race, though racing in a way that was quite different from sports or running or the occasional nervousness. It was racing in a way that I could actually feel it, such that my limbs were getting weaker—not entirely unsexual and probably similar to the feeling that a hunter gets. I had pointed my gun at people before and seen “action” on the line, but I had never killed anybody, and as

I studied that head, or the mound of the carseat, which was visibly fading, I let go of the gun and took my hand off the trigger.

In retrospect, this was cowardice. I have no doubt I should have shot him or, at the very least, would have been justified in doing so, as the others had shot before me. Later on, it turned out that only the seventy-seven-year-old reservist had fired. The others were scared, or frozen, or non-reacting, like I was. The bang that I heard was the sound of the car having plowed through a plastic divider. And the man on the ground—a friend of mine—had jumped out of the way to avoid being hit. Apparently, a call had come through several minutes earlier from the Shin Bet, Israel's secret police, informing us that an Arab was driving through and that he was wanted. He probably wouldn't stop at the checkpoint.

A FEW MINUTES AFTER THE CAR HAD RACED OFF AND DISAPPEARED down the highway, a column of Jeeps whistled by us, followed by police and their sirens. They scrambled down the road after him and stopped about a kilometer south on Route 60. At this point, no one was speaking. We were all flustered by what had happened (as soldiers usually are), and I was trying desperately to figure out what had happened—to little avail then. Ron, the friend of mine who had dived from the barrier, looked almost saddened, as if he were slightly aggrieved to find out that someone would kill him. He later explained that he and some other men had told the car to stop, and the thing kept on going, actually aiming for him, and he dove to the left at the last moment. He wasn't sure why, or much less how, he had done this. But the adrenaline a man gets in such circumstances—and which is presumably what I was feeling—has amazing capacities. It can also shut a man down, as it may have in my case.

About half an hour later, we were surrounded by a dozen other men from our Company, most of whom were woken up and forced to come join us. They would be replacing us in an hour or so, anyways, and they were less groggy than usual, perhaps enthusiastic at the sight of seeing “action.” They even looked at us blankly, as if we had been the warriors.

It was a little after five, and the sun had emerged, casting its faint, hazy spell through the mists of Har Homa. It looked like a grapefruit. A couple trucks lumbered by us. One was a flatbed with a large metal crane and a winch. Soon, it returned with a couple of the Jeeps that sped by us, and strapped to its bed was a blue Honda

Civic—the very one that we'd seen—with white Arab plates. There was no one inside it. The bumper was falling off, but there weren't any pockmarks in the metal, and the glass was intact. A couple of soldiers inspected it as the tow-truck slowed down. The truck was being driven by a couple of civilians. Both were unshaven, and one of them said from the front that the man got away. He parked his car about a kilometer down. Then he made off through the fields and probably holed up in one of the neighboring Arab villages. The others were searching.

A couple more Jeeps rumbled by—men from Battalion. The Border Police were there, as well, and a chopper was flitting above us. It was strange, we all thought, to have garnered that kind of attention, especially at a place we had otherwise associated with endless monotony and dread. I asked if anyone knew who the guy was or why he had run. Nobody knew. I asked the old guy, who by now had some sort of bemused look on his face, a curious combination of a smirk and indifference. Then, even stranger, while the rest of the guys were mulling about the checkpoint, talking to their friends or inspecting the vehicle, this seventy-seven-year-old, gray-haired, blue-eyed denizen was standing guard at the checkpoint. He was the only one.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED IN THE ISRAELI ARMY. SOME WOULD SAY THERE is a general lack of will among the soldiers, brought on by three decades (approaching four) of serving in a primarily occupational capacity. Others would say that the recent war in Lebanon disproved that, as many of the soldiers, including those in my company, fought bravely in battle. The recent war in Lebanon was a disaster by all accounts, except on one level: the soldiers who fought there. As abhorrent and sickening and wasteful as the effort was, and for which a top General was sacked and a Prime Minister sanctioned, no one would dispute that the troops had fought bravely.

In fact, of the men in my Company, several were severely wounded. One of them was my commanding officer, a Captain by the name of Biché, who had to have his leg nearly amputated after leading an assault on a building. He survived a grenade burst and ended up killing a couple of Hezbollah defenders. Another former commander of mine, a First Sergeant by the name of Eyal Benin, was out on an eight-man patrol driving along the Lebanese border the day that the war broke out. His Humvee was ambushed with anti-

tank missiles and pre-positioned explosives. Two of the soldiers in his convoy were pulled from the wreckage and taken to Lebanon, where they remained for two years as hostages. Eyal Benin was not one of them. His body was buried at the Kiryat Shaul cemetery, and I remember him now as a guy who liked to read Tolkien and Harry Potter. He would read them while pointing his whistle at us and telling us to move things.

Needless to say, when Israel responded with a full-on assault into Lebanon, backed up by helicopter gunships and Merkava tanks, I could understand why. As much as Israelis tend to hate each other while serving, when one of them goes missing, the others react. As it turned out, Hezbollah was prepared for the response and subsequently bombed the searching parties, resulting in the deaths of five more Israelis and leading to the escalation that would culminate in roughly 2,000 dead (counting civilians and combatants on both sides) and thousands more injured. To most observers, it seems like a large price to pay on both ends for the return of a few bodies. When you've stood guard in the rain, though—and endured the wet hell—you can start to see why it would happen.

THE WEEK BEFORE ENLISTING IN THE ISRAELI ARMY, I FLEW TO Florida. My grandmother was dying of cancer, and I came to spend some time with her because I knew that I wouldn't get the chance to see her again. I had not told her of my intention to serve in the Israeli Army. In fact, I hadn't told anyone at that point—which isn't uncommon among those departing for service. The night before I left, I cooked us dinner in her apartment using a 1958 recipe she had clipped for a tuna-corn casserole. (It was delicious, by the way, and involved large globs of ketchup.) In many ways, she was the diametric opposite of the seventy-seven-year-old man that I served with: wide-eyed, brown-haired, almost delicate in features, and fully at ease around others, if not outright gregarious. But she was, like him, not one to mince words.

We were talking about my late grandfather, who had served in the American Army during the Second World War. He was stationed at Fort Riley and then in the Pacific. She said that she used to send him socks in the mail, and sometimes sausages, and sometimes sausages wrapped in socks, so that the officers wouldn't find them. After the war, he said that he got neither the socks, nor the sausages, but he was happy she'd sent them. Like many of his generation, he returned home, led a

normal life, and lived more or less happily married to my grandmother for fifty some years, until he died in 1987. He hated the war, though—every moment he was in it—and neither he nor she were under any illusions about what the war meant, either then or right now.

“I don’t understand why people keep doing this,” she said. “All these men, they keep going off to fight. Sixty years ago,” she said, as we washed plates in the kitchen, “I thought all this was over. I thought it would end. And here we are going to Iraq again. You know, they invented all these things—cars, planes, televisions, even the Internet—and they can’t figure out how to stop this. I don’t understand that. It’s all so stupid, and yet it goes on.”

“I know,” I told her, sealing lids on her Tupperware.

I left the next week and enlisted in the army, less out of conviction, I think, than curiosity—a morbid one, to be certain. But like the millions of others who have done so in my time, I was raised on a generation of war films and novels. I had read Hemingway, Auden, Orwell, O’Brien. I had seen the regular run of war flicks, from Coppola to Kubrick (most Israelis, by the way, can actually say *“What is your major malfunction, Private Pyle?”*—arguably the first words of English they learn), and I was under no illusions about what a war entails: the sheer, biting cruelty of it. Nor did I ever, for a second, principally support what the Israeli Army did, even as a response to “terrorism” or kidnapping. Even now, I wouldn’t say that I’m Zionist; I probably remain more of a Marxist in temperament, and to the extent I have a politics, it’s a belief in a multi-national state in Palestine, albeit one founded on equality and justice (whatever those things mean in practice). Nor did I have any real words to say to my grandmother that night as I left her; I wasn’t just hiding the fact that I was serving—though that, too. I actually agreed with what she said. War is stupid. All soldiers know that. Why they do it is another matter.

I don’t have any grand explanation for why these wars continue. For me, like many, I gather, the war was fought for a set of personal reasons, probably involving a commitment to art, or reporting, or the sheer aesthetics of experience. Maybe it was a tribal thing brought on by some vague, induced notion of “ancestry.” Or maybe, like many of the over-privileged youth of my generation, at least in the First World, I was bored. I cannot purport to justify my service, try as I might, and I can’t really invoke any higher set of principles, even as I might claim to “stand” for them.

*J.A. Bernstein*

On the other hand, I didn't fire my weapon that night. Later, I found out upon returning to the base that the man they had chased was a car thief. He wasn't a terrorist, by any definition of the word. And from what I heard, they never found him.

## **Point of View**

While his memories pace back and forth like expectant Fathers, he tries on the loneliness like a loose-fitting shirt. Somewhere in the room there is the ticking of a palmetto bug. It reminds him of the planes on the way to Kosovo, The fading crackle of wireless ground-to-air talk. He'd like to take an eraser to that life, leaving Just a few ghosted lines separating one nothing From another nothing. Outside his window there is a Darkness except for one balcony where a woman is sitting. The smoke from her cigarette disappears into the stories Reflected in the windows above her. She is probably reading One of those romance novels where the characters speak In the extinct language of a love she once knew. Okay, let's drop the fiction. You know who you are. Despite searching for yourself under stone, in trash bins, Behind boarded doors of houses about to collapse. The old loves pile up like skeleton sculptures in a Capuchin monastery. What do they know about how we come back? The things you want to say are as light as helium. Now it's 12:14 A.M. In this world, two parallels meet, The circle never closes. Maybe you have cried out In your sleep. It's so hot the leaves are burning off The trees. By Fall we'll be able to see right through The forest into the future. By then you'll know this is about me. The palmetto bug is just keeping time. What's at stake here is how we define ourselves. You are me when you are not you. I am you When I am not me. The branch above us wonders if It is time to fall. Our lives line the post office And supermarket walls like runaway children. Sometimes we just want to appear in our own mirrors. I've double-locked the doors. It's so hot the blackout

Won't end for a few more days. In Lebanon  
The light spreads out like shards of a mortar  
Round. One family trying to escape is hit by  
A random bomb. This is really about us, isn't it?  
Are bombs random? These lines? Who was it  
That I began with? As a kind of defense? There's a barge  
Stuck where the river changed course. Day and night  
Take turns trying to escape our field of vision.  
Hope spreads its tentacles but we know better.  
When I started, this was supposed to be about love.  
But look, we can't even control what we think about  
The moon, the train's distant whistle which is sad  
Or promising, the existence of centaurs, peacekeepers,  
Runaways, skeletons. I can't stick to one subject  
For more than a line. In no time at all I will find  
A real self. I don't know how many bugs have come in  
Through this open window, a kind of lung these lives  
Pass in and out of. You, me, him, I understand, I do,  
Your hesitation. The branch, too, is about to fall. You,  
It, have no idea how much of me this love has become.

*Alana Joblin*

## **Earthworms**

Dalia's tired. Her guitar strapped to her back, fingers calloused several times over on her way to record in the East Village.  
She carries two buckets of soil with earthworms—  
Tomorrow her fourth-graders will learn *compost*.

Kyle's fingers are not long like her spindly bass player's  
or the soldier at the border of Lebanon.  
He rides the train from their home in Brooklyn  
to meet her in Manhattan and takes the buckets of worms

from her hands, gets back on the train and rides right back from where he came. Somewhere between Canal and Dekalb they get restless and he reaches into the warm black soil.  
*Hey, take it easy little guys*, he talks to the worms,

there on the train. Sure, people stare.  
Love can feel this good.

Remember how the pickle man treated  
Amy Irving in *Crossing Delancey*?  
I resisted, but wanted what my grandparents who sat next to me in that old movie house wanted for me.

All those years in between were a diversion.  
The way they glittered.

I touch Daniel's face in his sleep, lightly,  
not to wake him, but enough to see  
the lines by his eyes break into smile.  
It's my favorite part. *My crow's feet?*

he asks. Yes, I say, amazed it's true, these happy lines. My friend's lover travels over the starry cityscape with buckets of dirt and worms so that she can stay in the city and sing.

Tomorrow she'll take handfuls with her students, pat them into the earth. It's all there, she shows them—the things we discard along with the life to sustain it. Someone helps us carry it.

## **Arriving, New Delhi**

Smoke. Ocher smolders. Blue  
sparks. Below the airplane's  
steady arcs, the neon lights are

embers. Over the city's central rings  
a flash, the tipping silver  
wings. Over discotheques, the temple  
dancer's ankle bells. Boys  
selling oranges, cool feet  
in public fountains. Great cows lounge  
on garbage heaps. The steep dome  
of the Friday mosque. Burger and marble  
Moghul palaces. Then, tires

slamming down on pitch. Heat  
a furnace in the ears.  
Doors open and the blood pounds out  
its local language along every limb.  
Smell ashes. Men. Jasmine  
climbing on a fence. A taxi driver  
turbaned in a tongue of flame  
says, "Sister, I can take you into the city.  
Brother, shall I take you home?"

## Prologue

I don't remember everything.  
Well water tasted of metal.  
In the rutted yard, the dog  
Choked itself on its chain,  
Repeatedly. We complained.  
The ceilings were low. Not one  
Of the kitchen counters was level.

We had no interest in our parents' history.  
We were after and before.  
The woman was only our mother;  
Her silence was the ordinary  
Orbit every little family roams,  
Inevitable and alone  
As a planet. Eve was the end  
Of one day, the expectation  
Of the next. The sun dragged

Its colors down, while dust in the field  
Rose up. We felt the twilight haze,  
Stinging in the nose and throat.  
She sat on the front step carefully  
Drying her face with her sleeve.  
Inside we heard our father  
Washing the dirt from his hands.

## **Prayer for Fire Season**

June is set aside for naming the sighted woman.  
Twenty-Nine Palms, Redwood City, Thousand Oaks.  
Neither insurance nor spot fires burn miles north.  
Three cities are named after women or local trees.  
Santa Barbara and Santa Monica and Santa Ana.  
Free-flowering saluensis and soft florist's wire.  
Jottings. Naming July for sight, not blindness.  
Her pins are red lacquer, green glass, paired rose.  
Silk routes are open today. August runs her hand  
over a new dress. Yellow citronella in pails.  
Mosquitoes. Red denim flowers, one hand.  
Lying on the couch with her feet up. September  
grace in form of *dunamis*. Passing hundreds  
of small gallstones into a colander. One bitter stone  
flames into a four-colored hummingbird.

## **Prayer for an Ionic Levitating Car**

At the freeway stop in a dream  
with a weigh scale, my blue car was shy

two hundred pounds, light as you.  
I wondered how it flew weightless

on words like plasma coils, ionization,  
closed-loop isotope, gasless, heatless.

My car was a slender thin-shouldered  
miracle who woke to see how angels

who flame are clean and dangerous  
but a small one who's quiet is curious.

She lives in the library. Her carrel's  
in the silent reading room with ferns.

She wears her dark hair pinned back  
and prefers dresses with large pockets

where she puts what the Bible calls  
“angel food” in ancient Hebrew

or street Greek: crumbled fig cakes.  
She desires nothing and owns nothing.

Her hands do not flutter as she turns pages  
of a dictionary, her favorite book to read.

She's invisible. No one sees her much,  
yet everyone appreciates her messages

and knows she's always there, praying  
so the seminary won't burn down

or drop in a chasm of an earthquake.  
She's hidden an oil lamp upstairs.

No one knows why she's on assignment  
at a poor termite-ridden establishment.

Perhaps it was founded on holy ideals  
years ago and people still talk about them

although the ideals don't live in their souls.  
No one knows what salary she earns,

and frankly, no one cares. It's probably  
zero. Angels don't make great salaries;

they kill snakes and wrestle with men  
for a living. God also gave her an old car.

People know if you come to work early  
before five thirty A.M., under a blue moon,

this beat-up, sky-buffed boat on wheels  
pulls into the first space near the chapel.

The muffler rattles. Antenna's lost.  
Still too dark out to tell what she's wearing.

Her car drips a mixture of oil and coolant.  
She goes to her quiet carrel in the fern room,

reading and writing messages for a living.  
She writes music. If you're in the Spirit

when you're praying, you can hear the hum.  
She was even there when the city burned

and everyone left the hills to evacuate.  
She didn't want to leave the manuscripts.

Students who know her come to visit  
hoping for a word of revelation,

but she only corrects their grammar.  
*The Bible says that*, she hums, *not: In the Bible it says....*

She drives to the carwash after work, waits  
for giant red brushes to descend

in a thundering darkness of purification.  
Her gray eyes observe wax soap suds

foam the windshield night, soothing  
transcendence blinking silently

like glass bottles of blue sapphire gin  
under the twenty-four-hour neon sign.

Then, like a scene from a movie,  
God shows up in an ionic levitating car

spinning on pure air and blue electricity.  
Just like a star, and she hops shotgun

next to her Creator, waiting to see  
what He thinks: I promised you

a psalm, she whispers to God,  
who nods and smiles

wreathed with cumulus love  
in the weightless empyrean

where engines of air hum  
hosannas.

## **Sweet Heteroglossia**

Bravura of light, one apostrophe.  
Red flowers or commas in a square.  
A blind woman types out letters twice,  
costs a quarter per page yet too light.  
Intraocular eye pressures are low.  
Tuesday is lost outside a subway,  
topographical map for the sightless.  
Sun is a brown rose in a mineral spring,  
rust-hued fossil of antediluvian tears,  
myrrh burned in a true global flood.  
Musical wind path for the blind. Madeira,  
Brazilian river in paired confluence, tan blue  
or amber-colored wine, nothing with tears.  
She remembers typing out letters, honey  
with a magnifying glass. Hot at two o'clock.  
Potted tea sun. Cut nopalitos with scissors  
raining at the sink, thin as new hat pins  
or tin silence on the wet cutting board.  
Noon darkness salting a woman's eye.  
Window shades. Eclipse for autumn.  
White arms and leaf blindness, a typhoon.  
Occasionally, dreams are inaccurate reports.  
I open a letter. Open quietly, she says.  
Tongues of flame, sweet heteroglossia  
of prophecies float in known languages.

*Moira Linehan*

## **Wild Swans at Winter Pond**

*Their hearts have not grown old.*

—William Butler Yeats, “The Wild Swans at Coole”

Mid September, my twenty-eighth autumn on Winter Pond.  
Two swans with the year’s two cygnets, heads immersed in the pond,

are feeding off plants below the surface. Years now the same  
pair of mute swans has come back to breed on this small pond.

I’m sure they’re the same two since each spring she chooses the same  
spit of land for her nest. They have no purpose on this pond

save their own incarnate grace. And why don’t I see my claim  
as no less? No cygnet from her nest has returned to this pond

to breed. Only that first pair breeds here. I long to put a name  
to what two returning swans have done for me. Winter Pond

and its history. All these years—to still have as your fame  
an arresting glide of grace across the world. Winter Pond

and its mysteries. In May there were three cygnets. What’s to blame  
for one missing? I cannot stay forever on this pond.

I watch them paddle. Who will be the first to leave? I remain  
transfixed. A pair of swans and their young contain me and a pond.

## **Explication de texte de sable**

*...the self-same garbage truck  
manned by green-clad Africans  
come back at nine o'clock  
to empty the big green cans....*

—Marilyn Hacker, “*Explication de texte*”

The desert is bright brown.  
Little rain falls or clutters  
up the sky. Few towns.  
No green, just the mutters  
of thirsty goats who frown

at the sun. Here routine  
follows no clock but shades  
of blue. The cattle, lean  
and tight, amble to wade  
across streams of saline

every day or two. Boys  
tag along, sandal-clad,  
armed with sticks and chatter.  
The boredom drives some mad.  
For others it's the noise

of the empty sands.  
The stillness speaks of drought,  
hunger, loss of grazelands.  
Old men sit and stare, eat  
a roast goat, make demands

to their wives and sons.  
They crouch under blankets  
made of wool, bought with mon-  
ey earned before the climate's  
change. Dark spittle runs

between their narrow  
teeth as the elders preen  
their mudcaps, chew tobacco.  
They've made it their routine.  
Days pass, no rain follows.

