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Summer - Fall 2006
Contest Issue

FUGUE

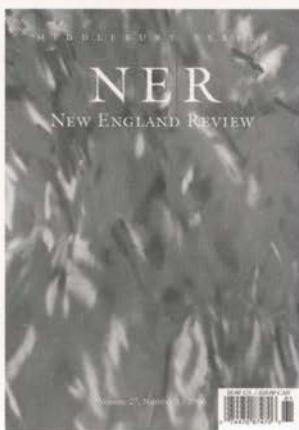
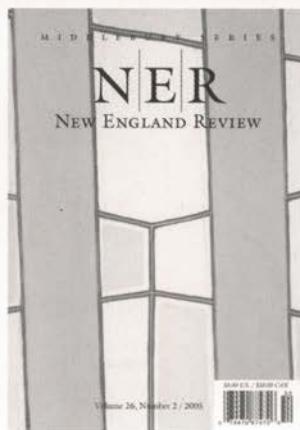
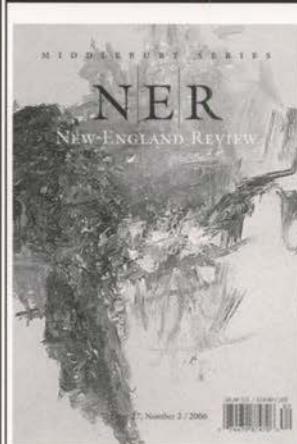
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To begin at the beginning: It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched courters'-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.

—Dylan Thomas

FUGUE

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FUGUE

Summer - Fall 2006, Vol. 31

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Submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1 (postmark dates). All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please address submission to the appropriate editor and send with SASE to *Fugue*, English Department, 200 Brink Hall, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-1102. Prose no more than 6,000 words pays up to \$50 (as funds allow) and a one-year subscription. Poetry, all forms, pays up to \$25 (as funds allow) and a one-year subscription. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be mailed separately, each containing an individual SASE. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), with the explicit provision that the writer inform us immediately if the work is accepted for publication elsewhere. We will not consider multiple submissions (more than one submission at a time). All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

Cover art, "Escape" by David Aronson, 2006.

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Contents

Editor's Note	8
Fugue Fifth Annual Contest in Prose & Poetry Winners:	134, 158
Fiction—Judged by Chris Abani	
Sarah Blackman, <i>Eena Eena Eena</i> (1 st Prize)	135
Scott McMurtrey, <i>yellow grass, yellow leaves</i> (2 nd Prize)	141
Claire Ortalder, <i>The Blue Dress</i> (3 rd Prize)	153
Poetry—Judged by Campbell McGrath	
John Pursley III, [I am Thinking of Columbus—of Newly Caulked, Dry Docked Ships...] from “The Sea Monkey Dreams” (1 st Prize)	159
Michael Meyerhofer, <i>The First Kill</i> (2 nd Prize)	162
Janine Joseph, <i>History</i> (3 rd Prize)	163
Poetry	
Philip Levine, <i>Anatole</i>	8
<i>The Gift of Winter</i>	10
Matthew Gavin Frank, <i>Before Breakfast</i>	26
Benjamin Vogt, <i>De-incarnation of a Back Page Story</i>	27
Kathleen Rooney, <i>Et in Arcadia, Ego</i>	28
Leonard Orr, <i>Family History</i>	29
Steven Rood, <i>Don Giovanni on Earth</i>	41
Roger Sheffer, <i>Joined at the Lips</i>	42
<i>Iowa Cross Dresser</i>	43
Campbell McGrath, <i>Krome Avenue</i>	57
David Schloss, <i>Absorbed in Therapy</i>	71
<i>The Values of Antiquity</i>	72
Lauren Goodwin Slaughter, <i>Osmosis</i>	73
K.E. Duffin, <i>Instant Replay Glitch</i>	80
<i>Paradise</i>	81
<i>Migrant</i>	82
Doug Ramspeck, <i>Hillside Wraith</i>	83
Robert Krut, <i>Rope</i>	84