Boys dodge green crocodiles  
while their camels lick salt  
from the lake. They're exiles  
since they catch fish. Asphalt  
roads cross the dusty miles

to glisten in desert towns  
where children go to school  
and teachers make their rounds.  
Uniforms are the rule  
as they tally up nouns

in a bland foreign tongue:  
*window, wall, shutter;*  
words known to the young  
but that the old mutter  
only blankly among

their few foreign phrases.  
Read this, they say, and gesture  
to the dust: *A goat grazes*  
*here despite the hyena*  
*scent.* The children shrug;

they read other books now.  
Soon, dressed in green and smug  
with pride, they dig and slough  
through Europe's trash, earplugs  
firmly set, and somehow

slosh through the cold winter  
months. Their ancestors die  
awaiting them under  
the blue, then star-black sky.  
In the moonlight, after

their quick burials, lines  
mark the soft sand. Bright brown,  
the quiet desert entwines  
cattle, men, salt, and towns.  
Transient, full of signs.

## The Sandal Maker

The boys who roam along the roads bring him  
the scraps the lorries shed, thin rubber tufts  
that potholes snag and throw off into the scrub.

He trims the inner tubes in length-wise strips;  
the outer treads he rounds to foot-sized shapes,  
his hands and blade both stained with tire dust.

Each sole is custom fit: He tucks his stumps  
into the sand and clamps the patron's toes  
onto the rough-cut shape with gnarled fingers,

then slices off the extra space by feel  
and cloudy eye; stretching the narrow bands  
across the arch, he tacks and squares the straps.

A tree provides his shop with roof and shade.  
He watches his wares stroll through market crowds,  
a surety against the thorns and heat.

And as the twilight cools the sandy streets,  
he drags his way home on stumps tough as shoes.  
Along the dust behind him trail a pair

of lines as smooth as worn-out wheels that sweep  
away the broken tread-marks from the sand.

## The Muezzin of Vegetables

Why the early hour? Why repel the night?  
The smog-heavy stars still fill the night.

A cheap megaphone on a blue pickup—  
to sleep I'll have to take a pill tonight.

Bright vegetables queue in rows on your bed:  
what hands uprooted them in the chill of night?

Luscious radishes, wrinkled cabbages,  
cucumbers, red peppers, the smell of night.

I ask only for silence, to sleep in,  
to stay warm in my bed and dwell all night.

Apartment lights come on; soon no husbands  
or children will be seen until tonight.

“Over here,” the housewives call out. “I’ll cook  
the soup my husband likes so well tonight.”

All day you cry along the streets below  
our windows, and then bid farewell at night.

“Haven’t these persimmons gone too soft?” “Take them  
at half price, everything must sell by night.”

At dusk, do you return to wife and fields?  
Surely you ready for the sequel night.

*Derick Mattern*

Your song rings through yet another morning;  
your prices and praises you tell the night.

Your nameless name I mutter on my pillow:  
Mosqueless minaret, do not expel the night!

## **Long Distance Lullaby**

There is nothing but water and land  
to separate your hand from mine.  
And there is only a body of sand  
to cradle the spine of the sea, to define

the way I would hold you should it be  
granted the world is flat, and could fold  
to close your body tight to me—  
but oceans are nothing if not cold;

their slanted depths insist on a curve,  
and the world refuses its collapse—  
but I feel your body with every nerve.  
My memory, estranged from maps,

has no reason to measure or recall  
this distance when it seems so small.

## **Waiting for Reconciliation**

With her,

he watches waxed leaves blink,  
reflect trash fires, and the smoke-tether  
knots over the field. Dusk-drawn, stars slink.

The night is a skirt folding together  
across her thighs. Slats of light gather,  
woven between trees.

Winds unwound  
the gauze of fireflies.

He left her.

\*

She thought of him and her field of want  
wavered with her.

Their skins are sewn  
with a waxed thread; in their absences,  
they are shadows in a darkened window.

Talk would be useless, and still,  
there is this:  
they return to each other, they slink  
  
unconscious of logic, she will not blink.

## Ama

AMA LOOKS AT ME FROM THE 24-INCH TELEVISION SCREEN THAT SITS on a bookshelf along one wall of my small living room. She stands in front of the flower garden I began planting nine years earlier and implores me in Nepali: “Please come back. Come visit us. We still love you. We want to see you.”

A gust of wind whining through the bare branches of the cherry tree outside the front window prompts me to pull my legs up on the couch and throw a fleece blanket over them. The camera tilts at awkward angles and swoops in and out at jarring speeds. But it brings enough of Ama’s face into focus that I can see the familiar features: white hair pulled back in a bun, fair skin—surprisingly taut for a woman in her eighties, and kohl-lined eyes blurred by crying.

This clip of Ama lasts only a minute or so. I dab my eyes with the blanket. I’m relieved when the camera veers off to capture a few final examples of the video’s predominant theme: the joy of playing with goats and the thrill of sacrificing them. I have just watched an hour of children cuddling newborn kids, fondling Nubian ears, and jousting with billy goats. I pulled the blanket over my head again and again as such delightful scenes gave way to close-ups of khukris slicing into jugular veins of some of the same goats and then peeling away skin and cutting out livers and hearts from the fresh carcasses.

“So, what do you think?” asks my fifteen-year-old son Amalesh after I turn off the TV. He has returned to Portland with the footage after a three week visit to his father’s family in the plains of Nepal.

“Well, there’s a lot of blood and gore. I couldn’t watch that, you know....” I’m not sure what else to say.

He smiles with the satisfaction of a teenager who has grossed-out his mother. I don’t want to criticize Amalesh’s interests in animal sacrifice. I never could watch goat, buffalo, or even chicken slaughters in Nepal. I have not eaten red meat for twenty years and have flirted with vegetarianism at times. Yet I have never objected to meat-eating on ethical grounds, especially in places like Nepal

where it provides essential protein and brings people together for festivals and rituals. Amalesh loves red meat and wants to learn where it comes from, how it gets harvested, and the role it plays in his Nepalese culture. I admire his desire to take responsibility for all that being a carnivore entails. And I'm grateful when my son shares any interest with me these days, even if it's through a video rather than extended conversation. But I don't enjoy watching animals die on screen and can think of no remark that won't sound critical or squeamish.

"Um, you certainly move the camera around a lot," I say. "I got a bit dizzy sometimes."

Amalesh smiles at that too. He has grown stingy with words over the last few years, so I want to believe I can read his expressions. This smile must mean that making Mom dizzy is almost as satisfying as grossing her out. But I can't be sure. I hear more from him at his high school, where I teach social studies, than I do at home. There he still rations his words as though he might run out. But I am beginning to observe more precision than miserliness in his speech. Like Arjuna zeroing in on the eye of the wooden bird, he aims his comments with care. And when teasing the talkative girls in his class or embodying Frederick Douglass or Lenin to win his case in a simulated debate, he usually hits his mark.

I often brood over how quickly he left behind clinging to my legs and chattering at me once he hit thirteen. He had been what many recent parenting books call a "willful" or "spirited" child, bombarding me with questions and opinions from awakening until his nighttime collapse. I became a single parent during his most spirited years and sometimes locked myself in the bathroom to catch a minute or two of silence. But Amalesh continued his babble from the other side of the door.

As much as I had once desired momentary escapes from the unrelenting talk of the child, I now wish for just a few words from this taciturn adolescent. He stops smiling, rises from the couch, sits on a chair and turns to face me. His brown eyes bore into me. I remember how those round eyes had charmed adults into overlooking his childhood mischief. *Little Buddha*, some American friends called him, though I tended to imagine him more as young Krishna escaping punishment after stealing the ghee. I predict those same eyes along with his black hair, golden skin, and straight white teeth will soon attract romance.

Is he waiting for me to offer more conversation? I have never been much of a talker, and my son's growing silence has made me almost as shy with him as I am with others. I long to converse with him to sort out my confused emotions after watching his Nepalese grandmother on screen. But I'm not sure I trust him. Whenever I try to talk to him these days, his eyes glaze over, or he remembers something important he has to do and disappears. I'm too vulnerable to expose myself to teenage apathy right now.

He cracks the silence. "What do you think about what Hazurama says?"

Watching the video, I wondered if he had intended to capture his grandmother's plea. Or did his Hazurama hijack the camera for a moment to serve her own purpose? A respectful grandson, he would have to oblige even if eager to return to his primary subject matter. But I suspect now that both may have collaborated to set a trap.

"She really wants to see you. Will you go back?"

I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT OF AMA SINCE I LEFT NEPAL. SHE HAD BEEN my mother-in-law, a close friend, and eventually a subject for my anthropological research during the three years I lived in her home in Gunjanagar in Chitwan Valley. She sometimes remembered her birth name as Hiramaya, though others claimed she had been named Hiradevi. Eventually, it didn't matter because she gave herself a new name: Parvati, after the assertive and devoted wife of Shiva. But from my first visit in 1984, I began calling her *Ama*—Mother—and have done so ever since. I interviewed women, carried out my pregnancy and much of my labor, and raised Amalesh as infant and toddler under her protective care.

When I conjure an image of Ama these days, it's usually with a pink gauze scarf folded neatly on top of her head. She wears it to shade herself from the sun as she walks. And I see her shoes: beige, Chinese slip-ons made of cotton with rubber soles. There is something steady, sure and stable about Ama just like those inexpensive, practical shoes, but it's combined with a flash of pink—a carefree, adventurous spirit and a willingness to try new things.

Or maybe I see her wrapped in a red sari and a striped, multicolor shawl peering under the hood of our Land Rover, helping me try to figure out why, once again, it won't start.

"Perhaps it just needs water?" she says, as though speculating about the cause of illness in a loved one. "Or does it need petrol?"

“You should’ve been an auto mechanic,” I say.

“I might’ve liked that,” she says, laughing.

Sometimes, I picture Ama squatting in her habitual grasshopper pose on a straw mat, her legs angled out on either side under her sari. Eyes moistening, she listens to a woman, perhaps a relative or neighbor, tell a tale of suffering and hardship. She could tune into such tales for hours, expressing her sympathy and suggesting courses of action.

Many anthropologists before me had focused their research on the religious and ritual rules that shaped people’s lives in Nepal. But like others of my generation, I became more interested in how people, especially women, defied religion, ritual and cultural expectations. And Ama had always provided a prime case study for that.

Amalesh’s father, Pramod, and I often shared the story of my first clumsy encounter with the family as evidence of Ama’s unusual perspective. After more than twenty-four hours of travel by train, bus and bicycle rickshaw from New Delhi, we walked into the courtyard of the family home in Gunjanagar after midnight. Pramod had sent a letter that he would be coming home for a visit and bringing a friend. He gave no indication that the friend would be a woman, let alone his intended bride. Despite the initial shock around my gender, Ama welcomed me and rallied her granddaughters to prepare a meal due a guest who has come from so far away.

Confused conversations during our first hour there compromised my position. Pramod’s father, Pundit Kedar Nath, came to believe that we had already married, which was bad enough. But he felt further insulted thinking we had not asked permission. In Nepal, even as “love marriages” become more accepted, a Brahman son does not bring a stranger into the house through marriage without consulting his parents. Despite medication, Pundit Kedar Nath’s blood pressure rose to dangerous levels. Foregoing sleep, Pramod and his relatives tended him and worried about an impending heart attack. I later disturbed the quiet of the early morning hours when I got up to relieve my bladder and fell down the stairs. In a manner I later learned was characteristic, Ama rushed to my side, cried over my misfortune, opened the door for me, gave me a flashlight, and then made sure I got back inside and up the stairs safely. The next morning, she worried about bruises and broken bones. When Pramod assured her I was fine, she still fussed over me. She could not allow any guest in her house to suffer pain.

Over our three day visit, Pramod explained that we had come to ask permission to marry. Pundit Kedar Nath eyed me without smiling and shared his misgivings about Pramod's racial, caste and religious transgressions in marrying a non-Nepali and a non-Brahman. "What caste will your children be?" he asked again and again. He lived by rigid caste rules when sitting with others and taking food and water. However, inspired by Gandhi and other South Asian reformers, he had been trying to see the essential goodness in people rather than judging them by their caste, religion, or nationality. With little enthusiasm, he gave us permission to marry.

Ama supported her husband through his ordeal but also tended my comfort, happiness, and food intake. On the last day of our visit, Pramod and I huddled around the warmth of the cooking fire, talking with her, drinking tea and trying to fend off the fog that hangs thick in the plains in the winter months. I did not understand Nepali then, so Pramod translated Ama's words, Supplementing her words with gestures I could understand, Ama smiled, clasped my hands, and wiped tears from her eyes with the end of her sari.

"Everyone's worried about how you come from so far away, she says. She was worried too at first. But she's been thinking a lot these last few days. She's decided she's not worried anymore."

I looked at Ama and smiled. She tightened her grip on my hands.

"She says: Why should I worry if I have a daughter-in-law who comes from so far away? I don't have to worry. Now the whole world will become my village."

After Pramod and I married and returned to live with his family, Ama continued extending her hospitality and compassion. I had to adjust to rural life and Brahman culture, learn Nepali, struggle with the physical and emotional difficulties of pregnancy and childbirth, care for my child, and conduct professional research on caste, class and ethnic differences among women. Ama nurtured me through it all, peppering me with questions: Are you eating enough? Are you homesick? Do you miss your mother?

I tried to give birth in our home with the help of a nurse-midwife. Because of slow progress, I ended up in the hospital. But during that first night of labor, Ama prepared special meals to comfort me through the pain. She had little interest in cooking and made dishes, such as fried eggs floating in watery broth, that resembled no food I ever encountered in Nepal or elsewhere. I couldn't swallow her concoctions then, but I savor the memory of them now—just a few of

Ama's many creative attempts to cross cultural boundaries and come up with something to comfort her unusual daughter-in-law.

Ama inspired my academic interest in women's songs as a form of resistance. I first became intrigued during the hot dry spring, four months after Amalesh's birth. I walked into the kitchen one morning where pots were boiling over into the wood fire in the cob stove. Ama squatted on the bench next to the table, her sari-covered legs drawn up to her chest. She hummed softly to herself and looked out the window grills into the sun-bleached courtyard. The acrid smell of burnt food filled the small room.

"Ama!" I shouted "The rice! The lentils! Look!" She didn't look up. She had been losing her hearing over the last year.

I moved to take the pots off the fire but then remembered that Pundit Kedar Nath would not eat cooked rice touched by a non-Brahman. I held back and waved my hands at her, trying to get her attention.

"Ama! Look!" I shouted again, pointing towards the pots on the fire. She snapped out of her reverie and looked towards the fire. She jumped up from the bench and removed the pots.

"I was just making a song," she said, scrunching her shoulders, shaking her head and laughing. "Now look. Everything is burned."

Before sitting down to eat the burnt meal—the price of Ama's creativity—Pundit Kedar Nath laughed. "I'm not surprised," he said, "she's been humming and making rhymes all night long."

Ama tried out her new rhymes on us:

*Listen, listen sisters, something I will say  
I will tell the story of illiterate women  
We must express our heart's feelings  
We are like orphans without writing and reading....*

"Does it work or not?" she asked after singing each verse.

*...Taking the rest we need, let's work the whole day  
Let's learn to count up to a hundred this way  
That I am too old to read, nobody say!  
Let's learn to count up to a hundred this way.*

"Yes, of course it all works," said Pramod, "Have someone write if down before you forget it."

She pressured us to start literacy classes for women and became one of the first students, taking her place alongside landless and low-caste women. Although the daughter and wife of learned Brahmins and professional pundits who spent most of their lives reading and writing, she had never found time to study. She was in her late sixties when we began the classes and worked hard to master the skills. I'd often find her on a cot on the verandah or in her bedroom, bent over a notebook, her arthritic hands pushing a pen to form Devanāgarī letters, their loops large and uneven. She tired easily, not only because of her hands, but also because of her failing eyesight. She might labor for several hours to write a one-page letter or song, but she persisted. More often her ideas outran her fingers, and she had to rely on others to write for her.

AMALESH SITS QUIETLY, WAITING FOR ME TO RESPOND. I TURN THE TV back on and rewind the tape to watch Ama again. The camera zooms in on her face. I hit the pause button. The holes in her nose and ears have tightened to pinpoints after years of being without jewelry to hold them open. *The woman who doesn't wear ornaments:* that's how Ama wanted people to think of her. She had refused to wear nose-rings, earrings and bangles for years. Some in the village whispered that she might be a bit crazy dressing like a widow while her husband still lived. She loved explaining to any who would listen that she still honored her husband and that he supported her mission to inspire young women to change their priorities. She hoped young girls would see how jewelry seduced them into spending money on fashion rather than on books, paper, and pencils. If they focused on education, they could improve their lives and change society. She even invented mythical stories of women losing their edge in power struggles with men when tempted by ornaments. "It's what keeps women oppressed," she often told us.

Ama didn't stop with her assault on fashion. She took particular pride in her methods for resolving domestic disputes. When she heard that a husband was beating his wife, she would gather women together and "sit-in" at the home until the husband came out, apologized and signed a paper agreeing that he would never beat his wife again. She supported the causes of unwed mothers, either brokering deals for their marriage, trying to get their families to give them land, or at the very least, providing food and a sympathetic ear.

She also relished telling tales of how she had gone door-to-door in the early 1980s to campaign for multi-party democracy. It was

a fairly lax period under the authoritarian Panchayat system when citizens were allowed to vote on a referendum to retain one-party rule or replace it with more representation. Still, local officials threatened activists who became too enthusiastic with jail or worse. Yet Ama took an umbrella and pot of water and set off daily to encourage people to vote for democracy. The referendum failed, so Ama channeled her disappointment into a song:

*If we had democracy, why would the poor wail?  
Who would have taken this way to hell  
We want the government that we've elected  
This is not the one that we've selected.  
The poor, the King does squeeze  
And puts the money in accounts overseas....*

Ama shared her song with others in the village. Some Brahmins threatened to report her as a troublemaker to local officials. She loved describing how she challenged them to do so. “I have only spoken what has happened. Can’t I make a song out of it?...Let them take me to jail.”

Ama was not arrested, but some local teachers were, and the school was closed. So she composed another of her favorite songs. After 1990 when the Panchayat system dissolved, she always began singing it with giggles and could hardly finish it through her guffaws:

*Let's dig a pit and put in it  
Mahendra's Pan-cha-yat.  
In the city, market, village, and house, let's go planting  
The Multiparty system brought by striking.  
Putting together the Government's various wrongs  
I have made this song.*

I REWIND THE TAPE AND WATCH AMA AGAIN AS AMALESH RUNS COMMENTARY: “Look at her, Mom. How can you ignore that? See how she’s crying. She’s begging you, Mom. Will you go back?” Here is a hint of the child’s unrelenting questions again, but with the greater force of reason behind them. I could try locking myself in the bathroom, but I figure we’re both too old for that now.

“I don’t know. I can’t really afford it.” As a single mother, I had been struggling with finances for years. My yearning for a stable home in the Pacific Northwest grew stronger than my professional drive to be in academia. I refused to chase adjunct academic positions around the country from year to year in hope of landing a tenure-track job in some place I didn’t want to live. So I stayed in Oregon, writing grants and professional reports for non-profits, government agencies and labor organizations. Soon bored with such work, I began teaching at a private high school. The work allowed no time for boredom and gave Amalesh a tuition reduction to attend the high school. But the meager salary would make it difficult—although, with frugality, not impossible—to save for a trip to Nepal.

“But that’s not really it, is it Mom?” asks Amalesh, cutting through my obfuscation with the same skills he used in my social studies classes to dissect the speeches of George W. Bush or Donald Rumsfeld.

“You’re right. It’s not really about the money,” I admit. “It’s just that...well, I’ve never been able to see myself going back.”

“But why?”

“I’m afraid of how people will see me now. You know how Brahmins look down on divorced women.”

Since divorcing Pramod in 1994, I could only imagine the harsh judgment of orthodox Hinduism. I try to imagine myself walking into the courtyard of the family home. But I can see only disdain on the faces of Ama, Pundit Kedar Nath and all the others I had grown to love. I had seen it before. It was the day after Amalesh’s birth when I returned from Bharatpur hospital and looked forward to recovering from forty eight hours of labor. After stepping out of the Red Cross van which Pramod had hired to bring us home, I waited for the adulation that my middle-class, Euro-American culture had led me to believe I would deserve at this moment. Yet Ama came and took the still-unnamed infant out of my arms, contempt carved into the lines of her face. She rushed him over to lie next to his grandfather who was preparing his astrological chart. Relatives and visitors crowded around the patriarch and the newest male family member. I stood alone, exhausted and lonely, trying not to cry. I wobbled forward to find a place to rest. Ama rustled around in the storage shed and brought out a dirty, torn straw mat fit for one more job before being composted with food waste and buffalo manure. She threw it down in front of the buffalo

shed and gestured for me to sit. She never smiled or said a word to me, now just another daughter-in-law defiled by the worst ritual pollution a Brahman could imagine.