Timothy Green, <i>Sculptures</i>	85
David Troupes, <i>The Picnic</i>	86
Mark Sanders, <i>Traveling to the Big Empty</i>	100
Sandy Tseng, <i>Babel</i>	101
Peter Desy, <i>Out of Round</i>	102
Lynnell Edwards, <i>Planting Dahlias with a Pick-Ax</i>	114
Lisa Roullard, <i>Postage Stamps, the First Date Series: Watching the Kingdome Implosion Broadcast, Seattle, Washington</i>	115
John Nieves, <i>Two Years Ago This Morning</i>	116
 Fiction	
Eric Shade, <i>Yolky at the Warhol Museum</i>	11
Tony Schaffer, <i>Letter</i>	39
Giselda Beaudin, <i>Jawbone</i>	44
Aimee Parkison, <i>Chains</i>	74
Jon Boilard, <i>Capp Street Incident</i>	79
Rachel May, <i>Just a Few Places I've Been</i>	87
 Essays	
Rose Bunch, <i>Ghosts</i>	30
Urban Waite, <i>A Varying Border</i>	61
Kat Meade, <i>The Making of an Insomniac</i>	103
 The Experiment	
Mike Smith, <i>Aquaman</i>	118
 Interview	
Campbell McGrath, <i>An Interview with Sara Kaplan</i>	50
 Contributors' Notes	
	164

—From the Editors—

F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you've got something to say." The writing in the following pages all has something to tell the reader; in fact, these pieces earnestly dare the reader to question how our imaginations affect our lives, that writing can in fact change our lives if we believe the truth in what's being told. These pieces remind us that sometimes we must say what we feel we cannot; they remind us that we must walk past the end of the road. Thank you to all who have forged ahead and helped to create this, our thirty-first volume of *Fugue*. We gratefully acknowledge our contributors whose words continue to push literary boundaries, our tireless and enthusiastic staff, and finally, our subscribers and the University of Idaho for their continued support.

We would also like to extend our great thanks to Chris Abani and Campbell McGrath for judging our fifth annual contest. Every spring *Fugue*'s annual contest showcases great prose and poetry. And, this year is no different. To submit one's work to a magazine requires humility, courage, and a strong sense of pride in one's craft. When we enter a writing contest we show how writing is more than sensory, it is necessary, as we thrust our work confidently forward for the ultimate praise. Proudly, we share and congratulate the talented winning prose and poetry that dazzles the eyes and ears and begs us to consider the colorful world that entices us each day. Here, in these pages, it is within reach.

To you, our readers, we hope you find the prose, poetry, and experimental writing in the following pages something to return to in the long, hot hours of this summer and those to follow. As in our cover art "*Escape*" by David Aronson, perhaps the images and characters you encounter will urge you to say what you must and write what you must.

Sara Kaplan and Justin Jainchill

Anatole

Among all the Titans, Anatole
with his great rocky brow, his grace,
his character, was the most human.
I learned this from a local seer
who held my hands as he spoke
of Anatole's rare nature—a God
who cared for living things—
and how as an aging myth, he'd
gone off into the northern wastes
on foot to die, and found
a perfect garden pelted with rain.
Under the unpruned branches
of a lemon tree Anatole beheld
the bright faces of pansies,
violas, violets, and knew he was
in heaven. "This garden," the seer
whispered in stumbling verses
on a Saint's Day in Liguria,
"was meant to be the whole world's
Garden." I paid him in Euros,
the currency of choice, and humming
old show tunes he danced off
into the dusk as the little street fair
broke up. All that night I heard
an angry sea rising against the shore
below my balcony and the winds
raiding the pines and knew morning
would break on a different world.
You ask how I, a man of no faith,
could believe in Anatole, could
take as fact this vision delivered
on boozy breath from behind
a white cotton beard held on
by rubbery bands around the ears?
Even after I'd seen the seer's act
with Beniamino, the terrier mix
in blue trousers he'd taught to eat
with fork and knife, and to dab
his muzzle on a napkin, I believed.

That night the winds died, a morning arrived, just as he'd predicted, new light leaked between the shutters, a light like no other. The waves piled up along the shore as veined as native marble, and to the west a long arm of land descended from nowhere, joining sea and sky, a new land. It was the seer's vision become flesh, it was Anatole—or so we would learn to call it—come back to earth as earth itself.

The Gift of Winter

The alder outside my window
motionless, the forsythia
holding its breath, the last smear

of fog burnt away so the day
can enter the long memory
of winter, clear and uncorrupted.

Twelve years old, I tramped the back alleys
searching for something I couldn't
name or describe and found cinders

jeweled with tiny points of light
that cut; I found handwritten,
scented letters, gifts from the future,

their words frozen in the weather—
“Paola, there is never a right time,”
in a straight, manly hand that collapsed

from exhaustion. There were trees there too,
a row of tattered Chinese elms
to shade the past year's garbage,

a fenced-in copper beech thicker
than a Pontiac, its leafless
branches stiffening in the wind.