If the impurity of childbirth had brought forth such distancing, what would the stain of divorce do? Ama treated all her daughters-in-law with respect. We had both pledged to honor the cultural expectations of the other. But in some areas, we found it difficult to compromise. The time following childbirth had been one. Wouldn't divorce be another? I believed so for years.

"No one will blame you, Mom," says Amalesh. "Dad told everyone it's his fault."

"Really?" I ask. "What did he say?"

"I don't know...just how he's the one who did bad stuff, that you're innocent, that sort of thing. Nobody blames you."

Pramod had been telling me for some time that he would take full blame for our failed marriage to protect my reputation in Nepal, but I didn't fully trust him to follow through. Nor was I sure it would work. Neither one of us had done anything worse than drift apart. But Brahmins in Nepal consider divorce on any grounds shameful and blame women for it.

I smile as I imagine Pramod tossing out vague allusions to having been *badmash*—"really bad"—to make it possible for me to return.

"Wow," I said. "That was a nice thing for your Dad to do."

"Yeah. Dad's cool that way."

Pramod had shouldered the weight of his culture to protect me following childbirth as well. "If you're going to treat her as polluted, you'll have to do the same with me," he told his parents when Ama tried to make me sit with the buffaloes. So Ama provided a chair for me to sit on, and Pramod's father said I could eat in the kitchen. Despite an eleven day prohibition on bathing following childbirth, Ama boiled hot water for me every day and helped Pramod carry it behind the house where I could use it out of public sight.

Once I passed the eleven-day mark, Ama began smiling at me again and treating me as a friend rather than a *Pani-Na-Chalne*—One From Whom Water Cannot Be Taken. But although there is an end to the blood pollution following birth, there is no such end to the family shame that divorce brings. So even if Pramod takes the blame and Ama stills says she loves me, how can she welcome me back?

"I just can't believe they would accept me," I say.

"Come on, Mom. You're such a worrier. Hazurama doesn't care.

She wants to see you. You should go for her. Even if some people judge you, just ignore them."

I can't believe I'm getting advice to ignore what others think from this young man, barely grown out of his early adolescent fascination with musky colognes, hair gels, and frequent glances in the mirror. I consider reminding him of his own sensitivities but stop myself. We're talking about me, not him, and I have to admit he has a point. Yes, a few orthodox Brahmins in Gunjanagar had probably already condemned me for bringing the shame of divorce to the family. But hadn't they condemned me long ago? Having already been born a non-Brahman and a woman, I never had much further to fall. And Pramod's family began their downward spiral by welcoming our marriage in the first place.

Ama had always defended me against Brahman orthodoxy. During my first year there, rumors circulated that I walked through the village in a white sari with a cross around my neck and a Bible in my hand looking for converts. Several years later, rumors spread that I danced too much at weddings, thus demonstrating my loose morals. Again and again, Ama traced those rumors to the ravings of "old know-nothing men who don't know you and don't even understand what Hindu teachings are really about." They may have spent a lot of time reading the *Vedas* and the *Gita*, she said, but they didn't understand them. If they did, they would have had more hospitality for foreigners and more compassion for women.

Ama paid a price both for having me as a daughter-in-law and defending me. Orthodox Brahmins stopped coming as guests to our home. Or if they did come to have a conversation with Pundit Kedar Nath, they stayed a short time and refused to take water or food from Ama. She may have been pained by this ultimate shunning. By refusing water from her hands, orthodox Brahmins defined her as outcaste. However, she never showed any shame in this. Although she worried about what it meant for her husband's role as a Brahman priest, she took pride in upholding her own sense of what was right.

And hadn't Ama been risking her reputation in so many other ways that had nothing to do with me? I remember a favorite family story about the compassion she showed for a daughter-in-law years before I showed up. Pramod was just a boy when Ama received word that her eldest son, Purushottam, had been found dead near train tracks in North India. Ama experienced a grief I can't bear to imagine over his mysterious death. But through her mourning, she also had

to consider his young wife, Vishnumaya, no more than sixteen. She and Pandit Kedar Nath had arranged the marriage shortly before Purushottam left to study in India. The couple had little time together, but Ama witnessed genuine affection growing between them. And Ama had grown to love Vishnumaya herself. Rather than follow convention and hold her to a lifelong sentence of childless widowhood and servitude where the best she might hope for would be the kindness of family members, Ama released Vishnumaya from the marriage bond and sent her back to her parents in freedom. Vishnumaya remarried and built a family with her second husband. I remember Ama's joy when the confident, middle-aged wife and mother of grown children came to visit once while I was there. They cried together about their misfortune so long ago and expressed their gratitude: Vishnumaya for being allowed to remarry and Ama for having an opportunity to practice the compassion that has made her life so rich.

I TURN OFF THE TELEVISION AND VCR. AMALESH AND I SIT IN SILENCE. I look out the window at the skies made clear by winter air blasting through the Columbia River Gorge and scouring clouds out of the city. I sense my son's growing impatience to go down to his basement lair. Ahead of me, I have a long afternoon of roasting chicken, grading papers, and trying to tune out the muffled bass of *Rage Against the Machine* shaking our house from below.

"Anyway, I'm going back to Nepal for a year after I graduate from high school. It's just four years. Will you come then?"

I rarely hear my son make plans beyond meeting with a friend to go skateboarding the next day. He steers clear of commitments that might interfere with his flexibility to respond to a better offer. Yet here he is making plans four years ahead. And he is encouraging me to be part of them, now tightening the net that snared me when his grandmother appeared on my television screen.

*The whole world will become my village:* Ama once welcomed me into her life with those words in the hope of holding together a family that might have been pulled apart by religion, culture, and geography. Her predictions had come true, although the changes had little to do with me. Over the previous nine years, Ama's village had become more connected to the world. Nepal had been swept up in a Maoist insurgency and a royal massacre. Since my first arrival, the global reach of technology had brought electricity, television, and cell phones

to her village, with the Internet not far behind. Meanwhile, the family had extended its reach further. Pramod became a U.S. citizen after our divorce and ended up living in Portland. In addition to Amalesh, six of Ama's grandchildren resided in the U.S. for work or study. Another practiced medicine in Australia.

Yet during this time of rapid change, I imagined Ama and her culture stuck in timeless tradition. I had been obsessed with brief moments—Ama's disapproval of my ritual impurity after Amalesh's birth or a few orthodox Brahmins spreading unfounded rumors about my proselytizing—and inflated them to represent the singular attitude of an entire village. Summoning half-remembered clips from grim movies on Medieval Europe or Puritan New England, I created nightmarish scenes of how I would be greeted when I step down from the bus in Gunjanagar: *Ah, there's the divorced woman, let's throw stones at her.* Now I realize that I am the one frozen in my own fictional world. I studied anthropology to challenge depictions of static culture and people following it without resistance. I wrote about Ama and other women in Nepal using song and poetry to criticize tradition. In my high school classes, I have been telling stories of Sojourner Truth and Mother Jones to show not only the courage of women who defy convention but also their successes in bringing change. Yet I have not been able to imagine people who bent so far to accept me in the first place bending a bit further to weave me back into their lives.

I am especially ashamed at how I have underestimated Ama. She had always been a rebel and continued to embrace change. She had just reached out to me through cutting-edge technology in the hands of her American-born grandson in the same way she had taken on other new tasks in her later years: reading, writing, and political campaigning. Ama and I had both stretched our cultural flexibility to breaking points at times. But such stretching always made us more limber for the next challenge.

"WELL, MOM?" SAYS AMALESH GETTING UP AND STANDING BEFORE me. He is beginning to put on height that may soon exceed my own six feet. "It would be cool if you come when I'm there."

I wonder if I hear some genetic trace of his grandmother's compassion breaking through the armor of adolescent apathy and moodiness. Or is it just another awkward step towards maturity like the one I saw one evening last summer when I lay in bed reading

*Parzival?* Wielding a blunt machete over his head, Amalesh pushed open my bedroom door with his foot and hunted the room for an intruder he thought he heard. We concluded there was no one and both went back to bed, but I marveled at how my son seemed to step out of an Arthurian romance to defend me.

“Uh, Mom,” he says quickly. “You know I mean for a visit. Not for the whole time, right?”

I smile and nod to show that I never would have imagined he meant otherwise. Of course, he doesn’t reach out to others with the same emotion as his grandmother and probably never will. But his terse invitation is enough to soften me to the question, if not the answer.

“I’ve got four years,” I say, as he turns to head downstairs. “I’ll think about it.”

## Highways and Fairways

EVENTUALLY, THE RADIO SPUN WITHOUT PAUSE, SEARCHING THE empty air for weak signals, for half-hushed strains of oldies, or even polemic talk shows. Nothing. Just the slow escalation of numbers, tipping over at a hundred and eight, then recycling back around. The northern stretches of the Mackenzie Highway rendered even car radios mute, while the surrounding taiga offered little more than whispers. Slow swaying short pines, whisking brown grasses, and the mild crunch of the highway's packed gravel.

My brother guided the car along the road while I intermittently checked the spinning radio dial and scanned a map spread across my lap. We had more important things to seek than FM frequencies, like gas stations. We'd left from Edmonton early in the morning, speeding north from the city into the wide prairies of Alberta. Civilization disappeared quickly, though reasserted itself from time to time in places like Peace River, where we'd last stopped for gas. There, as we pumped the car full, I found a twitching moth in our radiator, a lone survivor from a swarm we had driven through a few hours before. For miles, white bodies had fluttered toward our windshield like snow. Some splattered on the glass, while others stuck in the radiator gaps. At a Peace River gas station the last moth flickered, nearly dead, discharging a few last surges of organic electricity. We left town with the moth still attached, but by the time we rolled off the blacktopped portion of the Mackenzie Highway and entered radio silence, that moth had also no doubt been silenced, whisked away by the velocity of wind around our speeding car.

Here, in the empty scrub taiga, we felt alone but not unpleasantly so. Rarely, a vehicle passed going the other way, south, back toward civilization. Of the few we saw, nearly all were trucks, big-wheeled 4x4s pockmarked by rust and use. Each carried a few jerry cans of fuel strapped to the roof, which reminded us of the potentials of empty taiga, of the possibility of coasting to a stop on a lonely stretch where we'd have to wait. How long, we could only guess. Afternoon

stretched toward evening, which even at this latitude in August meant, eventually, nightfall.

I spotted a small town on the map, probably better described as an outpost, which I assured Greg would mean gas. I felt at least partly responsible, and quite a bit more nervous about our plunging gauge than he appeared to be. Awhile back, we'd had the opportunity for gas, then later a chance to peel off the main road toward Hay River, a somewhat legitimate town that, at the very least, would have had fuel. I advised against each, preferring to maintain the rolling pace we had, to make headway toward our target of Yellowknife. When we reached the new point on the map, the hopeful spot onto which I'd pinned our chances, we passed a long since abandoned building, where faded price signs hinted at a more useful past. Greg said something about the jerry cans, about their function as metaphor or icon. As warning.

Not much later, we eased toward the bank of the Mackenzie River, where mosquitoes swarmed our slowing car and pinged off our windows. Ahead, a ferry waited, and a crewman waved us aboard. Even before we'd stopped, the ferry lurched into the heavy currents of the river, leaving behind the mosquitoes and, officially, the Mackenzie Highway. Here, the proximity of so much life—cars, bugs, working men—seemed jarring. That the ferry moved, however, lightened our solitude and, better, suggested the presence of fuel, as did the pumps in front of the convenience store a half mile farther down the road.

TWO HIGHWAYS RUN THROUGH THE SMALL MOUNTAIN TOWN WHERE I live, separated by little more than name. The normal road, the highway that connects our outpost to the city, bears the utilitarian title of Route 30. Westward from town, it carries four lanes of traffic through the brief wilderness of the Loyalhanna Gorge, then empties into a more or less steady stream of escalating population. Here, Route 30 breaks its side-by-side promenade with the Loyalhanna Creek, turning instead to snake through chain fast-food joints and strip malls, until finally disgorging at the urban delta of Pittsburgh. For much of this path, the old Lincoln Highway lies beneath Route 30, and bright road signs alert travelers to the history of the old road and, more, seek to align that history with the same sense of Americana that pulls travelers off speedy Western freeways onto the cracked macadam of Route 66.

Separating Route 30 and the Lincoln Highway seems a senseless task, since the former is merely a newer rendition of the latter, and each merely an improvement on the wagon ruts that used to connect

the frontier outpost of my town—old Fort Ligonier—with the next fortification in the wilderness, Fort Pitt. Worse, there's something suspicious in the name, something untoward in the impulse to tack up signs proclaiming clinical Route 30 as the grander, richer, more resonant Lincoln Highway. Regardless of name, in practice the highway serves only as a conduit of traffic, and the clinical, sanitized, numerical designation fits best. Lincoln Highway: the name gestures toward history, attempts to apply an artificial weathering to a road that is nothing more than a route.

Each fall, close to a hundred thousand tourists drive the highway to arrive in historic Ligonier, for a long weekend called Fort Ligonier Days. Vendors set up tents to sell lazy watercolors, hand-tooled leather, dried flower arrangements. Doughy middle-aged men dress as British Redcoats and shoot blanks at other doughy middle-aged men impersonating the enemy French. Cannon fire echoes through the valley, perhaps momentarily diverting eyes from displays of silver jewelry.

In the past that Fort Days seeks to recall, the road along the Loyalhanna served the frontier. Wagons led supplies through wilderness and found in places like Fort Ligonier safe haven, signs of life and civilization in a thickness of green that, to the weary traveler, must have felt both oppressive and sinister. Now, tracing that same path along the Lincoln Highway carries no weight. The route that once took days and once tempted fate takes an hour today, and on the modern road between Ligonier and Pittsburgh travelers are never more than five minutes away from food or safe lodging.

There's little in a name, then, at least when applied to a highway. Names assign importance, permanence, heft. A name suggests inspiration, too, which fits nicely for oceans, for rivers, for towns even. But in highways, names rankle like unearned war medals. Named highways perpetrate fraud, absorb accolades once given to old pathways that, now, allow undistinguished roads to bask in the glory of ancient achievement. There's nothing grand about the new Lincoln Highway, particularly when it's been paved over and renamed. And even where the old road deviates from the new one, and where it now stands as a seldom traveled back road, there's no glory in the Lincoln Highway signs, only a sour reminder of a history that passed, only a flicker of recollection of a now-developed space that once deserved the title of frontier.

I WONDER ABOUT THE ROAD SIGNS PROCLAIMING THE MACKENZIE Highway. They appear in Alberta, midway between Edmonton and the

northern border, in Canadian prairie lonely enough that, when we met a construction crew blocking half of the two-lane road, the flagwoman casually waved us into oncoming traffic. For miles, we shared a single track with vehicles theoretically coming the other way, but none ever appeared. Such emptiness, perhaps, earns a road the right to a name. The road stands up to the wild, deserves credit for its presence or, more, marks the achievement of road crews who tame the prairie, who toil in emptiness to create smooth travel for rare vehicles. But if this is honor, it is certainly dubious.

Farther north, the Mackenzie Highway crosses the 60<sup>th</sup> Parallel, a geographic imposition significant enough to warrant a giant billboard and, of course, a photo-op. Here, the Northwest Territories begin, and the sudden realization of latitude. The arctic is not far, just six and a half degrees—a bit more than seven hundred kilometers, seven hours by car, if a road went that far. And at least on our route, roads don’t choose that target, ending instead at Yellowknife, the capital, where we were headed for a game of golf. I had originally hoped to cross into the Arctic, an epic side journey while visiting my brother in Edmonton. The lack of northern roads and expense of bush planes diverted our plans toward Yellowknife, where Greg had heard of a golf course with impressive claims: the northernmost golf course in the world. Whether the course ever truly held such distinction I don’t know, and by now it has lost that honor to a Scandinavian course, has even been trumped in latitude by another course in Canada. Nevertheless we found the claim intriguing enough to rationalize the 1,500 kilometer drive. A one-day drive, I might add—straight up, play golf the next day, then straight back.

SOMEWHERE, I HAVE A PICTURE OF THE 60<sup>TH</sup> PARALLEL BILLBOARD, and no doubt somewhere I have a picture of a Mackenzie Highway sign: a shield, emblazoned with a number and a stylized hunting knife. Such pictures cannot be avoided on trips like this, since giant road signs mark progress through the unknown. They serve as markers of place, similar to the inuksuk that dot the landscape of the far north, stacks of rocks gathered in part to impose landmarks on land impervious to marking. Road signs and billboards, of course, exact a different kind of demarcation, a blazing of trail that implies the taming of frontier instead of the management of life in the wilderness.

Eventually, however, even the Mackenzie Highway signs seem to gather credibility. Farther north, the asphalt gives way to packed gravel, perhaps because of ratios of expense and use. And frost bears

no love for the rigidity of pavement, which refuses to yield to heaving and twisting. Gravel forgives the frost, at least partly, and more pragmatically, is cheaper to fix. Still, a highway that submits to gravel is a highway that submits to wilderness, in at least a small way. There, a highway name begins to make sense, as such concessions imply a consciousness of locale that numbers do not. Yet the Mackenzie Highway has a number, is in fact Highway 1.

We left that highway the moment our tires rolled onto the waiting ferry. In the stories we tell, Greg and I always refer to the rush of that moment, to the quiet impatience of the ferry workers who apparently saw us approaching from some distance. They waited, following what we'd probably romanticize as the code of the north, choosing to delay the trip a few minutes instead of stranding us temporarily on the Mackenzie Highway. Likely, the decision was as much about economics and efficiency as anything else. Had the ferry not waited, it would have been forced to cross back to us immediately, even though no one waited on the other side for a lift, an outlay of fuel and time that made waiting worthwhile. But I don't think we exaggerate when we explain the hurried moment, the waving of the boatmen, the surge of diesel engines and the jolt away from shore.

I don't remember any pictures of the ferry, which strikes me as a missed opportunity or, maybe, a lucky miss. As a traveler, the ferry looms as a perfect moment, as the very best landmark of the voyage, a fume-spewing, grime-coated testament to the unbridled spirit of the north. I'm glad we missed the photo, though, because showing off such a picture would tell more about me than I'd like to admit. The picture exposes too much, about frontier and possession, and about the purity of our alienation. My brother may have driven a car with Albertan plates then, but neither of us could ever boast of anything Canadian; his visit just happened to be two years longer than mine.

We shared the ferry with other vehicles, all more robust than our own, and all carrying badges of authenticity we couldn't fake. There were the jerry cans, of course, whose absence on our own car marked us as nothing less than foolish. But there were the plates, too, polar bears bolted to local vehicles. In the Northwest Territories, the official governmental license plate ignores the standardization of rectangles and, instead, takes the shape of the northern bear—head, tail, legs hanging over the absent edges. The polar bear will not be contained, even on a license plate. While other states and provinces adhere to the North American standard and compress the state into a steel rectangle

of unquestioned border, the polar bear of the Northwest Territories—shared too with the sparse territory of Nunuvut—refuses to be bound. It mocks borders. Maybe this is an odd envy—a license plate—but even now I can't help the jealousy. Worse, I've seen photos of old Pennsylvania plates that incorporated the shape of the state itself, a ragged right-hand edge mirroring the sinuous Delaware River. But on the plate, the river does not become the margin, is instead bound within the steel rectangle that confines the whole state, unnatural right angles surrounding the chaotic lines of nature, refusing to allow water to run free. And even that plate disappeared long ago, replaced with a stream of gold and blue placards carrying less and less inspiring slogans that have, now, been reduced to the official state website. I feel ashamed in the face of the polar bear. All we ever had, in Pennsylvania, was the arbitrary shape of a governmental parcel bound on all sides, while the Northwest Territories takes the bear as totem.

A RIVER MARKS A NATURAL BORDER, MAKES AN OBSTACLE THAT creates inevitability for the border. It's the easiest way to identify territory: yours is on this side of the river, mine on that side. On a map, the river becomes a line. The river becomes the clarified separation of territory, the touching of two frontiers that are forever cleaved apart by the flow of water. There's something chaotic in this that I like far more than the straight-drawn lines of dry state intersections, like the Western border between Pennsylvania and Ohio or, worse, the flat line south of Pennsylvania that takes another name: the Mason-Dixon line. A river can't help but move, ripping land away at one bank, building on another. Rivers spread out, slow themselves over time, carving a broad path as they find new ways to navigate space. As a border, a river must be considered technically tangential, though modern surveying establishes defined and immutable borders permanently marked in numbers—latitude, longitude, degrees, minutes, seconds. But when I look at a river as border, I can't help but see the constant shift and the contingency of forever. Today, the river is here, tomorrow there, taking with it the clarity of separation. A highway serves as a more permanent border, built as a monument of concrete and stone. A highway is better, then, from the perspective of a mapmaker, more stable than a river, and perhaps for this reason is honored with a name.

I still prefer the number, since the numerical highway makes its functions clear. Where else are numbers so clearly in charge? A number for the route. A number for the speed. A number for the distance. How

poetic—ironically poetic, perhaps—that our highways carry regular posts marking those numbers. And how crucial that even the roads we know by name, the small secondary roads that run past lonely farms, even the tar and chip roads that run through nowhere, carry an official numerical designation, usually a moniker as ungainly as this: T576. That's my road, the little half-mile stretch of pavement that runs past our house, that is also called Edgemont and that pizza delivery drivers often don't know exists at all. Until two years ago, it lacked a name, known officially only by postal designation as a numbered rural route.

Riding on the Mackenzie River ferry, such issues of name and number surged away like the water flowing steadily toward the Arctic Ocean. It strikes me now, eight years after my visit to Yellowknife, that the river offered my only hope of reaching my arctic goal, that its chaos and flow could have taken me somewhere that roads could not. Had I spit over the side of the ferry, part of me—DNA more easily expressed as number-like sequences of letters—would have shuttled across the Arctic Circle, where the rest of me could not afford to go.

More importantly, I think, the brief minutes we spent ferrying across the Mackenzie were the only moments of the trip spent off the highway. For a few delirious moments, we were nowhere exact, and our position could not be accurately tracked by map, nor could it be described numerically. There, we rode the true Mackenzie, the river that earns its name through fury. We rode within an unbridled flow of water that the northern climate defends with all it's got. The ferry's engines whined against the current, did everything they could to keep us from flowing downstream away from the Great Slave Lake, whose countless gallons surged without fatigue toward the open ocean. And though we didn't have to wait for the ferry on our crossing, often drivers do, the river presenting a literal barrier to passage, a forced nod to its power. In winter, the passage is quicker and, perhaps, more reliable, when an ice bridge spans the moving water. But that convenience comes at the price of a few awkward weeks a year, when half-thawed river makes travel by both ice bridge and ferry impossible.

Naturally, plans are underway to build a real bridge across the Mackenzie, a girder and concrete structure that would end all delays. No waiting for the ferry, or for the seasons. I wonder how the bridge would change the last moments of the crossing, when a vehicle rolls off the boat and back onto a highway. At that moment, on our own trip, we drove from atop the Mackenzie River onto a new stretch of gravel road, Highway 3, also known as the Great Slave Highway, also known as

the Yellowknife Highway. Names sit better with me here, for the more remote portion of the road to Yellowknife, since the inconvenience of the Mackenzie makes the packed gravel more significant or, at least, harder to get to. Of the official names, I prefer the first—the Great Slave Highway—since it refers to the lake we soon flanked, instead of the settlement we would eventually reach.

MY DISTRUST OF NAMES EXTENDS TO FAIRWAYS, WHERE A PECULIAR and pretentious assigning sometimes appears, usually on exclusive golf courses, or ones that wish to seem exclusive. I first noticed the practice when watching the Masters Tournament on TV, the annual professional championship held at Augusta National Golf Club, a place whose superiority seeps out from beneath heavily guarded fences. Sometimes, TV announcers refer to the holes not by their number but, instead, by clever and saccharine titles like “Flowering Peach” and “Nandina.” I’ve never played Augusta, but I have found myself chopping down fairways with similarly floral names, names I can’t ever remember and won’t ever accept.

Golf, like most sports, is governed by numerals, strokes and yardages like runs and innings. The game is played along a sequence of holes, a particular sequence that counts up from one and ends at eighteen. Adding names seems both confusing—how do you remember the order?—and overly sentimental. Names make the field of play more than a locus of activity, and golf needs no such impositions: already, too many people assign it status as a “metaphor” for life. Sport is sport, and holes are best when numbered, just as courses themselves are better when named simply. I prefer the plain, descriptive titles of courses I’ve known—Turquoise Valley Golf Course, VFW Country Club, Ligonier Country Club—than overwrought destination names like Teeth of the Dog, Great Bear, the Den. A simple name sets the golf course into a specific place, implies nothing beyond the virtues already present within a given plot of land. A simple name lets the course speak for itself. In the case of the VFW, the course I grew up playing, the name alerts players to the hardscrabble, mostly forgotten, crusty manners of the course and its golfers. Grander names are guilty of trying too hard, of mistaking a memorable name for a memorable place. They commit the same error of judgment as those who would superimpose Lincoln Highway over Route 30, since the name itself changes nothing about the road. The fairways of a golf course are little more than highways, merely pathways between departure and arrival.

For highways and fairways, names do not create the pleasure of the journey. That's left to the journey.

This might explain part of the draw of the Yellowknife Golf Club, which could easily have been overnamed, yet identifies itself simply with its town. Even the fairways in Yellowknife seem the rare kind that could deserve individual names, scraped as they are from the inhospitable Canadian Shield. In Yellowknife, the fairways are nothing but sand, billowy, dune-type sand that cannot be traversed without slogging. The fairways grow no grass, and are therefore different than most other fairways. Golfers carry strips of artificial turf to toss on the sand and create small, stable platforms for hitting. The tee boxes and greens are artificial turf, seemingly designed to repel the insertion of wooden tee pegs and prevent the easy stoppage of a ball.

On the day we played, my brother and I teed off late, at nine P.M., at an hour that would have fallen long after a blazing orange sunset at home. We worked our way along the nine sandy fairways of the golf course, tossing our pieces of turf down after plucking our balls from the sand. I've never been dirtier on a golf course than I was that day, blackness seeping out of the sand to run up my legs to my knees. I struggled with my game, too, unused to the shiftiness of the footing, always aware of the way turf greens do not hold shots. We finished some time close to eleven in a late twilight, when dimness reduced the golf course to tentative shadows. We sat on a few exposed rocks beside the clubhouse and sipped from bottles of beer.

Yellowknife could have called this golf course The Barren Dunes, or The Midnight Sands, or worse. That the city did not make the Yellowknife Golf Club's directness admirable and representative. This far north, the course is enough. A fancy name would be overkill.

I think, then, of the winding Great Slave Highway, where Greg and I gradually eased our way back into radio contact. I think of the massive boulders flanking the road, house-sized monstrosities carried along or scraped free by migrating glaciers. I think of the wooden shacks that began to appear beside the road, tucked among the boulders and taiga, signs of life I took as Yellowknife itself. I was wrong, and shocked at the final bend in the Great Slave Highway that reveals, once and for all, the improbability of Yellowknife itself. In late afternoon sun, a curtailed skyline of a half-dozen mid-rise buildings appeared as if by magic. This was Yellowknife, a rambling city of 20,000, the end of the highway.

## **Gesture**

The boy is caught crawling toward the men's scuffed shoes,  
ruffled frock dress buttoned to the bottom of his round, worried face,  
detailed, still enough for his lips, parted and taking in a breath  
to flash one baby tooth—my mother loves this boy, his arms and legs  
ephemeral streaks dragging in the grass the camera collected  
and transformed into silver hairs bristling on this square paper.  
This is a photograph of men lined up in uniform,  
coat sleeve to coat sleeve, before the hedge,  
before the boy they did not know was steadily heading toward them,  
before the war maybe—we think they are German, my mother does,  
but not her relatives. If the men were her relatives,  
she might keep this to herself the way she was quiet  
playing with the neighborhood kids in New Jersey,  
all of them Jewish, all of their parents survivors of the camps.

*L'art du silence* means the art of mime, Marcel Marceau  
mocking the wind in his white makeup and surprised blackened eyes,  
the single red flower springing from his silk opera hat.  
The wind is not there, but it is, like on that hill in France  
when he and another man in the Free French Forces  
hurried in and out of the trees' blue-flecked shade,  
rushing into the clearing's gold afternoon light,  
the smoked wet scent of burning leaves, the men standing around:  
German soldiers eating lunch and pissing into ferns.  
His father was already taken to Auschwitz.  
He only had one moment before the soldiers saw him,  
so he straightened like a pulled string and ordered the men,  
*Surrender! Our unit is only a mile behind us!*  
No one was behind him. Nothing was. It saved his life.

## Ossuary

*Kutna Hora, Czech Republic*

But inside the bone museum, go in, go in, show the girl behind  
the glass desk

your ticket stub. This ossuary smells like the inside of a violin,

an expectancy of sound when the tawny summer shoes of that family  
pad the stones.

A monk boiled people he couldn't bury during the Plague, then  
the Crusades,

and these are the bones—he pulled the chalk ends apart and re-fitted  
the knobs of arms

to make this museum, thirty-thousand bodies used like matchsticks.

Skulls huddle along the ceiling, or between the ceiling beams and  
roof above

the bone chandelier made from all that was left. Squint, the place  
could be limestone

or ocean-worn coral, pocked, smooth, grown together. The roof  
umbrellas us.

Our cameras spark here and there—dull brown beetles lighting up  
beyond us.

Remember home, how the insects sparkle the peonies,  
the chiffon, bulbous-headed flowers bowing to the alley  
of the church—

when building the choir room, construction workers split shovels  
into graves,

the tombstones dating to when the town faced the river, when  
trading boats

docked, unloaded, and some of the brick homes honored with metal  
date badges

face the water still, having survived the floods that lifted soil from  
the banks,

that silenced the town, rose to the tips of wrought-iron fences and  
covered the burials,

the stone markers later cemented with the bricks in the decorative  
courtyard

behind the building where people stop now to shake rain  
from umbrellas,

silver blades opening like jellyfish blooming in the electric water.

## Tinsel Halo

Sun wraps the other balconies in wet wax paper—these apartment towers,  
trees flickering wetness, holding air, moving air through nests of leaves.

Pencils could have sketched that radio tower fading in clouds soaking  
the almost  
light when the sun catches up with my mood, too late for the comical  
mail truck,

jewelry box on wheels, hurrying past the back fins of the cars'  
exhaust pipes,  
like opera binoculars peering at the dumpster. The soul has just  
enough time

to take a bookmark out of *M.C. Escher's Etchings*—photographic  
insides of castles  
where insistent people march up flights of steps warping up the wall,  
a fisheye

lens curving the earth—or *Picasso*, the part about his desperate  
Blue Period  
in Paris, where he'd lead his models upstairs and they'd step  
from dresses,

lie down, knees opening, hair undone and tangled in blue clouds  
around their kohl-rimmed, wide, bored eyes, and they'd exhale  
cigarette figures

of smoke, the sun moving the indigo window's shadows across their  
feet and then  
they'd sleep: crushed pigment and water. Like carnation stalks  
soaking blood dye

up to petals and the fringe explodes! The sky. At the ocean.  
The tidewater as warm as the twist  
from the tap you wash your hands with, and a fishing vessel slits  
its razor shiver of a wake,  
  
that lip of white against the green glass veins pulsing the water,  
pushing,  
pushing the body that lies on its back and stays here and stays here,  
stays here.

## **Power Girl**

Never mind my supposed weaknesses—the loss of vision power, the temporary grounding—and never mind my past, muddied as it is with revised histories. Who cares where I came from? Once I was a child, flung out like in a game of red rover. I hovered for years. They sent me off with a feather boa and a bayonet, which explains everything, almost. With these, I designed a plan to conquer the stars, to align them in shapes more easily imagined. No more Ursa anything. No more faded corners. I missed bean bag chairs, hot curlers and hairspray, and all those disco dynamos in their strobe-lit glory. I missed the Le Freak and the c'est chic. I missed the first kiss, the tongue and hand awkwardly thrust toward their untold promises, the backstreet in the backseat. I mean, I gave up a lot. Sure, it seemed like it was for a good cause, Justice and all, and sure I can do some pretty rad stuff, (My therapist would be pleased with the affirmation... she's been after me on that. Power Girl, she says, you have to learn to love yourself. Blah-dee-blah. Power Girl, you need to be peeling your onion, she says, you need to get to the core of you.) but no one's made a tag line for me. You never hear *It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Power Girl.* Letterman could leap capital T in a single bound. And I've never even been near a TV show. The Wonder Twins and that space monkey? Ya gotta be kiddin' me. Activate this. Meanwhile,

back in the realm of relative reality, my therapist  
says part of peeling the onion, my onion,  
is moving through and past my resentments.  
If you look at someone through compassion,  
not judgment, she says, you'll be set free.  
Wendy and Marvin did not have it easy either.  
Limited powers. Limited dialogue.  
Lame names. Still, it was a show.  
I begin each day in the same way:  
I have super strength, I'm faster than Flash,  
I have an alter ego and a software firm,  
and heeled boots with matching gloves.  
Every few years I get a new costume  
and bigger breasts. Go ahead,  
laugh. I know it's the running joke.  
Sticks and stones may quite literally  
break these otherwise perfect bones,  
but an audience can't hurt me. My core  
is pilates-firm. I'm in search of action,  
of someone to save.

## **Stretch Armstrong**

*for Paul Guest*

It's nothing  
intentional,  
though nothing  
a band-aid or salve  
will mend. They pound  
my stomach concave  
like art class clay, a lumpy  
ashtray, a shallow  
bowl bound to crack  
in the kiln, then contort  
me like a rag doll, like something  
made of something less,  
a Slinky or Silly Putty,  
my briefs barely covering  
my anatomical nothingness.  
Sure I have the tan,  
and the requisite blond hair,  
the bod to make Barbie  
turn her head, but  
I can barely stand, I melt  
into myself like a drunk  
or puppet. And how'd you like  
to be from the '70s? Nixon  
and leisure suits, your world  
in avocado and goldenrod,  
and you elongated over it,  
through the stench of cigarettes,  
down the hall of a ranch house,  
or across some dark linoleum,  
then snapped back, expected  
to re-form like a super hero,

while your deltoids ache  
and your wrists remain thin.  
Eventually, you ooze,  
which is what they want—  
knowledge of what's inside.  
Though thirty years later,  
they won't remember—  
was it red or green? Did it taste  
like syrup? Did mom  
make us throw him out  
immediately? Or did he linger,  
wounded, for a year or years,  
under the bed or in the bottom  
of some over-crammed toy box?  
And what about that toy box?  
A yard sale?  
Or a thrift store drop-off?

## **When I Was a Lounge Singer**

*after Maureen Seaton*

Softer than petrichor, I was,  
but also the storm's crepitation,  
and then, too, the pause

between the thunder, the combination  
of all this, and curves and velvet,  
red, a fitted bodice, a meditation

hued with bourbon and the swirl of cigarette  
smoke, and slingbacks, jeweled.  
I was the word *silhouette*.

And the men pooled  
around the stage, and, too, their wives,  
to the songs of the one who left, the one who'll

leave, the who'll drive  
from Canada to feel the satin  
skin over the ribs, the tongue alive

like *where have you been*,  
and *I was worried sick*. So easy to be drawn  
in, like all-skate in the opposite direction, the spin

of lights on hardwoods, his hand gone  
now, yours slightly cold, you're part of the stream  
and spark, and it does not dawn

on you that this is what it means  
to be lost. There's no bread crumb trail  
back from seventeen,

*Leah Nielsen*

from all that exhaustion. It never failed—  
The steady murmur of their applause,  
how it hung like lilac, like a veil.

*Hannah Faith Notess*

## In the City of Arias

*Georgina Joshi 1981–2006*

I believe it is a little like the place  
we go each night before we airdrop into sleep,

that there, the girls in uncomfortable shoes  
kick them off in the deep grass  
stepping off sidewalks, off stages,

and the woman in the elaborate witch wig  
has unpinned her heavy tresses,  
now free to walk bald in the street.

The lover, released from his costume sword  
and rage-filled alto girlfriend,  
no longer has to sing that vengeance  
is kind of like justice.

Actual songs perch in the trees—  
the words are all untranslatable.

In that city, I want to say,  
the voice is the lamp of the body,

and if a soprano falls accidentally  
from her rooftop garden  
she will release only one clear note,  
its pitch diving Doppler away from you.

I want to believe you have moved  
into that building of bel canto vowels

that your voice,  
    clear as an empty room,  
        has an apartment all to itself.

There, I believe, every steel beam carries one note  
    and every brick rests on others to form a chord,  
        and even a crumpled airplane

flares open like a fermata nearly resolved.  
In that city, anyone can endure it.

## A Box of Oranges

Each year the box came early, a month before Christmas  
At least, and stayed there for ages, sometimes a week  
In shadow in the mornings and then sunlight as the day  
Passed over our patched floor. We all knew what was inside:  
Oranges we'd never eat, and a note signed from someone  
We'd never met, but of whom we'd hear the occasional,  
Apocryphal gripe, whenever our mother was feeling forlorn  
Or besieged (which was all the time really): how she'd beat  
Our mother; how she'd had a son go insane, get sent away  
Up north someplace. Her husband never came home.  
She was beautiful and blond, and she'd take a daughter  
Out of school with her to see movies in the daytime...

These oranges would be bruised, shrunken, mottled with mold,  
Wrapped up in a pink, girlish gauze. As a chore we'd discover  
Each lumped globe, and set them upon our gloomy sideboard  
Gently, as if a voice constrained within might somehow speak to us...

Years later we saw her in the garden of our aunt's house  
In a folding lawn chair: imperiously she held her chin up  
Toward the sun. She sat apart from her four estranged, estranging  
Daughters: she was my mother, exactly like my mother  
Is today! I don't think she spoke a word all afternoon...

*Ricardo Pau-Llosa*

## **Three-Quarter Moon over Virginia Key Inlet**

The man said it was a half moon, but the woman corrected him,  
knowing the world of this light and the names its cycle takes.

Still, he thought he knew what the boats moored there  
might bowl within them—couples locked in conquered sleep.

Really, her sigh questioned. What of absences?  
No ripples. How could the marble of these vessels love?

And the man searched the annals of randomness,  
and noticed how the boats were like the puddles he saw

on his morning walks, inverting that scene, so that the solid  
here gathered its lust for chance yet seemed free,

thrown upon the sea much as the water cupped  
into the palms that life had worn into his sidewalk.

But, the woman quietly assessed, there is no randomness  
in either scene. The boats rest where the depths dictate

much as the water finds its destined holds. But surely  
the heart, the man thought, oracles the world the moon

has wrested from the sun. In the eye's will there is  
the miracle of intention. The boats pool upon the sea

as rain anchors in its ports of stone. Surely night is what  
we owe ourselves, who toil the light toward umbral joy.

## Pondering the Husserlian *Epoché* while Flying across the Mona Channel

So much like land, the ice tattoo  
on the inside pane, and like it too  
the stitch of clouds in winded rows

whose gloom stains the neural sea.  
Who hasn't drawn conclusions  
from shape without a breath of doubt,

that now-lulled suspicion  
that in a named thing there hide  
two horizons that frame identity?

One is the fake shadow that light  
can't help but make, mechanical  
eclipse that prints the cotton edge

of objects on their kin. The other  
is the impinging host of rumor,  
feeling, hope and thought—

the flesh names give to set  
the unsure thing upon  
the ample mind. But when we venture

to unwind the boundaries, it is awareness  
which, self denied, announces  
its vaporous but poignant cast.

*Ricardo Pau-Llosa*

The outlines which its projects take  
are the ranges to which we belong.  
The mind's a face to itself unknown,

and when it appears at last  
as nimbus chamber, bright north  
keels the moon-dragged tide.

## **Angel Lust**

I visit the morgue out of a morbid  
    wish to know the cold that awaits, the slow  
  
decay of the almost frozen. Instead  
    I find a man rendered into a slab  
  
of bruised sky marble, a length of rope burnt  
    into his neck with a hundred blistered  
  
kisses. When the diener peels the sheet back,  
    my attention's drawn from the solemn face  
  
to the shaft of skin that seeks to defy  
    death's gravity. *We call this angel lust,*  
  
as if, near the end, he summoned a priest  
    to place on his tongue not viatica  
  
but Viagra, and I can't keep my eyes  
    from surrounding him like the six-winged lips  
  
of seraphim, singing *holy, holy,*  
    even this strange chamber seared with glory.

## I Kiss Your Deer Head Goodnight

Though I suppose I can't say the head's really *yours*—  
only that it came into its current state

by the work of your hands, already blue with cold  
when you sent a bullet through shoulder and spine,

leaving a mess of blood, a body you'd dress, skin,  
carve into ribs and roasts, steak and stew, winter

food. All that's left of her now is serene face, glass  
eyes that watch me from their perch on the basement

wall as I root in the freezer for popsicles,  
dig among boxes to find a dusty sled

or skateboard left over from my youth. I don't know  
why back then I felt compelled to smooch her snout

each night before bed, bristles on her chin tickling  
my lips, or why, when you died, I carried her

from your house to mine, where I'm too old to kiss her  
now, but still rub her furred cheek from time to time.