There was always that wind, unnamed,
defiant, whistling in the face
of February and not this odd calm

outside my window and closing in.
Even when the final blizzard whited
out the old neighborhoods

there was always new life
aching to break through and nothing
I could do to stop it.

Yolky at the Warhol Museum

Part 1. Paxson and Gus

They parked at the bridge with a stolen Honda motorcycle in the truck bed. They bore the motorcycle up and cast it over the edge and waited for the noise but the noise was not the cracked clank and echo. They looked over the edge down at the tracks. The coal cars were gone. The motorcycle lay in snow-covered trail and ties; the front wheel spun.

Lawnmowers, college textbooks, wheelchairs, soiled casts and mildewed flags, and, once, a month before, a Christmas-treat tin with two human toes in it—Paxson and Gus had always thrown things off the Muleshoe Bridge and those things had always clanked in coal cars.

"Train's gone today for once and all, I bet," Paxson said. He was thirty-five. He'd played varsity football at Windfall High, tight end.

Gus tried to scale the ledge, his boot tips scraping the in-lain ancient stonework. He weighed nearly three-hundred pounds. "Screw it," Gus said, having given up. He stood leaning and panting. "I was planning to go down and get some of that stuff back we tossed."

"Like what?"

"Pictures of she whose name means nothing to me now."

The woman whose pictures Gus referred to was someone Paxson knew. She'd written to Gus and told him that she had a husband, and a baby, and she hated Gus, hated everything and everybody in Windfall.

Gus kicked some snow at Paxson. "Say, Dumbass. Was there anything you were planning to get back?"

"I could have fixed that lawnmower."

There were other things Paxson had tossed over from plastic bins: informational brochures from art schools he'd wanted to attend. And letters of rejection from those schools. And notebooks filled with his miserable sketches. He'd spent hundreds of dollars in application fees. He didn't tell any of this to Gus. "Would you sleep with her if she came back?"

"Would you?"

He believed Gus's girl was probably dead. Her name was Melanie Grassmier. She had a smalltown stripper's body. Her small face was ugly, her head full of dreams. Paxson himself had run around with her in his time.

Gus drew a cigarette, then looked at his lighter and Paxson. "Oops," he said. "Forgetful."

"Don't worry," Paxson said. He touched the rough sleeve at his upper arm. He was still getting used to the nicotine patch.

Gus tucked the pack in his shirt pocket. "You going to call him?"

He was talking about Farquhar. He was their employer. He'd paid them to snip off the boy's toes and now he'd hired them to shoot and kill a young man in Pittsburgh. They had never killed anyone before.

They would try it. It was very simple.

NOON THE NEXT DAY PAXSON picked up Gus in his Corolla. Weary of the turnpike, he took interstate twenty-two west to Pittsburgh. It took longer but the memories it provided were of childhood, of snowy banks and stiff carcasses, spent shells and casings glistening in the snow like ornaments dropped from holiday firs.

At a stoplight Paxson glanced at Gus, asleep in the passenger seat, his laptop with wireless modem open in his fat lap. Its screen saver showed images of women bending over washbasins.

Unlike Gus, Paxson had kept in shape since high school. He gave up dreams but not lifting. If he could stop smoking he'd be in good health. He had trophies. His picture had been in the sports section twice.

Then, snow. He lit a cigarette, looked over at Gus. Maybe you ought to wake him up, he said to himself. Tell him, hey Dumbass, take a look at the snow.

They reached Pittsburgh and they marked the city's bridges and shadowed graffiti-emblazoned underpasses, Three Rivers Stadium, Heinz field, signs for the Andy Warhol Museum, a bar called The Decalogue.

Gus checked his investments on the wireless internet. They listened to a C.D. Gus' cousin had copied for him. Spit yo game, talk yo shit, grab yo gat, call yo clicks, squeeze yo clip and hit the right one, pass that weed I gots to light one.

Paxson turned the volume up. It was early yet. They would not approach the man's apartment until after dark. They had directions; they knew his apartment number and the code for the entry gate and that there was no alarm system.

Go in, pop him. That was the plan.

"Let's go to the museum," Paxson said, embarrassed for being what his father would call artsy-fartsy. "We have time."

Gus's cell phone rang. He looked at it, saw who was calling, turned off the ringer. "Which museum," he said. "Did you say museum? That Randy Robot guy?"

"I'll pay for you," Paxson said. "Just for a joke. Let's see it."

"That was my creditor who called. From New York. The want to charge off some loan. I wish I knew what that meant."

Paxson thought of the drawings he'd done years before. The still life of a plastic pineapple his mother kept on the kitchen table, the nudes he'd sketched—and later burned—of women from Hustler magazines.

He'd tried to make the pineapple life-like, the women pleased with his renditions. He didn't expect to be a major artist, just draw comic books.

He'd created a character called Yolky. He was an egg with a crack; he had problems with puberty and sexuality, his attitude more or less Christian. Instead Paxson worked for twelve years at a Giant Eagle supermarket, cleaning floors, stocking shelves, getting promoted to assistant manager of produce, then produce manager. Salary, benefits, unpaid overtime, scheduling part-timers, temperature control, invoices, brown shoes, red smocks, blue ties, time cards, warm smiles, neat margins, customer appreciation, double coupons, no facial hair except neatly trimmed mustache and an expectation to work holidays; all those crates of iceberg lettuce, all those heads of iceberg lettuce, all those leaves of iceberg lettuce for which he alone was accountable.

Then he met Farquhar at a wedding reception in Warrior's Mark and then he quit his job. He introduced Gus to Farquhar. Gus, too, who'd managed the night shift team, quit. Neither had given notice and both had angered their tidy bosses who a week later would not remember their names.

The target's name was Lee. He owed Farquhar fifty-eight thousand dollars. He had fled the town of Nanty Glo, apparently planning to get out of the state, but stopped in Pittsburgh and stayed in Pittsburgh. After two years, Farquhar had finally located him. With the internet and satellite dishes and improvements in tele-com apparatus, Farquhar maintained, there was really no crack to slip into but the grave. And even then he'd track you down.

The museum trip was a disappointment: they stayed for twenty minutes. "Was that really an art museum?" Gus asked, taking the keys from Paxson and putting his seatbelt on. "I have news for that jabroney. What happened to that egg-headed fellow you drew, the egg with the pimples?"

"Sorry," Paxson said, though he wasn't sure who he was talking to, or what he was sorry for. Gus drove and Paxson asked him where he was going and guessed he knew. "We have time. If you're sure."

"We had time for that dumb museum."

"I said I was sorry."

They came to a light. Gus rubbed his thighs and turned the heater up. "We'll look at the house. Let's see if it's the same address."

"You've put on about seventy-five pounds since the last time Melanie saw you."

"So she might not recognize me? That means I can sneak up on her and smother her with my largesse."

"Largesse?"

They climbed a narrow ridge road. Then down into a knot of cramped dark lean-tos and weathered sheds. Gus began to sing. He had a good voice. I'm going to go diving in the bay, Got to get a lot of oysters, find some pearls today, to make a pretty necklace for Leah. Paxson closed his eyes. His eyes were still closed when the car stopped. "Hurry up," he said but

Gus had already slammed the door.

Sad boor, Paxson thought.

A car clambered by and he stirred and wrenched up. He reached under the seat for the gun a former Giant Eagle stock boy had sold to him. He started shaking and the whole car started to shake. He had never killed anyone before. He had never seen a dead body before.

But Farquhar would pay them six-thousand dollars. With his half he'd be able to go a few months without doing anything, get his mother's residency dues and upkeep vectors, as they were called, paid up. He imagined the man called Lee asleep in a chair and himself angling the twisted slug into the man's head and he began again to shake and then stopped. He lowered the gun under the seat.

He stepped out of the car. It was getting late. He went up to the house and rapped at the door and opened it.

There stood Gus holding a child of perhaps two years old. Melanie stood behind Gus. She looked ten years younger than when Paxson had last seen her; or at least she was clean, her hair combed back now into a lively pony-tail, her skin bright and scrubbed. When she saw Paxson she put her hand over her open mouth. "You're shaking," she said.

He gave her a quick nod and she strode toward him and opened her arms and hugged him. She kissed his cheek. It was the first time a woman had touched him freely, with genuine affection, in years.

"Cold out there," Paxson said, pulling away. Then to Gus, "you ready?" He sized up the dark-haired child. He looked around at the place—the house, for the love of God. There were no caked ashtrays, no Schnapps bottles upended on the parquetry, no starved nameless dogs chained to the radiator, no knotted condoms in the toilet, no losing lottery tickets going to sludge in the kitchen sink. She had done it. She had changed. The child held some strange object and he asked Melanie what it was.

"It's an attelet," she said.

"Exactly," Gus said. "Good for cleaning the ears. I got two of them last time I was on the continent."

"Y'ins might ought to take off," Melanie said, taking the child from Gus. "Brian'll be home any minute. I never really told him about stuff at home and I don't think this is the way to tell him. But it was really great to see you. Oh, you got mud there but it's okay, it's okay."