*Lee Felice Pinkas*

## The Fractal Geometry of Nature

*Most emphatically, I do not consider  
the fractal point of view as a panacea...  
—Benoit Mandelbrot*

Father of fractals, we were foolish  
to expect a light-show from you,

hoping your speech would fold upon itself  
and mimic patterns too complex for Euclid.

You swallowed your words, hunched  
as one who's spent too long with microscopes.

Tired of being dilettantes,  
tired of waking up each morning

under winter's dark table, we watched the screen  
behind you limn the few hairs on your head.

We had read enough science  
to know that as you spoke of self-similarity,

of patterns that repeated,  
your own internal clockwork was rusting.

*Fractal*, from the Latin *fractus*,  
more aptly described

your weakened eyes,  
your mutinous cells.

Soon your name would be only text,  
certain and printed beside a snowflake.

## Falling

i.

**F**REE-FALLING, FALLING IN LOVE, FALLING FROM GRACE. *FALLING* asleep, *falling* behind. *Falling* out of favor, *falling* short of expectations, *falling* ill. There are different kinds of falling. To *fall* is a physical act (as occurs with *falling* snow or rain, after which a calm *falls*). *Fall* is a descent, a declivity, a shedding, a lapse. Leaves *fall* in the season of *fall*. There are less common meanings, too, like the *birth or production by dropping from a parent*. Or, *the cry given when a whale is sighted, or seen to blow*.

Of *falling*, almost everyone knows the sensation: clenched gut rising, arms and legs writhing to catch some outcrop of air. There's a loss of centering, of upright orientation. Spirit resists as body succumbs to gravity. *Falling* is not drift but descent, *falling* since there's only one direction to *fall* until caught: in open arms, a net or pool—*falling* then landing, feet-first or flat on the ground. Distance and weight determine the force of impact. A glider can wing its way aloft, but lacking wings, matter and mass eventually follow Newton's apple.

I remember not long ago, looking at the Aerial Lift Bridge that divides Lake Superior from the harbor in Duluth, Minnesota. I'd seen it only once before, hidden in fog. This second afternoon was clear, sunny, and breezy. Gulls flocked along the shore, as if along an inland sea. The bridge's span (of steel traceries, threading filaments) rose and fell to let ships in and out of port. *Beautiful*, I said to an acquaintance. In response, she was unable to look at the Aerial Lift, she said, without remembering a boy from her hometown who had climbed up one of the bridge's legs. At night. The span started to rise. His friends yelled for him to jump, but he froze and clung. The lift rose higher and higher, until he fell. Dead.

After she spoke, I looked again at Duluth's Aerial Lift and saw something more than its metallic lacework. With her memory, I perceived its danger. The warm blue sky deceived me. If still warm, clear, blue,

beautiful. My sense of marvel deepened, conflicted, as I saw the bridge from another point of view.

*Falling* from grace, *falling* in love, *falling* ill. Like anything else, there's never one side to a story. The story that I'm trying to tell isn't one-sided. It wants for a bridge. A bridge supports cross-currents: of traffic, of people, of vibrations. My mind jumps from span to span, the Aerial Lift to Brooklyn, London Bridges *falling* down, until settling close to home: the Golden Gate.

For a moment, picture this: single suspension span with two cantilevered towers, rust-red, a color called International Orange. If you cross the main deck, its towers climb like ladders. To heaven, if the day is clear. From the breakers at Fort Point, the towers are lost to caissons, piers, and trusses. But on the Marin Headlands, the towers reappear like vertical windows framing the San Francisco skyline.

I've looked at the Golden Gate from different perspectives: in diagrams, in photographs, in memories, in person: on foot, in a car, on a bike. My knowledge about the Bridge always reverts to senses: moist wind on my checks and scent of brine.

*Falling* behind, *falling* short, just plain *falling*. Instead of remembering facts, my mind drifts among memories, wanting for a different kind of bridge.

Instead of pylons, I'm working with paragraphs. Anchoring anecdotes. Steeling sounds. Beyond that, the analogy *falls* apart.

*Falling, falling, falling.*

Human relationships can't be engineered. Even a bridge is not what it seems. I recall Duluth's Aerial Lift as seen through a second set of eyes.

*Fall: the birth or production by dropping from a parent.*

When my grandmother was nineteen, she rode a bus at night over the blacked-out Golden Gate Bridge. My grandfather was stationed on the other side at Fort Barry. They met there, at a Red Cross dance. Fourteen days later, they were married by a Justice of the Peace in her single mother's living room. The day after that, my grandfather was shipped to the South Pacific for two and a half years.

*Falling* in love.

On my grandparents' 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, my mother and aunt recreated the dance at Fort Barry. The party included a Big Band, vintage clothes, and artifacts loaned from the Golden Gate Recreational Area. A rented silver Studebaker drove them across the bridge. My grandmother wore a home-sewn dress, and my grandfather rented a

replica of his army uniform to match his salvaged hat and shoes. In a cloche, I sang standards like “Sunny Side of the Street” and “Has Anybody Seen My Gal?”

Five years earlier, our family crammed with 300,000 people on the span to celebrate the Bridge’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A half-century before that, my grandmother had joined 18,000 pedestrians for Opening Day when the chief engineer, Joseph Strauss, proclaimed: “What Nature rent asunder long ago, man has joined today.”

I want to believe that, still. To believe—that things rent asunder can be re-joined.

*Falling.*

I want to—

*Fall: the cry when a whale is sighted, or seen to blow.*

Re-member:

A beached whale. *Falling* ill. Not far from the bridge. *Falling* behind. The carcass washed ashore at Fort Funston, where we brought our Labrador to retrieve tennis balls (and where, years later, my husband-to-be proposed, knowing it was a favorite place). *Falling*. With my father and brother, I ran around the dead whale’s bulk and pinched my nose to block the stench. Standing near the decaying flesh, I wanted to breathe into its blowhole and bring it back to life. *Falling*. Did that whale have baby calves moaning for it under the sea? Could I listen hard enough to hear? How many of me could fit inside this bulging body?

*Falling.*

Within days, scientists buried the rotting carcass under the sand. I returned to the beach and felt loss. *Fallen*. The largest living being on our planet had been present within reach, right there, and then was gone. *Fallen* from grace. Smoothed by the tides, the shore appeared untouched.

It reminded me that anyone can be beached in plain sight, then disappear.

*Fallen.*

I’ve thought of that whale recently, learning that its bones were exhumed and reconstructed. Its skeleton remains displayed at Fort Cronkite, near Fort Barry, where my grandparents met. I’ve wanted to visit the bones, to see how its parts were joined back together. I’ve wanted to see whether it is possible to return to a particular place in my past, swept in fog—as if paying homage might make this moment, now, clear.

ii.

A SCRAP OF SKY SPREADS ABOVE MY CREAM-COLORED CURTAIN, whose pattern eludes except as texture. What to call it, *gingham*, or some pattern fading toward the shade of ice? My mind is a confusion of fabrics: cut up from old clothes, de-buttoned, laundered, starched, ironed, color-coded, and compacted on my grandmother's closet shelves. I can't remember this particular bleached fabric, except that it was there, hanging on my window, hiding and exposing my first remembered glimpse:

Snow. I didn't know the word for it then, that reversal of shadow that can blind by its brightness, descending in impossibly-small flakes, without sound, muffling everything in its midst—branches, cars, sidewalks, pavement—until all disappears into a field of lumps and lightness.

There wasn't a field, when I think of it now. Not on that steep hill in San Francisco. Years later, I went back to the apartment on Johnstone Drive (wending around low-rise apartments, now gone, rebuilt as lofty condominiums whose windows frame envied views of the bay) but saw no field, not the one I remembered, only familiar cramped balconies, peeling paint, buckling concrete steps and sidewalks. Beneath canopied trees, children hollered from a playground with swings and a slide.

I remember a trail off one asphalt parking spot, a wooded path dense with eucalyptus, where my father carried me after I'd seen that fresh-fallen snow through my window. High above the ground on his shoulders, I brushed against his scratchy red beard as he lifted me down to the ground. I stood, tenuously. The scent of frost mingled with his pipe-tobacco breath. We stood near my mother, at a time when I thought of her as gentle.

Later, I would learn that Ishi, the last Yahi, had lived in that forest after being taken from Lassen, brought south to be studied and displayed at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Back then, I didn't understand death or time (he died in 1916; I was born in 1975) and would look for glimpses of him alone as we drove home, twisting from the bottom of the hill up a narrow back road (a shortcut from the hospital where my father was in medical school).

Back then, I believed that Ishi was still there in those woods. I believed that he was waiting for me to find him amid eucalyptus, hidden high on my hill in San Francisco where the city rises toward a tri-pronged transmission tower. The tower blinked through my window. I called it *mine*:

*My tower.*

*My snow.*

*My Ishi, it might seem.*

*Mine:* the one bedroom apartment, gingham curtain, shag rug, shaggy mutt named Simba, so-called because my father spoke Swahili and her muzzle resembled a lion's mane.

In my mind's eye, looking out that window now, I feel my babe-sized body learning to move there, to recognize my own weight in the world—

Nuzzling against Simba's mottled fur, I feel her muscle and mass, elephantine in proportion to my own toddling form. My fingers reach to her, out to my father and to my mother, through windows in the wooden cradle where I sleep. The cradle is large, cedar, hand-hewn by my father. On its sides, he's cut out shapes with a jigsaw, allowing me to reach my arms through absence: absent ovals, squares, triangles. It's their absence that attracts me, windows to a world that contrasts with cedar grain. Knowing to articulate only a few words, I'm realizing that walls around me have exits and egresses, some space where I can press beyond, if only with a foot or a fist.

Re-member:

Twenty-four years later, I try to imagine what it was like as my babe-body learned with curiosity to coordinate arms and legs, to sit, to crawl and walk—all those movements—to remind my body at twenty-five where its parts should connect. Back in San Francisco, after living on the East Coast, studying and singing abroad, intellectually capable of understanding muscles and nerves, I don't know how to communicate that knowledge with my body. Long-limbed but crooked, wearing some brunt of age. Unable to button clothes; tie shoes; hold a pen. I remember loss more than discovery, then.

Re-member:

To peer out of shapes on my cradle, and out the window of my first bedroom, is akin to gazing down the barrel of a telescope with diminishing mirrors.

*Snow and glass reflect and refract; light shifts from white winter into verdant spring, haze of fog in summer, hot autumn through warmer winters that brought no snow to San Francisco.*

In grade school, I yearned for Snow Days but only got one Earthquake Day (in 1989). One of my two hopes for college was the presence of seasons, so I could live in snow. My grandmother in San Jose grew up in snow; in her girlhood home in Minnesota, there was always snow. My grandmother told me of a toboggan-run in Red

Wing, so long and high—to climb to the top, up different hills—you could manage two runs in one day, at most.

But that's not the image that reflects and refracts in my telescopic teleology, a theology of diminishing mirrors. My mind drifts to my paternal great-grandmother, once Minnesota's Mother of the Year. I never met her, but heard about her, before and after her onset of senility. A widowed pastor's wife, she lived her last years in my grandparents' house in San Jose, donning gloves and taking tea to the bathroom, keeping a regular date with her Woman in the Mirror. She called herself that: *the Woman in the Mirror*. My grandmother showed me that bathroom mirror, a mirror into which I'd peered as a baby, sitting on coral-colored tiles after baths, learning to identify that body as *mine*.

*Me*, now, a stranger has replaced the Woman in the Mirror, who can't claim her reflection as her own. If for different reasons. What does it mean to not have a word for something? To not have a word for something so visceral, so vital, so venial (in the sense of *worthy or admitting of pardon, forgiveness, or remission*) that twists a body like a rag? I want to forgive this body of mine, to claim it as mine—like *my tower, my snow, my Ishi*.

Why did I believe that anything is mine?

*Falling.*

iii.

*FALLING.*

*Falling.*

*Falling.*

I REMEMBER MY ARMS' RESISTANCE. I REMEMBER TRYING TO MATCH pegs in a board with holes. I remember not being able to hold up my head, being fastened like a marionette with my neck brace, arm braces—with plastic halved balls taped into my palms, to remind them where they were supposed to arch. Crooked back; crooked walk. I remember wishing that I could feel out-of-body, since the pain that contorted it reminded me too well of the body-I-was-in.

I REMEMBER, MONTHS EARLIER, LEADING CLASSES OF HIGH SCHOOL students on a camping trip to the Sierra Nevadas. And a few years before that, backpacking with a college group in the White Mountains

to learn wilderness survival. One morning after breaking camp, we walked in widening circles from the spot where a hypothetical camper had last been seen.

YEARS LATER, I REMEMBER FEELING LOST IN PLAIN SIGHT. I REMEMBER feeling like my body wasn't *mine*. Someone else's—*yours*.

I REMEMBER SPEAKING INTO MY VOICE-ACTIVATED COMPUTER ABOUT *you*. I provided instructions for *you*. Like this: Go to the kitchen cupboard at waist height, and retrieve a Campbell's can. Flavor doesn't matter—there, *Condensed Tomato*. Take care when reaching, since you're not supposed to extend too high or too low. Your muscles don't work the way normal muscles do. Bring the can to the electric opener; secure the top under the magnetic arm. The opener grinds. Tomato stench escapes. Your hands appreciate reclusion; you can't use a manual opener for the same reason that you can't cut tomatoes. Remove the can as steadily as possible. Don't worry about dabbing goop off the can's cherubic children.

I REMEMBER HEARING THE WORD: *DYSTONIA*. *TONIA* DERIVING FROM “tone.” *Dys* (according to the *OED*) being an “inseparable prefix, with notion of hard, bad, unlucky, etc.; destroying the good sense of a word, or increasing its bad sense.” The uncertain diagnosis from different doctors affected my left side sequentially: neck and shoulder, then my hands, hip and knee, into a slow and painful twist. Unless I could learn how to counteract (or manage) the contractions.

**TONE:** QUALITY OF SOUND; A PARTICULAR STYLE IN DISCOURSE OR writing; the degree of firmness or tension proper to the organs or tissues of the body.

VOICE-ACTIVATED COMPUTING SOFTWARE WAS MY STUDENTS' THOUGHTFUL going-away gift to me. The equipment claimed to save time but never wrote down what I told it to say. *Scratch that, delete that, correct that*. My train of thought turned into a train wreck. But I moved inside my convoluted words.

*BREATHING, BREATHING*, I SPOKE INTO MY VOICE-ACTIVATED COMPUTER. It miswrote *grieving*, *grieving*.

I REMEMBER RELEARNING TO BREATHE, SIT, STAND, TIE MY SHOES, hold silverware. I remember retraining my body beside a half-paralyzed stroke patient three times my age.

YOU, AGAIN: WRITE WITH A PEN BETWEEN YOUR INDEX AND MIDDLE fingers. That task is especially difficult because it is more than a physical act; it enables your communication. Your handwriting slowly improves, although you still cannot type, cut, grip, play piano, or perform tasks that make the pain return too quickly. Arches of both hands collapse flat or clamp into claws, disabling their use.

YOU STOP WEARING CLOTHES WITH BUTTONS. VELCRO STRAPS FASTEN your shoes. You yearn to use your neck brace all the time but obey orders to use it in short stints. Your muscles might atrophy like African and Burmese women whose necks no longer support their heads on stacked metal necklaces.

KEEP ME SAFE INSIDE.

I REMEMBER MY CHILDHOOD HOME, FILLED WITH ISSUES OF *JAMA*, bulky red *Physicians' Desk Reference* beside *Gray's Anatomy*, stacks of papers, my mother's epidemiology grants, my father's pediatric charts. I never had to go to doctors. At my dad's office, my brother and I played with *Highlights*, colorful stickers, and gloves that were inflatable like balloons.

I REMEMBER MY GRANDMOTHER'S MOTTO: *LIFE IS TOUGH IN THE FAR West*. She grew up in San Francisco during the Depression. Her dad died when she was twelve.

I REMEMBER SITTING ON THE EDGE OF AN EXAMINATION TABLE WITH one neurologist and my father, looking at me like some specimen, when the neurologist said, "She's crooked." "She's not crooked," my dad responded, quickly, as if the neurologist had suggested the impossible. Six months before, I had started experiencing symptoms and had driven myself to appointment after appointment, until I could no longer drive. The doctor cocked his head at my father then walked to the examination table and placed his two hands on my shoulders. "She's crooked. Don't you see?" And there, in an instant, I saw something register in my father's gaze. My dad, one of the most selfless people I know, who cares

for everyone's health except his own. When he looked at me in that neurologist's office, there were paintings and (perhaps?) plants. I can't remember anything but the look on my father's face, and his response, "She's not crooked." I can't remember even if I wore a paper or cloth gown, since by then I was used to donning clothes that hid my torsal asymmetry. Here, I was exposed; but he still couldn't see. My father stared, his head cocked cartoon-like, as if nothing could be wrong with *his* child—full grown, at age twenty-five, slumped on an examination table after months of debilitation, who had lost use of both of her hands. "She is, isn't she," said my father, leaving out the word *crooked*.

CAN YOU BLAME HIM? WOULDN'T YOU WANT TO SEE ME AS HE AND MY mother wished? I'd feel helpless, too, if I'd devoted my life to medicine and didn't know how to make my child better.

MY BROTHER, AT HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL, SAYS THAT MY ANSWER may lie in knowing how to manage my condition. Even if a struggle. Even if my progress sometimes follows a sine curve. Despite all that's known about medicine, he says, medical school has made him realize how much about health is unknown. At least I know: with physical therapy, my special computer, thick-handled silverware, and other gadgets, I can manage this condition.

I REMEMBER RECOVERING ENOUGH TO LIVE ON MY OWN, AND MOVING to New York to pursue a Master's degree. I remember cobbling together dead-end jobs that didn't require manual dexterity, going into debt but maintaining my independence. I remember practicing how to ask for help, like my physical therapists urged me to do. The catch: with good management, my disability appears invisible.

*DISABILITY: THE WORD THAT MY MOTHER SAID TO KEEP OFF MY RÉSUMÉ* after I served on a university search committee for a new Director of Disability Services. *My résumé?* I had never thought of putting that word on my résumé. From then on, I viewed my résumé as a way to hide my disability.

Hiding, I fear, has become more disabling than any diagnosis.

I REMEMBER ASKING MY PARENTS TO READ MY PT MANUAL, SO THEY would understand what I was supposed to *do* and *not do*, the difference between *can't* and *shouldn't*. The manual sat unopened. I remember

trying to help my mother do errands and tasks around the house. When I asked for help, she assisted a few times, then got flustered and said, “Isn’t there anything you can do?” The first time I brought my thick-handled silverware to a restaurant, my father said: “You’re not going to use that here, are you?” Home didn’t seem safe; I needed to get away. Six years after my first symptoms emerged, on the eve of my last work-up, I remember asking my parents to read my patient chart. Amid the stacked pages, my mom found a phrase written by my current doctor: “her parents” seem to show “understanding intolerance of her symptoms.” My mother said, “*Understanding intolerance?* What’s that supposed to mean? Tell them tomorrow that your chart is wrong. Be sure to say that we’re supportive.” I pointed to the entry, where I’d also said, “They mean well.”

I REMEMBER TRYING TO FALL ASLEEP ON THE NIGHT BEFORE MY COLLEGE graduation in New Jersey, hearing my mother cry about all the work awaiting her when she returned home.

AND THIS, A FEW YEARS AGO: A DREAM WITH LITTLE SOUND. WALKING home in the dream, I passed a white Victorian house brimming with windows and turrets, felt a strange recognition, circled back to enter familiar doors. Spotless and arid, the interior appeared like a public bath from the turn of the century. Bodies swam in translucent aqua waters. I heard laughter, splashing, muffled words, echoes off tiled walls. In slow motion in the pool, heads and limbs bobbed. Goggles glinted beside buoyant balls. Long windows glinted as if bathed in cheap baubles. Sterile, clean as a cliché, stinking of chlorine and bleach.

Something in my periphery rotated. I glanced over to see wheels of stationary bikes and walked to a recumbent one, empty. I started to ride as usual. My periphery kept waving: arms, white smocks, vacant eyes. Broken sounds and spastic motions. I recognized, slowly and anxiously: everyone was *Dumb. Retarded; handicapped. Freak. Me.* A litany of like terms raced through my mind, accompanied by bodies who needed help moving, eating, wiping themselves. And then, I wet myself—bleeding some long unstoppable flow between my legs, as a white smock approached. A stench welled in my mouth; bile on my tongue. I couldn’t stop vomiting, bleeding. Tumbling off the bike, I lumbered along the pool, all limbs and loss, away from the white figure, unable to scream or speak, wary not to slip but confused by echoes, laughs, too-wide grins, too-bright windows, hallways veering in all directions strewn with sun, as I kept spilling out of myself, vomit and spit and blood, more than

seemed containable in one body, not marring the sterile floor, which somehow cleaned itself in the institution in which I was locked.