"What stuff at home?" Gus said.

Paxson held up a small statue of the Virgin Mary and the baby looked at him and made a sour face, as if Paxson had just reached out and rubbed a damp rubber glove on the kid's forehead.

Part 2: Lee Giles

Lookit—it has been my birthday, Lee thought as he sat in the movie theater, for twenty hours and one minute and nobody has said squat. Nobody

said squat at school or last night at the gym, but maybe they were waiting for me to mosey into work tonight, but tonight is my night off—didn't they remember?

He recalled all those years past when he dreaded anyone knowing his birthday or knowing anything about him, but life was better now, he had found help with his gambling problem ("fuck luck" was his mantra) and he had found a beloved; he'd squeezed into graduate school and written strong material about his experiences with the wild hungry masses and received one encouraging rejection letter from a big magazine, but now nobody remembered his birthday. Bunch of jerks, he thought. After all those potlucks I brought hummus to. And Jenny, oh, Jenny, with the long list of publications and boobs as wide as watermelons; and nipples, he could only imagine, as thick and substantial as light switches. Now she wasn't answering her phone after he had just given her a key to his place. He'd given it to her as a sign of trust, saying, just in case I ever lose mine, I mean it's good to know that someone you trust has a set. I mean lookit—it had been her idea, she kept mentioning that neither of them was from Pittsburgh. And now she wouldn't call him on his birthday? And she wouldn't answer her phone?

He made sure the ringer on his cell phone was at five. To heck with the people watching the movie, he thought, it's my birthday and I want to be able to talk to Jenny when she calls. And if she doesn't call I'll use her keys when she's not home and swipe her list of contacts, the names of editors and agents, and put her panties in my bag. Dirty panties, from the dirty laundry. Oh, Lee, you can de devilish, can't you. Like Iago.

He was watching the last Star Wars movie and scribbling notes for an essay he was formulating for a graduate class on Shakespeare's tragedies. Wasn't this futuristic drama, which happened in the past, reminiscent of, or derivative of, Macbeth? Couldn't Luke be Macbeth? Or maybe Darth Vader could? Lookit—first things first he would reread that play. Reread this play, I must, he thought, pretending to be Yoda.

He tore up his notes; nobody called; the movie ended and he chucked his tub of popcorn at the barrel and watched couples and groups of friends poke around and finally say let's go, see ya.

Part 3: Paxson

He rolled down the window and entered the gate code and cold air blew in. The code didn't work. He tried it again. It didn't work again. He rolled up the window. "This is the wrong place," Gus said. "We got the wrong directions." He sounded hopeful and he sounded scared. "That Melanie. What a snoot now though, huh?"

Paxson tried the code again. He rolled up the window and used his cell to call Farquhar.

Behind them someone honked. The car behind them was trying to

get in. He let Farquhar's phone ring. Three, four rings. Maybe he wouldn't answer and they could go back home. They were starting to feel ridiculous and out of place. At home there were no gate codes, no rivers, no foreigners, no coffee shops, and one post office.

A woman in a Steelers coat, gloves, scarf, and hat leaned outside her car window, poking in a code. "You have to hit star first," she said. "Do you even live here?"

Paxson looked up at the woman. The phone rang still. Paxson waited. Seven rings. "I daresay I would shag her," Gus said. "In spite of her fastidiousness concerning the preliminary star. Shit. Bitch. She can take that thing and pound it up her ass. Oh, it's a kind of utensil."

Paxson drove on through; Farquhar picked up his end. "That was quick," Farquhar said. He must have been getting a manicure again; he sounded distracted by the attention paid by a stranger to his nails.

"No, no, boss," Paxson said. "Just wanted to let you know we're on our way."

Paxson thought to mention that Farquhar hadn't told them to hit star first, but was afraid that he would laugh and say everybody knows that, and at any rate Farquhar had already hung up.

They parked. It was dark now, nearing six P.M.

"I can't do it," Gus said. His cheeks were red. He looked into his lap. "I can't do it. I want to go back home. I want to go home and watch Animal Rescue."

"Gus," Paxson said, gripping the steering wheel. "Don't think."

"Call Farquhar. Tell him we're lost."

"He already knows we're here."

"Well then."

"What," Paxson said.

Gus pinched at the upholstery. "You take the money. But I can't do it."

Paxson tried to reason with Gus the way he had tried to reason with himself. The man owes money. If he doesn't want to lose money, he shouldn't gamble. And if he's not punished for not paying, then everybody will stop paying. If everybody bet and didn't pay, there'd be chaos; winners wouldn't get their money. That was how the world worked.