BETWEEN LINES, WITHIN WORDS: I'M TRYING TO BUILD A BRIDGE. If crookedly, like my body. Abandoning a *protagonist*, I want to be an *agonist*: that is, controlled interplay of contraction and relaxation. To temper blame with blessing. To not reject but claim *my* life, *our* lives.

Forgive me for *falling*.

I've peered through windows that I want to break or replace—at least, to refract through my telescope of diminishing mirrors. These windows don't frame my parents when they supported me growing up, and later...

*Blessed be... Blessed be... Blessed be...*

Strangers, too many to name.

*Falling—*

Down to this: That rare February day in San Francisco, my first birthday. Snow. I look out at a blanket of white. Snow. I remember the warmth of my bedroom, of fabric that I now call gingham. Snow. Hoisted out of the cradle, held off the ground, I touch the windowsill, look out and feel suspended, in flight, reaching to everything in sight that I don't yet reduce to a name. It's a wonder, actually, this world without words, this world of lumps and lightness. Even outside, when my parents and I go out later, the cold feels warm, since I don't know words for warmth or for cold. Everything blurs, like when you cross your eyes, and details fall away to form.

FALLING.

FALLING MAY BECOME FLYING HERE. LIKE THOSE FIGURES IN CHAGALL paintings. Flying figures. Like fingers on smooth piano keys. Light and stiffer resistance. Listen:

I'M TRYING TO LEARN A NEW WAY TO MAKE MUSIC.

I REMEMBER PLAYING PIANO FOR HOURS. MY HANDS STRADDLED OCTAVES of a baby Grand (so large I could've curled up inside, without being seen), allowing something inarticulate to meet my swells. My body never felt big enough to hold my clamoring heart.

I REMEMBER, AT AGE THIRTEEN, IN 1988 ON THE STREETS OF DEBRECEN, Hungary, singing with two teenaged Hungarian singers and a fellow

Californian chorister. Although the four of us couldn't speak one another's languages, our shared knowledge of repertoire—in neither English nor Hungarian—allowed us to sing and laugh together, as we spun through song after song, inebriated by the invisible wall between us that was *falling*, thanks to music.

I REMEMBER, AT FOURTEEN, WATCHING METEORS FALL IN THE CASCADE Mountains with my great uncle. A retired pastor with white hair as frenzied as Einstein's, he had done humanitarian work around the world and described worship as either sincere silence or a big belly laugh. The Perseids kept *falling*, streaking light. He asked, "Have you been 'called'? What about your music?"

AT SEVENTEEN, IN A REPATRIATED VILLAGE IN EL SALVADOR, I REMEMBER a grandmother who told me: "*Los hilos son como los pueblos. Si una puntada se desenreda, la cadena se desenreda.*" Threads are like communities. If one stitch unravels, the whole sequence of stitches unravels.

A YEAR LATER, MY JESUIT HIGH SCHOOL CLASS VOTED ME AS "Most Likely to be a Jesuit." A woman and then-practicing Lutheran, torn between my Conservatory studies and human rights work, I thought:

What does it mean to be "called"?

*Calling, calling.*

*FALL BACK ON YOUR SELF, AND CATCH:*

I REMEMBER WHEN A FEW PHYSICAL THERAPISTS INDEPENDENTLY told me that if all patients with chronic conditions were as diligent at managing them as I am, then physical therapists would be out of work.

*YOU HAVE NINE LIVES, A FRIEND ONCE TOLD ME.*

*IN THIS LIFE, I AM TRYING TO ACCEPT MYSELF, NOT SOMEONE WHO I once was or might have been.*

*FALLING IN LOVE.*

I REMEMBER LYING BUNDLED ON A BLANKET WITH MY TO-BE HUSBAND in below-freezing weather in the middle of a November night, watching

the Leonid meteor showers. There were no artificial lights near that nature preserve in western Massachusetts. I remember watching streams of meteors *falling, falling*.

MAKE A WISH.

MY HUSBAND'S NICKNAME DERIVES FROM *NINE LIVES*, TOO. WHILE A piano major in college, he was in a car accident that crushed his right hand. It was reconstructed to function fully, even eventually to play piano and organ, except without the dexterity to play full-time.

MY COMPUTER USES THE VOICE-RECOGNITION SOFTWARE CALLED *DRAGON Naturally-Speaking*®. My husband nicknamed it “Puff the Magic Dragon.” “Puff” for short.

“JUST LISTEN TO GRETCHEN,” MY BROTHER TOLD MY PARENTS AT ONE point. “Don’t tell her what to do about her health. Just listen.”

THERE ARE MANY LAYERS OF LOVE. *LOVE*: ALL I WANT FROM LIFE, NOT *mine* but *ours*.

MY NIGHTMARES COME AND GO, WHEN I AWAKE IN A COLD SWEAT after dreaming that my special silverware, flat keyboard, spine rolls, neck brace, voice-recognition software—all those minor but major aids—have been destroyed and won’t be reproduced. These seemingly-small tools disappear in a flash—poof goes my Puff—and leave me in a temporary state of panic, not knowing where I am, while my husband holds me, kissing my hand or whatever part of me has strayed closest to his face, awaking me with caresses and hushes.

I REMEMBER ANOTHER CRADLE, NOT WHEN I WAS A CHILD BUT ONE that’s coffin-long, replete with rockers, headboard and sideboards. It sits in a room of the historic Hancock Shaker Village. I can’t remember the caption—something about bodies never losing their want for being rocked, about how cradles aided invalids, preventing bedsores and calming palsy. I remember wanting one of those coffin-long cradles, to help me heal, associating it with physical therapists who’ve rocked me on examining tables, *rebounding* they call it, to calm nerves that flare from over-contracting muscles on my body’s left side.

WHEN MY BODY EXPERIENCES A FLARE, MY HUSBAND CRADLES ME, lays on top of me, not like when we make love, but as a calming counterweight until my slight spasms pass.

I REMEMBER HEARING A RECAP OF A PITHY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS that Garrison Keillor gave at my alma mater a few years after I graduated. The gist was: "Have your mid-life crisis in your twenties and get it out of the way." I remember feeling very pleased.

RECENTLY, A STUDENT THANKED ME FOR INCLUDING A CLAUSE ABOUT disability accommodations on my syllabus and for talking with her comfortably and confidentially about it. "Some professors just give me a strange look," she said. "I want to tell them: Just because I have a disability doesn't mean I'm not smart."

I REMEMBER, MY FIRST SUMMER OF COLLEGE, TEACHING MOTHERS ON welfare in San Francisco. Of the thirty students, the youngest mother in the group was eighteen, the oldest was thirty-nine, and one thirty-three-year-old woman was a grandmother. Spending a good chunk of each day together, I learned as much, if not more, than I taught them. For a writing exercise, one student wrote: "I have a Ph.D. in ghetto life."

I REMEMBER LEARNING RUDIMENTARY BRAILLE AS PART OF MY TACTILE retraining in physical therapy, learning to distinguish dots with my eyes closed. Learning the importance of unlearning.

SIX YEARS AFTER MY INITIAL PHYSICAL RETRAINING, HIKING THE BRAILLE Trail near Independence Pass in Colorado with my husband, I close my eyes and listen to silence and the rain: patting across my cheeks, the brim of my mesh hat, branches of trees. All echoes cease. Time compresses to this moment, as if past and future can be negligible. Life is at my fingertips, on my tongue, in my ears. If not by echolocation, I am aware of my place by being here, still.

Still.

iv.

AND THEN THERE'S RAIN. IT HOVERS IN THE AIR. STEADY DROPS SHIFT to drizzle, and back again, as my parents and I drive through the

June afternoon and through the rain, heading to the North Shore of Minnesota. The highway stretches before us, two lanes each way, leaving farms for thicker forests. Pines and birches clutter the median, green mingling with low, gray clouds.

We've not made this trip before. We haven't seen one another in six months. Back at Christmas, we saw one another less than two days in San Francisco. It's usually stressful when we're together; my slower pace is often out-of-whack with their fast-paced urban one. I live in Missouri pursuing a Ph.D. with my husband, who couldn't come because he's in the midst of changing professions. In Minnesota, my parents and I are meeting for long-overdue reunions with extended family and friends.

"I can't believe all the roadkill," my dad says, as we pass a dead porcupine crushed on the road's shoulder. "Deer, fox, skunk..."

My mother voices agreement from the backseat. They've commented on roadkill the entire trip. Although it's common where I live, the quantity here has started to amaze me, too.

Reviewing the week's itinerary, we're almost jovial. The week has been sunny, with picturebook blue skies, ramshackle red barns, verdant green fields. Today is the first day of gray. Rain is *falling*.

The car is quiet, except for the whisper of ventilation, buzzing hum of tires on pavement, and our conversation. I'm surprised at the lightness, as if we've potentially reached a new place in our relationship. These seven years have brought us on a bit of a wild ride, as my physical condition has made steady but slow improvement. I've recovered enough to manage a good threshold, with a few setbacks. My adapted lifestyle sometimes has caused them to focus on the things that I can't do, rather than those that I can. I'm trying not to be hurt when they compare me to the "old Gretchen," reassuring myself that they've done the best they know how, and that hopefully they'll see the "new Gretchen" with her own worth.

The car continues down the highway at a sure pace, in the slow lane. We plan to stop for lunch at a bakery near the Duluth Aerial Lift Bridge, which I've never seen before. The rain has subsided, leaving a misty cloak like San Francisco's fog. Gray sky hovers over a bank of trees. They grow close enough to appear like a wall.

Gray road, green wall, gray sky.

And then I see the deer. Rather, its head. The body is nudging into the driver's side of the hood. Brown sloped head, perked ears, black-bone of an eye glazed with fear—frozen but running full-speed into slow motion, as if the next split-second might yet be avoided.

“Deer!” I say the word. Not a scream, not a yell, but emphatic. My dad sees the doe at the same moment. There is no time even to swerve. The thud is staggering. The car buffers the impact. I brace for shattered window glass. There is none. We drive steadily, surreally forward. I expect to hear the motor short out, to feel the car drag itself over to the shoulder.

My dad moans.

“What was *that*?” my mom says.

“Didn’t you see the deer?” I say, amazed that the car is on the road, staying inside the lines. I look over at my dad, as shocked as me. His face crumples with concern. Later, he tells me that he looked in the rearview mirror and saw the deer’s bouncing body go limp.

*Fallen. Fallen. Fallen.*

“Oh, God,” he moans.

*We’re okay, I think. We’re okay. Are we? We are. We’re still here.*

Later, I’m sorry for the deer, for its death, for our role in that event. But at that moment I am not. Living in the Midwest, I’ve heard too often of what deer accidents do to cars and their passengers. Whenever we visit a friends’ farm outside of Fayette, she always cautions us to watch out for deer. Over three years, she’s educated my citified self. This is the stuff of life. Shit happens.

“What deer?” my mom says. “I didn’t see anything. My eyes were closed.”

“THE DEER,” my dad and I say, almost in unison. “It came from the median. I can’t believe it. I didn’t see it until it was right at the hood. Did you?”

“No, did you?”

“No,” I repeat. “We’re okay?” It sounds like a question.

“Is everybody okay?” my mom asks.

“We’re okay,” I say. “You’re okay, Dad? You’re sure?”

“The car,” he says, then starts clenching his teeth.

“But you’re okay?”

“I’ve got to pull off. I’ve got to see the car.”

“But we’re okay,” I say, relieved. “Do you know how many people die from deer accidents?”

“I thought we hit another car,” my mom says.

“You didn’t see it at all?” I ask.

“No,” says my mom. “I had my eyes closed. I just heard it happen in sounds. Shattering like glass.”

“The headlight,” my dad says. “I saw the pieces scatter behind the

car, through the rearview mirror. An impact like that probably tore up the car. I've got to pull over."

I still can't believe the deer didn't crash through the windshield. I've heard about hits where the deer slides up the hood. I tell them, "We may be lucky, really lucky, that we didn't see it sooner, because we may have tried to swerve." I think for a moment, my heartbeat racing yet uncannily calm. "If we'd swerved either way, the car could've gone straight into the deer or flipped off the side of the road. We may have been in the best situation." I look over at my dad, relieved that he's such a good driver. "You couldn't have done anything differently. It was an accident." We did the best we could.

"In the eyes of insurance, hitting a deer is like driving into a stationary pole," he says. "It's still the driver's fault."

"You know," my mother says from the backseat, "that's why we have insurance."

My dad glances into the rearview mirror, takes his foot off the gas, and pulls over to the road's shoulder.

"Be careful," I say.

"Don't stand too close to the lanes," says my mom.

"Please," I add. "You don't want to compound one accident with another."

My dad opens the door. Cars whiz past. Now that we are closer to trees, the green wall appears taller, blocking out more gray sky.

"I wish he wouldn't do that," my mom says. "My friend got her legs cut off by walking around her car on the side of the road." She has told this story before. My parents know many people who are ill, injured, dead. "Don't be silly," she says loudly, although he can't hear her through closed doors. She continues, "He always says that we work to get insurance, so when accidents happen we'll be prepared. But when accidents happen, he gets all worked up."

I watch my dad pace from the hood to the rear of the car, clenching his jaw. When he finally gets back in the car, after coaxing, he details some damage for us, adding that part of the deer seems to have exploded.

Later when I see the car, I'm amazed that so little damage was done. True, the left headlight is obliterated. Part of the left side and car door are dented. Fur and dried blood stick to the paneling. The back door is smeared with what I assume is shit. I've heard that when people panic in total fear or are killed, they lose control of their bowels.

I hope that the deer didn't feel anything. I hope that it didn't feel

fear, and that the split-second wasn't long enough for it to see through its black eye what was coming.

When I think of it now, I don't view the event as portentous. If not by direct impact, something brought my parents and me a little closer to one another that day, and the surrounding week. We'd been *falling* for a long time. This moment caught us unexpectedly. Somehow we were all involved, if only by accident, in that event and in our every encounter with each other. Like every action has a reaction, everything on this planet is seamlessly, mortally linked. This was just one manifestation of some inevitable law of physics, where two objects approach at certain speeds and collide.

The part that remains: deciding what comes next.

## Exodus

I.     *Now these are the judgements which thou  
shalt set before them—*

I DON'T REMEMBER HOW OLD I WAS WHEN I FIRST HEARD THESE WORDS, but I remember where I was sitting: the basement sofa of my Cleveland home, waiting out a lightning storm with my parents. We watched the evening movie: DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Or at least I followed the movie while they monitored the weather. It existed as a green splotch crossing an Ohio icon in the corner of the screen. I would later learn our neighbors lost two trees that night, huge beeches felled within the storm's early, angry tantrum. I'm sure I didn't hear them break, as I was listening to a Moses cast in Cinescope, who in turn was listening to God. I remember thinking of the game of telephone that night, but saying nothing as I watched the TV.

II.     *and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law,  
and commandments which I have written.*

WRITING'S ALWAYS HAD TROUBLE WITH ITS MEDIUM. STONE, FOR instance, despite its permanence and authority, lacked the ease of recording that would accompany papyrus or parchment. And yet we envision Moses, chisel in hand, chipping God's laws into granite, or at least presenting those double slabs as if he had chiseled them himself— each one tombstone thick and ready to topple. Papyrus, on the other hand, rolled easily and required but a reed for scribbling. Still, it cracked and tore, and refused to be double-sided. When its time finally arrived, parchment became the new and versatile medium for the ancient scribes. It came from the skins of animals.

- III. *And God spake all these words, saying I am  
the Lord thy God, which have brought thee  
out of the land of Egypt*

I WAS MAYBE TEN WHEN I FIRST READ THESE WORDS, PRINTED DEEP magenta in the unused family Bible. The title page reminded me that God's words would appear in red, and within minutes I found myself skipping around for his advice, relieved to know the rest of the sentences were filler. The pages almost split as I flipped them, and were even flimsier when touched by ballpoint pen. This was around the same time that I learned to diagram a sentence, and did so with one of God's in the margins of the book. I expected Him to have perfect English. The subject: God. Verb: spake. Object: all these words. Sentences it seemed behaved according to their guidelines and assumed, like the Israelites, a rule of law.

- IV. *And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom  
again. And he put his hand into his bosom  
again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and,  
behold, it was turned again as his other flesh.*

THE SUMMER I SPENT LEARNING A DEAD LANGUAGE IN CALIFORNIA was also the summer I discovered the many attributes of parchment or vellum. For instance, not only is parchment stronger than papyrus or modern paper, but it also has two textures: the flesh side, from inside the animal, and the hair side, the outer skin. Sitting alone in the special-collections library, I wasted hours with parchment texts I knew I couldn't read, my fingertips pressing gently against the corners of the page. The flesh side was smooth, white, and delicate as quartz; the hair side tended to yellow. When sewn together in signatures, quartos, and folios, flesh touched flesh, and hide touched hide. Thus, as I turned to a new block of Latin, I found myself inside, then outside, the lamb.

- V. *And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words  
in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth,  
and with his mouth*

AS MOSES BEGET GERSHOM AND GERSHOM BEGET SOMEONE, SO TOO did the languages of the Israelites grow new languages all their own. Or at least I like to think so, as I like to imagine God's words rolled into one continuous sentence and carried on a sea of many tongues. This is probably not the case. I once read that half of the New Testament's the product of a shoddy translation, and in the original Christ gets thrown to the Roman lions. Subject: Lions. Adjective: Roman. Verb: ate. Object: Christ. I can understand the confusion. For years I thought the Bible had been written by King James.

VI. *Thou shalt not covet...any thing that is thy neighbor's.*

ALTHOUGH IT DID NOT HAPPEN LIKE THIS, I WOULD HAVE LIKED MY first sex to have literally been written on my body. This is something of what I mean. Imagine a summer evening with the windows down and you can hear your little sighs cast like fishing line into the low and heavy air. You are young and she is young, and with your mouths worn out from kissing, you spend the hours left until dawn writing your names with fingertips across each other's back. Hers is smooth and delicate as quartz. She does not say what yours feels like, but at times it seems static-charged, like a TV screen.

It would be common to refer to such a significant life experience as *turning the page*, or perhaps even *tasting the flesh*, but my first time felt like neither. I had a friend claim once it was the nearest she ever came to prayer.

VII. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.*

IN MY FIRST GAME OF TELEPHONE I SAT DOWN HALFWAY BETWEEN the message's source and its final destination. This is the best spot to disrupt communication with complete deniability. Sentences passing through my whispers took the shape of serpents in a briar patch: their heads and tails visible, the bodies tied up and useless. *Laws of writing number one:* a sentence can't help but accumulate and stumble forward.

VIII. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*

BESIDES ITS RESISTANCE TO FRAYING, PARCHMENT HAD THE FURTHER advantage of erasure. Early in its history, someone discovered its surface was re-touchable, in fact almost carvable, much like leather. Therefore, when a scribe's marks proved unwanted, he could scoop the ink away or simply scratch out the word with a metal stylus. Onto this same sheet, various notes were then taken. In the special-collections library I found myself holding the pages to the light and squinting through the skin toward the handwriting underneath. Little was readable. Whatever mistakes had been made, they were not left to fester. I wanted to add my own footnotes, but they wouldn't let me take pencils or pens beyond the front door.

IX. *And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*

*LAWS OF WRITING NUMBER TWO: IF THE WORD BE FLESH, THEN LET broken flesh result in broken words.*

When my first lover left me, I began describing her body parts in ballpoint pen across my corresponding limbs. For *eye* (written on the eyelid) I wrote *green as glass*, and for *hand* I wrote *palm frond* and *open book*, and for *foot* merely *my root* twice, one for each. Then I slipped into the bath and watched her melt away.

X. *And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM*

A FEW DAYS AFTER THE LIGHTNING STORM, MY FATHER AND I WALKED into our neighbor's patch of woods and surveyed the damage. Not only were the oak trunks split, but a group of fresh beech trees had been mangled wherever a dead limb crashed. A few had already been carved: hearts, dates, initials, as well as the names of neighborhood kids. We began separating the wet wood from the useful logs, breaking twigs off and stacking them in piles. Each snapped branch echoed through the morning air. Before we left, he taught me how to etch my name in a patch of living bark.

*Donald Platt*

## **Golden Day Lily**

To gaze at these day lilies,  
six petals of 24-karat gold with six curvy stamens to match  
and the longer pistil,

tall gold style with one white dot for its stigma, exquisite  
punctuation mark,  
is to look straight into the sun and not to have to turn

away. Two days ago  
our younger daughter, Lucy, blond hair tangled, neck in a brace,  
head taped to the ambulance stretcher,

arms strapped down, could do nothing but stare up at the ER's  
ceiling. She had become  
a royal Egyptian mummy, formal, still. The young doctor's scissors

cut her head free.