"He has to know how it works," Paxson said. "And we have an obligation. We have our word at stake. Plus Farquhar will kill us if—"

Gus shook his head. "What have I ever learned from any of this bullshit."

"So you'll let me keep all the money," Paxson said. "The whole six-thousand. And you'll drive all the way back tonight so I can sleep?"

Gus nodded and turned the stereo up. We just sitting here trying to win, trying not to sin, high off weed and lots of gin, so much smoke need oxygen, steadily counting those Benjamins.

Paxson took the gun and got out of the car. He zipped his coat to the collar.

Paxson, explaining the job to Gus, had gotten through to himself. In Gus' face he had seen ignorance and stupidity and he wouldn't see his own face like that. The face of the fresh employee, the sneak, the fearful underling, the dumbass, the douche bag, the women leaning over washbasins so men like Gus could subscribe to their websites and come into toilet paper. The man intimidated by a toothless shopper from Tyrone trying to return a bag of apples—that fearful man had been Paxson. But no longer. No way. No more. He would do it. He would change.

He jogged towards the lime-green building where apartment #22 was, recalling the details he's been given: that Lee worked late nights at a fitness club; in the mornings he went to class and worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Pittsburgh; he slept in the late afternoon and evening. There was a cat.

At the bottom of the stairs he started shaking again. He took a deep breath. That air was cold. The gun was inside his coat.

He climbed the dark stairs and wanted to have to look around some more to get to the apartment but found himself right at the door. Number twenty-two; the brass numerals tarnished and on the door the remains of a bumper sticker—domestic violence now.

He took another deep breath, felt the cold close his throat, glanced toward the parking lot. He was here to set an example. It would take all of ten seconds, walk in and pop him. It really wasn't a big deal; people die all the time, and the difference was that this person had been warned.

Another deep breath, another look back, and then he twisted the knob.

The bolt clicked.

He closed his eyes.

He could go back, but he didn't. He wouldn't. No way, no more. He opened the door. He opened his eyes. It was dark. He stood still and waited for his eyes to adjust. He reached into his coat for the pistol.

All the lights came on; every light in the apartment. He was sure he was about to die in an ambush.

People yelled in unison: surprise! Then they stopped yelling and grumbled. Oh, shit, it isn't him. A woman came scrambling from the kitchen and squatted and held out her arms with fire-blackened wooden spoons in her fists and really let the word go. Surprise, she screamed, for ten seconds, well after the others had realized the mistake, then she looked at Paxson and looked at the other people at the party and someone started laughing and ceased. There was the smell of cake baking, of cat litter, reminding Paxson of the supermarket, baking needs and pet supplies in the same miserable aisle: aisle six.

A bosomy girl put music on.

A surprise party. He steadied and took his hand out from the inside of his coat. "Lee's place, isn't it?" he asked no one in particular. He wasn't sure if he wanted to be told that he was in the right place or the wrong place.

A narrow man approached. His T-shirt said Longfellow and below the word was an arrow pointing down; he said his name was Frank and he said he was poetry; he asked Paxson how he knew Lee, if they worked together at the fitness place, if he were poetry or fiction. Paxson said nothing and looked the man square on. The man went back to the group he'd been talking to and whispered to them and they turned their narrow, bored eyes over at Paxson. He felt his face going red. He embarrassed easily. He tried not to stare but counted three black people and three Asian people. He'd never been in a room in a place like this before. None of them seemed to notice or mind that there were people here who weren't white. It was exciting to feel welcomed here. They had no idea who he was or what he was thinking or had thought or what purpose had brought him here.

Part 4: Gus.

Gus waited in the car, fiddling with the cigarette lighter and thinking about what Melanie had said, that she dove headfirst into contentment. She was growing, she was cultivating her essence, she was confronting her demons, and she was doing yoga. And Gus was in love with her again, he was in love with her as he always had been; this was the woman he always loved. Her voice made him start, her toes, spread with olive oil, had been between his lips, though he couldn't deny or forgive himself for the time he had lain a burning sparkler on her thigh, leaving a slim pink scar—that was the incident that had driven her away from him and out of Windfall.

And she had flourished, finally, in the presence of another man, in a distant city. Far from Gus. But Melanie had told him he had a right to be happy, but could only become happy by claiming his demons. Wow, Gus asked himself now, who knew it was so easy? It took him five minutes to realize that it was in fact not that easy. Not for him.