He wanted her blue-green eyes to follow the secret hieroglyphs  
his penlight drew

upon air. His fingers gingerly felt along her neck and spine.

He asked her where it hurt.

There, no. Here, yes. Only when he touched her left hip, did she

wince. "We'll have to take  
some pictures, but nothing seems to be broken. She'll get a bad bruise  
and one hell of a headache."

Golden day lilies shine and blind me. Lucy wanted to ride  
Sarge again, the pony  
she loves, who spooked and threw her. I combed sandy dirt from the roots

of her golden, matted hair  
with clumsy fingers. When I kissed her forehead, I smelled sweat  
and the almost imperceptible

scent of day lilies, a faint sweetness that only the flesh  
of eleven-year-old girls  
possesses. It's the last week of June, and the day lilies are all out,

huge blooming banks of them,  
bowing ranks of orange, red, yellow, gold, and even dark pink,  
the color they call "burnt rose."

I stand on the sidewalk dazzled. It seems only yesterday that I held  
Lucy slick with vernix  
after the caesarian and sponged her off with warm water

as she lay in a shallow  
stainless steel bowl. It was her first bath. She didn't scream.  
I patted her dry with a towel

and wrapped her in a white receiving blanket. *Even Solomon*  
*in all his glory*  
*was not arrayed like one of these.* The golden day lily's three

inner petals are ruffled  
along their edges and have light yellow stripes down their centers.  
I touch the anthers

with one forefinger, and my whorled fingertip glows neon  
with golden-orange pollen.  
It's like Lucy's hands after she's been eating Cheetos, junk food

of puffed corn meal and cheddar  
cheese that leaves greasy, bright orange grit on her fingers. Once she wiped  
those hands on my red Hawaiian

shirt and laughed. I stood there, a tongue-tied father, variegated  
day lily pollinated  
with my daughter's fingerprints. Today Lucy's out rollerblading

*Donald Platt*

down the hill without a helmet  
on Grant St. with friends. I have been given my daughter, danger, golden  
day lilies bending to the wind.

## **Love Canal**

When they found something  
they didn't understand,  
the easiest way to say something seemed to be  
tied up in mustard weeds, blunt-yellow,  
unequivocally growing out of black mud  
in a homogenous field.

They said something  
but you couldn't hear,  
just a faint smell  
of aerosol on wind, fish  
nosing the surface  
in hungry stubbornness  
of a pond locked to  
land, ticks, swollen  
with entangled second- and third-growth,  
a curious yellow children's fishing raft  
floating to the sky.

Like eyes, the ponds, paisley-shaped  
decorations wrapping Earth  
like forgotten Egyptian  
logos seen from above,  
forgotten memories of where, when,  
*who was it?* They worked  
regular jobs, did regular  
things, taught the future, kicked  
dead horses in a pasture. Today  
they had to acknowledge the slumped  
lake, rocking in dead mosquito  
larvae, sediment

hanging in the shallows.  
And the sweet scent, according  
to warning labels, health records  
far from their beds, tongues  
swollen from something forgotten,  
something removed,  
bluegills biting, forgetting  
not to bite, or unable, in frenzies,  
lost then uneclipsed  
from the depths, yellow  
as canaries then dark  
as though signaling  
their heaviness  
with eggs.

*Martha Silano*

## **How to Sew**

You need a mouthful of pins.  
You need a Simplicity pattern,  
  
the onion-skin sheets explaining—  
with dotted lines, with numbers  
and arrows—palazzo pants, a hooded dress.

The best part is the storeowner,  
her rhinestone pince-nez glasses,  
  
how she flips and flips your chosen bolt,  
lavender fabric spilling out  
like a colossal ribbon candy.

The best part is the sound of scissors  
slicing through a poly-cotton blend.

You will need to learn  
about edges, about gathers.  
  
Meanwhile, the whole contraption  
disguised to look like a table. Meanwhile,

lifting the lid, reaching in  
for the smooth black cat, needle  
  
for a mouth. Meanwhile, threading  
the bobbin; the squeaking

of the foot pedal. You will discover  
there is satisfaction in edgestitching.  
Edgestitching and stitch ripping.

*Martha Silano*

You will wear the flawed apron,  
but only you will know the flaw.

You will learn to tie off knots.

## Illuminations

They wrote themselves into the script; more than decoration  
the images of their abbey life, woven through the text  
of scripture, were a prayer that the Word of words  
might illuminate a page of their own lives.

As those who later wrote luxury books for pay might  
tally salaries, fret about mounting debts  
in the scarred margins of the page—the monks first  
brooded their interior paychecks in terms of  
expiation: *10 pages, that one bout of drunken revelry  
in my student days in Paris....*

The demon Titivillus, personal scribe to the devil himself  
caused ink-blot, collected all malformed letters and  
misspelled words in a sack to produce at Judgment when  
the rare or common errors, the slips of sleepy calligraphers  
were lined up in columns opposite the correct and  
flowing text of their more attentive craftsmanship.  
It is said, in that register of debt and credit, a certain monk  
passed by a single mark: one delicate etched letter tipped  
the balance, and he slipped into writer's Paradise

where he often recalled that late afternoon in the cloister  
how his wrist hurt, his ink-stained blue-cold  
swollen arthritic fingers ached so bad he had almost quit  
...when something compelled him to wait, 'Just  
make it to the bell, friend.' He blew on his hands  
to warm them. Two minutes later and the words came  
as they hadn't since he was a novice, the psalm  
he'd been etching by rote...lit up, became his own  
spontaneous composition: *O Lord we ponder your Love  
within your temple* and never mind the contract

*John Slater*

or deadbeat editors, he wrote the line over and over  
felt himself entering the letters, the smooth texture  
and the smell of vellum...with the pure circle of a last  
dread ecstatic 'O,' left hand clutching his chest,  
he wrote himself into the Book of Life.

*Frank X Walker*

## Rotten Fruit

*Byron De La Beckwith*

i.

I fish for pleasure and to relax.  
It's the best way  
to sort out details of a plan  
that needs flawless execution.

Every useful thing I know  
I learned sitting in the bottom  
of a boat across from my daddy  
in one of Mississippi's

finest fishing holes. How to  
pick out the best spot. How to  
get there early. How to lay  
low, be patient and wait.

ii.

Watching your cork disappear  
in the water, bob back up and run  
is as thrilling as sneaking your hand  
up under a pretty girl's skirt.

They all put up a lil' fight, at first  
but sooner or later a lucky man  
will get his hands on a cat,  
a patient man, inside a big wide mouth.

There's something about the thought  
of a wet body, flapping about  
and gasping for breath  
that gives me the chills, even now.

iii.

Sometimes we'd just sit and smoke,  
swim in some ice cold beers,  
enjoy the sound of no women around  
or shoot at ghosts if the fish weren't biting.

Sometimes we'd get drunk and argue  
for hours about who would win  
in a fair fight between his nigger jack  
and that nigger joe louis.

He rode me hard for bragging  
about catching the big one  
but I know he bragged about  
teaching me how to fish.

## **Spell to Give the Woman a Head**

*for Glenn*

Rewind to a civil war bruised Kentucky, circa 1979  
when a middle-aged white woman dropped her trench coat

and walked barefoot and naked to the center of the room.  
Separate your shame from your fear, your art from your life.

Turn down the volume on your mother's voice,  
recanting the stories of Emmett Till and strange fruits.

Give yourself permission to ignore American history,  
unspoken Dixie rules and social norms.

Pick up a stick of charcoal, relax, examine the model,  
address your easel, take another look, only this time

stare...stare at her long enough to actually see her face.  
See it attached to a head and that head attached to a body.

See her on the page, whole, then ask yourself  
which is a greater sin, decapitation or eyeball rape.

*Joanna Lin Want*

## **Landscape with Elegy**

A cold Easter. Gray sky over green fields. Let's not resurrect  
the garden, plotting neat rows of beans and carrots.  
Let's not go back there. Untilled fields and March rain.

I was telling the truth when my cheeks flushed red, loss  
that could not be contained in clenched fists. You can claw  
the sky or you can sing a dirge, but the earth persists

in performing its daily illusions—lying flat, lying flat.  
I was busy sewing green leaves for the trees, something  
to cheer us, something to challenge a gray sky.

I'd driven that road a hundred times, but that morning  
I wanted to lift the sky above it so I could watch it rain  
for miles. The windows fogged and the trees

lost their singularity. I was looking all around—  
open fields, sky like a washed slate, wild daffodils  
climbing to the road's ragged edge—

but you, you were nowhere  
I could see.

## Kitchen Song

Au Pau,  
you died in a crowded city  
far from Indiana,  
in a Buddhist temple  
somewhere in New York.  
Between your death  
and the last time I saw you,  
I cut my hair short  
and grew it long  
three times.

I was seven years old  
the last time we met;  
I stole away from the others  
to be with you, alone.  
Touched your arm  
and looked at you.  
You were warm,  
gazing out the window.  
Through my eyes I saw  
an ancient Chinese relic,  
and wondered how  
my body came from yours,  
why our mouths formed  
words that could only be music  
between us and sang  
such discordant song and psalter.

What I found of you in me  
were the spices that warmed us,  
the food and flowers  
of my grandmother's kitchen—

the night-time smell of garlic  
and curry, hot and sputtering in oil;  
sticky short-grained rice  
wrapped in purple-green tea leaves  
and string, boiling in water;  
a catfish—his head still on, eyeballs  
serious, but his gills laughing,  
stuffed with green onions and ginger;  
the constant sound of chopping  
a thousand vegetables;  
duck, crispy and golden,  
only hours ago hung in a shop window  
on a narrow bustling street,  
now sits on the giant table,  
its aroma mixed with the scent of oranges;  
chrysanthemum tea, big bunches of flowers  
steeped in boiling water, sweetened  
with rock sugar;  
the flame-orange of shrimp  
against the pure white of mountains  
and mountains of rice;  
dumplings stuffed with meat and money  
for a red New Year's feast;  
the lingering morning scent of jasmine  
left from nocturnal blossoms—

Is all that has survived of the past.

That kitchen, the center  
of a yellow two-story  
on a cul-de-sac  
in a quiet Midwestern town—  
an entire continent to a small girl  
who would have to wait years  
to decipher the names  
of what she tasted there.

## Meditation on Apples

Somewhere, summer blooms despite the winter upon us here. Fallow fields—stalks bent low and snow-covered—are what I've come to know as mine each year. But I was born amidst the stars and desert of Arizona.

Do bodies keep a map of memory and sky and soil? I've often felt as close to trees as people. Some believe we're made from earth, but I believe we're made of stars—exploded, ancient, and reeling. But what does it matter, really, now that we're here? It's enough to consider the lilies and how they bloom without thought or worry.

I've heard it said that no one sees what is, but what one is used to seeing. So paintings of deserts might turn out as fields, or one's family as tall oak trees. I once met a painter who told the story of a year spent painting peaches. He painted the fruit until he was sure he could truly see them. At year's end, he said, he could see his own death through peaches.

Me? I would choose apples, but I am not a painter. When I was a child, I cut them in half to find the star at their center, without questioning that a whole world could exist in the palm of my young hand.

## **Out of the Irrigation Pipe**

It shot out of the rusted cylinder,  
slid past my boots on reeds  
bent low by the water's rush.  
It flailed gray fins,  
bared its white belly in the cascade,  
spun head and tail downhill, to rest  
on a bed of matted grass.

I shouted to my father  
where he worked furrows, shaped each row  
to hold the coming wash.  
He dropped his spade  
and motioned with gloved hands  
for me to crank the wheel,  
stop the pipe.

At the hill bottom,  
I stood in my father's long shadow  
and watched the slick body writhe  
at the touch of his spade,  
watched it squirm in its oily scales,  
sweeping the lawn with its tail fin.

I flinched at its yellowed eyes—  
vacant, blurred by sumpwater  
and silt-mucked pipes it wandered underground—  
eyes that could not blink,  
exposed now to a branding sun.

My own eyes settled  
on the thin flaps of its gills:

opening, closing,  
trying to let in the sun-dried air.

I wanted to put it back, but knew  
the same dark pipe that opened  
to soak bean rows, to release  
tight tendrils from the soil  
could not take back what it gave,  
pushed water one way only.

I remember how the sun  
shone on its skin  
and the way my father looked at me  
as he handed me the spade.

And I did not think  
as I stood above it in the grass  
that I was wrong; that life  
does take a part of what it gives,  
nor could I know  
that I would think of this  
as my father lay by a window,  
head propped to face his garden,  
his own mouth moving like a fish  
searching for air—

But standing in his shadow I  
at once knew what he wanted;  
and I winced, but did not look away  
when I swung the flat back  
of the spade and cracked  
the body broadside,  
crushed the bones with mercy.

*Joe Wilkins*

## Rain Ghazal

We drive south out of Memphis, dark shoulders of rain  
behind us. Now we turn west, toward the river, into rain.

The setting sun tumbles like a drunk through the trees,  
and an old man fishing the bank lifts his face to rain.

I sit on the porch, sip whiskey from a jam jar, listen  
for tree frogs and cicadas, for the lick of wind through rain.

Church Street is flooded. Don't try to drive it—it'll knock  
your spark out. Road of dirty water, outrage of rain.

It comes down like rusty buckets, stumps, bricks. In the morning,  
she lifts herself from the dark water of dreams, but still it rains.

Wind shakes pecans from the dark trees. Before dawn,  
we wake and gather them in the fog, a gray wool of rain.

The soybeans drowned. The wheat rotted at the roots.  
But green stalks swell between the dikes: rice loves rain.

A man holds a sopping bag over his head. Near the bayou,  
a boy pulls off his shoes, his shirt, runs lazy eights of rain.

They wake in the dark, the heat of their sleep between them.  
She swings her hips over his with the clatter of rain.

The road's a sudden river, trees thunder with dripping,  
the sky no longer belongs to itself. All the world is rain.

## In the Company of Alligators

They were the last thing  
I went to see—could not  
imagine what the attraction  
could be. I went for birds:  
anhingas, spoonbills, egrets,  
herons. And swamp lilies.  
Manatees and dark, steamy  
mangroves. Maritime fauna.  
Palmetto palms and pig frogs.  
Whispering of wind across  
sawgrass prairies.

But from the moment I spotted  
that first one dozing along  
Anhinga Trail, I was hooked.  
Hearing the bellowing of two  
echoing across the slough—a  
sutra—I knew they were saints  
if not prophets, beyond good  
and evil, soul-readers seeing by  
God’s light, wildly created,  
audacious, hypnotic, driven  
forward by practicalities—not  
hostilities, in control—rulers but  
not dictators of the slough, kings  
of the vast river of grass, a dark  
tense presence, unadulterated motion  
among soft-shelled turtles, garfish  
and fallen ripened pond apples.

Sinking deep into my awareness,  
triumphantly fulfilling my need  
for distinct, unabashed wildness.  
Even here, back now in my desert,  
the Everglades flows through my days,  
bellows of alligators like plain chants  
echo in my ears—rhapsody, love song  
so endearing, drowning out the  
groaners of this sad world.

Hosanna to the alligators  
in the highest: Glory be  
to their Maker.

## **Privilege**

*at Ginter Gardens*

In this tearoom pavilion, under glass,  
cloud shadows flash across the porcelain.  
The linen cloths are lilies on  
a hushed pool. Steam lapses in our cups  
and is replenished; waiters brush  
moth-like from bloom to bloom.  
Talk blots and folds, and still the maître d'  
fends off stroller and cane  
for we have reservations;  
we are named upon the master list.  
Outside is stomp and huddle.  
Gusts rock the maples, make  
a ruckus of samaras, rack the willows,  
thrash the tasseled oaks; everything rooted  
bends in a furious pantomime of flight.  
But here we drowse as in a diving bell,  
breathing a borrowed air, while currents flail  
the tentacles of things we cannot quite  
call animal, that bow and bow before us;  
or in a movie theater, leaning back  
while villages collapse  
and screams and prayers play across our skin,  
because the velvet seat, the popcorn tub,  
the chubby angels flaking overhead  
on the blue ceiling, these, these are real.

## **Story**

A boy is pulling at his mother's apron.  
The mother in her apron fills the sky  
like the rain-swollen cloud whose belly blots  
Clinch Mountain. The cove, the tinder-dry  
locust and collapsing cabin  
crawl in white, weevils in flour.

In the apron pocket, in her fist,  
is a sold-off toy, is a birthday cake  
like an acre of cracked clay, is a father  
run to war, is a dust of seed corn,  
is the thin ticking of her iron bed,  
is the squeezed word he waits for.

The boy pulls at the apron fifty-six years.  
His fingers twine up into the coarse strings,  
Virginia creepers over a topped oak.  
His mind becomes a buzzard; far away  
it tilts with no sound, circles the ridges  
of her nails, the ploughed palm that stays shut.

There are ways this story ends. He gets up  
like a three-legged deer from a ditch.  
He feeds like a mallard, craw filling with lead.  
He veers like a fox into a pocket of earth.  
A hundred ways, but not one of them true.  
When the boy scrapes up a voice  
to tell it, then. Then.

## *Contributors' Notes*

**Jeffrey Alfier** recently received honorable mention for the Rachel Sherwood Poetry Prize. His recent credits include *Pearl Magazine* and *Saint Ann's Review*. He is author of a chapbook, *Strangers within the Gate*. He occasionally works as a drayman and a thresher.

**Kirsten Andersen** received an MFA from New York University, and her work has been published in the *Notre Dame Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Barrow Street*, and *Greensboro Review*. She has been awarded grants from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the Edward Albee Foundation. She was a 2003 Writing Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and she was a 2006 Wallace Stegner Fellow in Creative Writing at Stanford University.

**Nin Andrews** is the author of several books of poetry and short fiction. Her next book, *Southern Comfort*, is forthcoming from CavanKerry Press.

**Francisco Aragón** has new poetry in *Mandorla* and *Great River Review*. His anthology, *The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry* (University of Arizona Press) won first place in the poetry in English category at the 2008 International Latino Book Awards. He directs Letras Latinas, the literary program of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame and also serves as editor of Canto Cosas, a new poetry book series from Bilingual Press. For more information, visit: <http://franciscoaragon.net>.

**Evan Beaty** is a native of San Antonio, Texas, and presently an MFA candidate at the University of Virginia. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bat City Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Quarterly West*, *The Southern Review*, and *32 Poems*.

**J.A. Bernstein** is writing a novel about the Israeli Army. He is a Middleton Fellow and a Ph.D. candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California.

**Ryan Blacketter**'s stories have appeared in *Image* and *Quick Fiction*.

His novel-in-stories, *Horses All Over Hell*, was a runner-up in the 2008 Ohio State University Prize. With a 2006 grant from Idaho Humanities Council, he taught a week-long fiction workshop at the North Idaho Correctional Institution where his father had been a counselor.

**Traci Brimhall** is the 2008–09 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at University of Wisconsin-Madison. She holds degrees from Florida State University and Sarah Lawrence College. Some of her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Rattle*, and *Harpur Palate*.

**Katie Cappello** has had work published in *Harpur Palate*, *Burnside Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Front Porch*, and *Cave Wall*. She is the winner of the 2007 Elixir Press Poetry Award, and her full-length collection, *Perpetual Care*, is forthcoming from the press.

**Deborah Casillas** lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has a degree in English from UC Berkeley, and she has studied poetry in the creative writing program at the College of Santa Fe. Her poems have appeared in the *Comstock Review*, *Kalliope*, *Sycamore Review*, *Ontario Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Borderlands*, and the *Santa Fe Literary Review*.

**George David Clark** teaches creative writing at James Madison University and serves as poetry editor of *Meridian*. His recent poems have been published or are forthcoming in *West Branch*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Sou'wester*, and elsewhere. In 2008 he was awarded the 25th annual Guy Owen Prize from the *Southern Poetry Review*.

**Toni Kay Cole** is a Chicago native, and was one of the 2008 Hurston/Wright finalists for College Writers. She is currently working on her first short story collection.

**Timothy Crandle** is the winner of the 2009 Waasmode Prize from *Passages North* and the second-prize winner in the 11th Annual *Zoetrope: All-Story* Short Fiction Contest. “Bethlehem Steel” is from an unpublished collection of linked short stories. He lives in Oakland, California.

**James Crews** holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Best New Poets*

2006, *Columbia*, and *Prairie Schooner*. A chapbook based upon the life and work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Small Yellow Envelopes*, is being published by Parallel Press, and another, *Bending the Knot*, won the 2008 Gertrude Press Poetry Contest.

**David Dominguez**'s full-length collection of poems, *Work Done Right*, was published by the University of Arizona Press. Most recently, his work appeared in *Bear Flag Republic* (Alcatraz Editions); *Border Senses Literary Magazine*; *Breathe: 101 Contemporary Odes* (C&R Press); and *Palabra: A Magazine of Chicano and Literary Art*. He teaches writing and literature at Reedley College.

**Elizabeth Enslin** received her Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Stanford University. She is currently working on an ethnographic memoir, *Sacred Threads*, a chapter of which is being published in the *Gettysburg Review*. She lives in Oregon, dividing her time between Portland and a farm in Wallowa County.

**Matt Ferrence** is a former and failed professional golfer who is working on a collection of golf-themed essays. Another essay from that project appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*.

**Robert A. Fink** directs the creative writing program at Hardin-Simmons University. His most recent of five books of poetry is *Tracking The Morning* (Wings Press). His literary nonfiction book, *Twilight Innings: A West Texan on Grace and Survival*, was published by Texas Tech University Press.

**Eugene Gloria**'s second collection of poems, *Hoodlum Birds*, was published by Penguin Books. His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Louisville Review*, *Lake Effect*, and *The New Republic*.

**Eamon Grennan** taught for many years at Vassar College. His most recent poetry collections are *The Quick of It* and *Matter of Fact* (Graywolf Press). His translation (with Rachel Kitzinger) of *Oedipus at Colonus* was published by Oxford University Press. He currently teaches in the Graduate Writing Programs of Columbia University and New York University. He spends as much time as he can in Connemara in the West of Ireland.

**Gemma Guillermo** was born in the Philippines and raised in Hawaii. She received both her B.A. in English and her M.D. from Cornell University, and is a past recipient of the Williams Carlos Williams Prize for medical students. Her poetry and memoir essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Praxis*, *JAMA*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Kartika Review*, and *American Literary Review*. Guillermo works as a physician and is currently at work on a memoir series about growing up in Hawaii.

**Mark Halliday** teaches at Ohio University. His fifth book of poems, *Keep This Forever*, was published by Tupelo Press in Fall 2008.

**Janice N. Harrington**'s first book of poetry, *Even the Hollow My Body Made Is Gone* (BOA Editions), won the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. She teaches creative writing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

**Elizabeth Haukaas**'s first poetry book, *Leap*, was published by Texas Tech University Press in Spring 2009. She received an MFA from Warren Wilson. Her poetry has appeared in the *New England Review*, *North American Poetry Review*, *William and Mary Review*, and *New Millennium Writings*, among others. She lives in New York City.

**G.E. Henderson**'s essays, poetry, and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Double Room*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Her longer manuscripts have been finalists for a number of awards, including the AWP Award Series in the Novel and the Poets & Writers Exchange in Poetry.

**Dennis Hinrichsen**'s fifth book of poems, *Kurosawa's Dog*, won the 2008 FIELD Poetry Prize and will appear in 2009.

**Cynthia Marie Hoffman**, a former Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, received her MFA in poetry from George Mason University. Her work has appeared in such journals as *Open City*, *Margie*, *Nimrod*, and *New Delta Review*, and in the anthology *Best New Poets 2005*.

**Chloë Honum** grew up in New Zealand. She is an MFA candidate at the University of Arkansas and the 2008 recipient of the Summer Literary

Seminars Greta Wrolstad Scholarship for Young Poets. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2008*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Paris Review*.

**Richard Jackson** is the author of nine books of poems, including *Half Lives: Petrarchan Poems* (Autumn House), *Unauthorized Autobiography: New and Selected Poems* (Ashland Poetry Press), and *Heartwall*, winner of the 2000 Juniper Prize (University of Massachusetts Press).

**Alana Joblin** grew up in Philadelphia. Prior to making Brooklyn her home seven years ago, she earned her B.A. at Oberlin College, studying English and Religion, followed by seven months of writing poems in Israel's desert, as part of the Arad Arts Project. Alana received her MFA in poetry at Hunter College, where she has also taught literature and creative writing. Her work has appeared in *Quarterly West*, *RealPoetik* and the *abedian arts project*.

**Kirun Kapur**'s poems have appeared in *AGNI*, *BPJ*, *Literary Imagination*, and other journals. She lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

**Karen An-Hwei Lee** is the author of *Ardor* (Tupelo Press) and *In Medias Res* (Sarabande Books). She lives and teaches on the West Coast, where she is a novice harpist.

**Moira Linehan**'s collection, *If No Moon*, won the 2006 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition. Recent work of hers has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Image*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Sou'wester*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

**Derick Mattern** was a member of the Tokyo Writers' Workshop and now lives in Istanbul. His reviews have appeared in the *Tokyo Advocate* and *Kyoto Journal*.

**A. McHugh** has one publication forthcoming in *Unsplendid*. She has been educated at The Ohio State University, Boston University and, most recently, at the University of Arkansas, where she is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing. Additionally, she is co-editor of *Linebreak*, which is located online at <http://linebreak.org>.

**Tyler Caroline Mills** was awarded the 2008 *Third Coast Poetry Prize*

and has appeared in *Water~Stone Review*, *Best New Poets 2007*, *Indiana Review*, and *Gulf Coast*, where she was awarded the *Gulf Coast* poetry prize in 2006. She has also been a John Woods Fellow in the Prague Summer Program. She enjoys playing the violin and teaches at the University of Maryland.

**Derek Mong**'s poems have appeared or will appear in *New Delta Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, and elsewhere. His work has received *Alehouse's Happy Hour Poetry Award* and the Jeffrey E. Smith Prize from *The Missouri Review*. He currently holds the Axton Poetry Fellowship at the University of Louisville.

**Leah Nielsen** holds an MFA from the University of Alabama. Her first collection of poems, *No Magic*, was published by Word Press in 2005. She teaches at Westfield State College, in Westfield, Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband Tim and two wild and crazy dogs.

**Hannah Faith Notess** held the 2008-2009 Milton Center Fellowship in Creative Writing from *Image* journal at Seattle Pacific University. Her poems have appeared in *Mid-American Review*, *Rattle*, *5 AM*, and *Slate*.

**Michael Nye** is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and works as managing editor of *River Styx*. His fiction has appeared in *Sou'wester*, *Thin Air*, and *Timber Creek Review*. He lives in St. Louis.

**Dan O'Brien** was recently the Hodder Fellow in playwriting at Princeton University. His play *The House in Hydesville* premiered at Geva Theatre Center in the 2008–09 season. This is his first published poem.

**Ricardo Pau-Llosa**'s sixth collection, *Parable Hunter*, is from Carnegie Mellon University Press. He has new poems in *The Fiddlehead*, *New England Review*, *Salmagundi*, and *TriQuarterly*. He was featured on the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* Poetry Series (PBS). His website is [www.pau-llosa.com](http://www.pau-llosa.com).

**Jennifer Perrine**'s first book of poetry, *The Body Is No Machine*, was published by New Issues in 2007 and won the 2008 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Poetry. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming

in journals including *Ellipsis*, *Green Mountains Review*, *RATTLE*, and *Third Coast*. She lives in Des Moines, Iowa, and teaches at Drake University.

**Lee Felice Pinkas** lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her poems and translations have appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Witness*, and the *Tampa Review*.

**Donald Platt**'s third book, *My Father Says Grace*, was published by the University of Arkansas Press. His fourth book, *Dirt Angels*, was published by New Issues Poetry & Prose in 2009. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*, *ACM (Another Chicago Magazine)*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Seneca Review*, and *Iowa Review*. His poems have been anthologized in *The Pushcart Prize XXVII* and *XXIX* (the 2003 and 2005 editions) and in *The Best American Poetry 2000* and *2006* and have appeared within the last year on the websites of Poetry Daily and Verse Daily. He is a professor of English at Purdue University.

**Kristel Rietesel-Low** received her MFA from the University of Illinois. This is her first publication.

**Michael Schiavone**'s fiction has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Mississippi Review*, *Carve*, *New Letters*, *Connecticut Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *GSU Review*, *Cutthroat*, *Santa Fe Writers Project*, and the anthology *Tartts 2: Incisive Fiction from Emerging Writers*. He lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he just finished his first novel, *Call Me When You Land*.

**Martha Silano**'s books are *Blue Positive* (Steel Toe Books) and *What the Truth Tastes Like* (Nightshade Press). Her work has appeared in *32 Poems*, *Prairie Schooner*, and online at *No Tell Motel*.

**John Slater** is a Cistercian monk in upstate New York, where he bakes, gardens, and cares for the infirm. His poems have appeared in various journals in the U.S. and Canada, most recently *Queen's Quarterly*, *Brink Magazine*, and *CrossCurrents*. His piece "Lost and Found" won the 2007 Foley Poetry Contest run by *America* magazine.

**Mecca Jamilah Sullivan** is a Ph.D. student, fiction writer, and playwright from Harlem, New York. Her fiction has appeared in journals and anthologies including *Bloom*, *X-24 Unclassified*, *Lumina*, *Baobab*, *Philadelphia Stories* online, and others. She has received honors and awards for fiction, critical writing, playwriting, and teaching from Temple University, The Boston Fiction Festival, New World Theater, The Smith College Praxis fund, the New York State Summer Writers Institute, the NAACP, and other organizations. She holds a B.A. in Afro-American Studies from Smith College and an M.A. in English and Creative Writing from Temple University. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, where her research focuses on the relationships between narrative form and intersectional identity in Afrodiasporic women's writing.

**Frank X Walker**, Affrilachian Poet founder, is the recipient of a Lannan Literary Fellowship for Poetry and a Lillian Smith Book Award for his collection of historical poetry, *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*. He is the author of four collections of poetry and the editor of *PLUCK! The Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture*.

**Joanna Lin Want** lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Her poetry has appeared in *The Auorean*, *Mochila Review*, and *Mudfish*. She teaches at Western Michigan University.

**Daniel Westover** received his MFA in Creative Writing from McNeese State University and his Ph.D. in Anglo-Welsh poetry from the University of Wales. He is the author of *Toward Omega* (21st Editions) and has recent work in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *North American Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*. He is currently a Lecturer at Utah Valley University.

**Joe Wilkins** lives in Forest City, Iowa, where he directs the creative writing program at Waldorf College. His poems, essays, and stories have recently appeared in *Pleiades*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Orion*, and *Slate*. He spent two years teaching in the public schools of the Mississippi Delta.

**Diana Woodcock** currently teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. She has lived in Tibet, Macau and Thailand. In 2008 her poem, "Survivor," was selected by Mark Strand for *Best*

*Contributors' Notes*

New Poets 2008, and she was a semi-finalist in Black Lawrence Press's Black River Chapbook Competition for *In the Shade of the Sidra Tree*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Nimrod*, *Atlanta Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Litchfield Review*, and other journals, as well as in numerous anthologies.

**Kristin Camitta Zimet** is the editor of *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. Her first collection of poems, *Take in My Arms the Dark*, came out in 1999. Her poems have appeared in *Lullwater Review*, *Runes*, *Red Cedar Review*, as well as in many anthologies and other journals. She works as a naturalist in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

# **CRAB ORCHARD SERIES IN POETRY 2008 FIRST BOOK AWARD ANNOUNCEMENT**

*Crab Orchard Review* and Southern Illinois University Press are pleased to announce the winner of the 2008 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award.

Our final judge, Ricardo Pau-Llosa, selected William Notter's *Holding Everything Down* as the winner. He will be awarded a \$1000 prize and \$1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His reading will follow the publication of his collection by Southern Illinois University Press in October 2009.

We want to thank all of the poets who entered manuscripts in our Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award Competition last year and this year. We will announce the winner of the 2009 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award in October on *Crab Orchard Review*'s website:

**[CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu/conpol.html](http://CrabOrchardReview.siuc.edu/conpol.html)**

# **CRAB ORCHARD SERIES IN POETRY 2009 OPEN COMPETITION AWARDS ANNOUNCEMENT**

*Crab Orchard Review* and Southern Illinois University Press are pleased to announce the 2009 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition selections.

Our final judge, Natasha Trethewey, selected *Strange Land* by Todd Hearon and *Threshold* by Jennifer Richter as the winners. Both winners will be awarded a \$2000 prize and \$1500 as an honorarium for a reading at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Both readings will follow the publication of the poets' collections by Southern Illinois University Press in April 2010.

We want to thank all of the poets who entered manuscripts in our Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition.

*Crab Orchard Review's* website has updated information on subscriptions, calls for submissions, contest information and results, and past, current, and future issues. Visit us at:

**[CrabOrchardReview.siu.edu](http://CrabOrchardReview.siu.edu)**

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**All submissions must be accompanied by a \$25 entry fee.** For complete guidelines, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

Jon Tribble, Series Editor  
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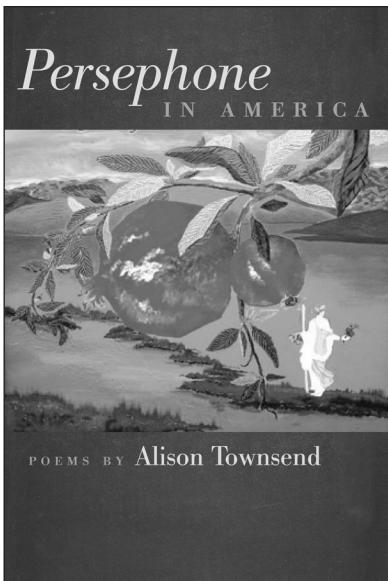
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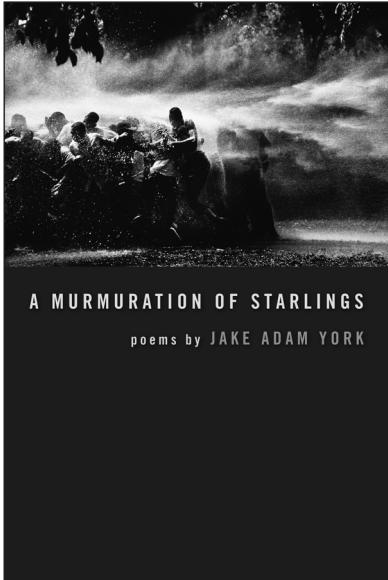
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2007 Open Competition Award



## The Sphere of Birds

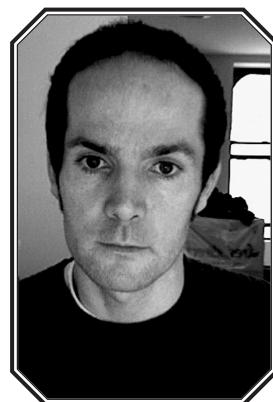
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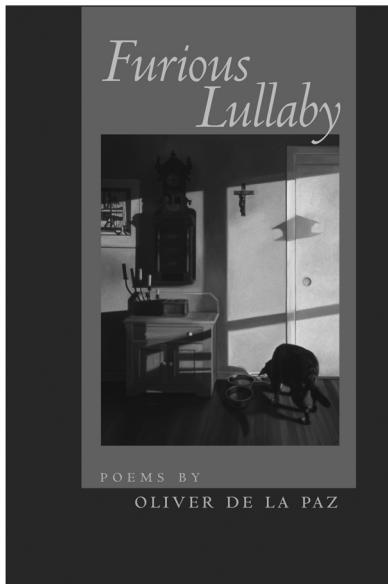
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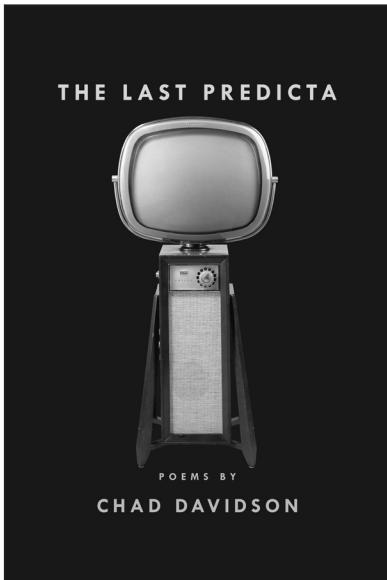
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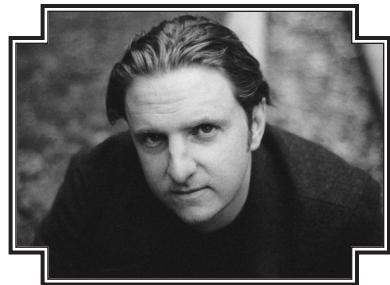
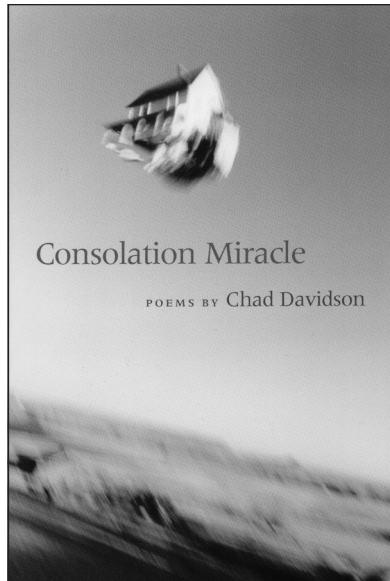
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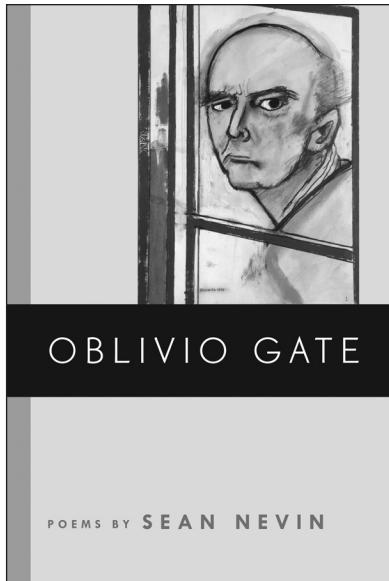


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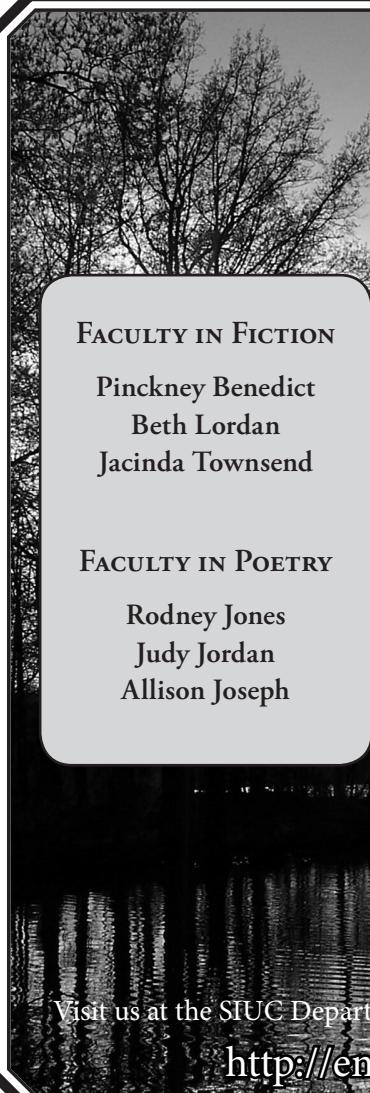
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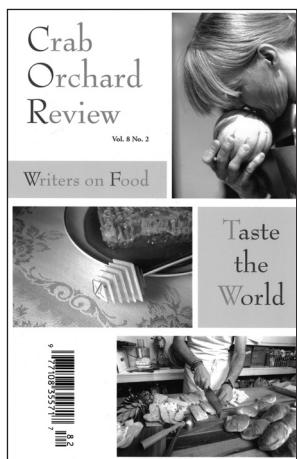


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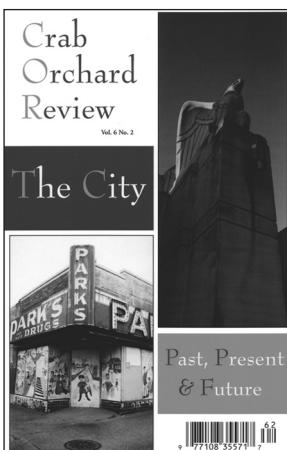
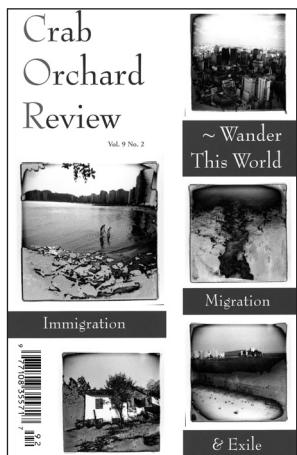
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