Not when he knew what he knew, and saw what he had seen, and did what he had done since he began working for Farquhar. Those toes, those blades they'd had to pause to sharpen, the oils dripping from an electric chainsaw and then they plugged it back in and resumed their task. He yanked the cigarette lighter out and looked into the orange coil and thought of pressing it against his tongue.

Part 5: Lee Giles

He hiked up the steps to his apartment, number twenty-two. At the door he hesitated and looked out at the parking lot and at the mountainscape beyond, the moon reflected in the ice-tinged fir branches. The sounds of distant traffic echoed there as well. Home at last, you are, young Giles-walker, he thought, and reached for his key. He checked both pants

pockets, then his coat. Shit, Lee, you dropped your keys at the movies. He knew he had locked himself out but instinctively reached for the knob just in case.

The door open it was—yes!—and he went inside.

They were all waiting. They hadn't bothered to yell surprise. When he came in someone said, finally, let's get this over with. He smiled at them as they approached and said hi. He smelled a cake and saw it was half-eaten.

And Jenny was there too. With a denim skirt and blue eye-shadow. Her blonde hair hanging down in curls. She smiled. "Happy birthday," she said.

He was so pleased he tried to hug her but just as he went for her, she said she had a small gift for him and crossed her left arm in front of her to reach into her purse, and he ended up lunging and patting her shoulder twice. "I didn't wrap it," she said.

He had a beer and he told everyone about his idea for his paper and everybody laughed. He laughed too.

He listened as they discussed Shakespeare and he felt weird: isn't this my birthday? Isn't this my house? Aren't those my oven mitts on the kitchen floor looking like—looking like?

Romeo and Juliet, they agreed, was a comedy, not a tragedy.

Looking like what they were—oven mitts on linoleum. And cat food on the floor.

He understood none of their talk; it was as if he were a pre-literate doofus with strained peas on his bib and they were spelling out the words they didn't want him to hear. O-N-T-O-L-O-G-I-C-A-L. He nodded, mumbled, yawned, drank another beer.

When someone—one of Jenny's friend's boyfriends—pinched his elbow and told him about the strange man who had been there it didn't occur to him that he had escaped a violent death, that Farquhar had indeed tracked him down.

The party ended. Lee was tired since these were his usual sleeping hours; in fact, when the last of the guests had rinsed the cups and slammed the door, Lee was already dozing in front of the T.V. with his cat on his lap, thinking that he really didn't belong here and wondering what a fluke it had been that he's been accepted for graduate study in the first place. He never would have bet on his own success, not even on a lucky streak. Fuck luck, he thought. Though he still thought Jenny was a maybe—she had rolled down her car window when he brought her a plate of leftover cake. And now she was obligated to return the plate. With that thought he rubbed the round pin she had given him as a gift—I write, what do you do? it said, and he programmed himself to dream of her lying on her back, on a large kitchen table, her white round nude body covered in sliced Genoa salami and sashimi, her belly button brimming with soy sauce, a cut watermelon

between her thighs, her hand offering a second pair of chopsticks, and she asking him to join her: they would dine ensemble.

Part 6: Paxson

Paxson avoided the gazes of the people at the party by slipping into the bathroom of Lee Giles' apartment. On the toilet tank was a slick book; he picked it up and peeled it open and read a line that had been highlighted in orange, and underlined, with the words of course! and three bold checkmarks in the margin. The line read: The horizon of absolute knowledge is the effacement of writing in the logos, the retrieval of the trace in parousia, the reappropriation of difference.

Paxson thought of Yolky. In the last frame of one of his crude comics, Paxson had had Yolky say "I'm a little chicken inside; that's why I won't come out of my shell." It had seemed funny at the time; but was this line a joke? Was the note in the margin a joke? He closed the book and sat on the bathtub edge and called Farquhar.

"Now that all those people have seen your face, you're completely fucked," Farquhar said. "Even if I get someone else to do it, the cops'll ask around and people will remember that you came to that party. Get out of there. Everyone there'll be describing you to a sketch artist someday. Spray some more water on them."

"Did you say 'spray some more water on them'?"

"Not you, numbnuts," Farquhar said. He hung up.

Sketch artist, Paxson thought, drawing the faces of people seen given a description of their attributes and their bad behavior. Maybe he could have done that. Maybe he still could.

He flushed the toilet twice and left the bathroom and the apartment. The Longfellow T-shirt guy dropped his cake—it seemed they had begun the party without the special guest—and tried to stop him but he waved them off, saying he would be back, he was just stepping out to get some ice.

He walked back to the car, explained the situation to Gus, and sat staring at the windshield.

"Did Farquhar say anything about the money?" Gus said.

"What do you think, he's going pay us for trying?"

"He could at least reimburse us for gas," Gus said.

Paxson pulled out of the parking space.

"Wait," Gus said. "They saw you. But they haven't seen me. Maybe I could try."

"But he's not in there," Paxson said. "Lee, the guy we're supposed to—"

"Kill," Gus said.

"Yeah," Paxson said. "He's not in there."

They drove. The dark hills and trees surrounded them and they felt closed in, separated from the world and from all exteriors. All they knew

were things they'd been told by people who claimed to know better than they. He showed Gus the book he had stolen from the bathroom.

"This'll fix the missing leg on my sofa," Gus said. "That other leg's due back to the library." He opened it. He flipped through the pages. "Why'd we go to that dumb museum," he asked Paxson.

"I don't know," he said. "Why'd we go to see Melanie?"

"I tried to get her to kiss me," he said. He closed the book and threw it out the window; it fluttered and disappeared in the banks of dark snow. "But she wouldn't even shake my hand."

Farquhar, Paxson knew, would be angry with them. Perhaps they'd been careless. But then Farquhar hadn't had all the information. Asking them to kill a man on his birthday in the middle of a surprise party thrown for him.

"You think you would have gone and done it?" Gus asked Paxson.

"Kill the guy?"

Paxson leaned forward and looked at a green sign indicating a lane change at the next underpass. "Yeah," he said. "I would have killed him. For a few minutes there I would have killed anyone. I would've killed the guy who wrote that book. Or maybe I'm just talking shit."

"You would have killed me?"

Paxson looked at Gus. "Yes," he said.

"Where's the love, Randy? Christ."

Paxson thought about the party and about Lee Giles. He would think about it for a long time. Eventually, he knew, he would try to reunite with his ex-wife, at least for the sake of companionship; he would spend a few mornings a week listening to his mother's incoherent musings about light bulbs and wiping spittle from her chin—he would. But there would always be these things he could never tell anyone: he'd been prepared to kill someone for money. He'd once clipped off the toes of a teenaged boy. He had whipped people's bare legs, at Farquhar's behest, with cable hosing. He'd slept with drunken strung-out whores and stolen or destroyed things for the pleasure of depriving other people of their property, their sense of security. He'd turned for good away from his good self, the one who checked fruit for spots at the supermarket.

"I guess things would've been different for us if we had killed him," Gus said.

"Well, things are going to be different for us," Paxson said. "I mean now that we haven't killed him."

"Are we fighting now?"

"Fighting?"

"Because all I am is hungry."

Part 7. Melanie Grassmier

"This is Mommy when she was in high school," she said to the child.

She flipped to the next page in her high-school yearbook, which she'd kept hidden with other keepsakes in a box stored in the basement. "And there's Randy Paxson, who was the second man who was here today. And that first man? The big one? Wait a second, let me go back. Oh, there. That's him there, Gustavo Bernard. He wasn't so big then, was he? Not so big at all. Here's where he signed his name for me."

They were on the wood floor in the living room. She poured more Ginger Ale into the child's cup and pulled a photo album from the box. The album was covered in red felt and had the phrase *preserve your memories* embossed in keen gold lettering; it had been a graduation gift from her parents, and they had bought it for her despite her having fallen six credits short of receiving her diploma.

She peeled open the album. "Let's see. There's your Grandma and Grandpa. And your uncle Leo. Look at him in that funny hat! Isn't that funny looking? You'll get to see him and Grandma and Grandpa real soon, I promise."

Part 8. Farquhar

"Xin chào," Farquhar said again to the woman tending to his fingernails. He was naked from the waist down. The woman was on her knees before him with her kit. They were in a hotel room in Chicago.

"What is that?" she asked.

He said it again.

She turned his thumb in her hand and blew on it. "Are you Chinese or something?"

"I asked for a Vietnamese woman," he said. "I paid for a Vietnamese woman between the ages of fifty and sixty."

"I'm fifty," she said, looking up at him. "But I'm not Vietnamese. I'm Laotian."

"Where's that?" he asked.

"In Laos."

"Laos?"

"It's better than it sounds."

"So I took Vietnamese lessons for nothing?"

She pulled at his fingers, one by one, as if drawing back the plungers on needles. "What's the obsession with Vietnam?"

He thought about it. "I'll give you fifty dollars to take off your bra. Just your bra. Leave your top on, but spray it with that water bottle. Not too much."

She smiled. "Fifty? I've got kids to feed. I have grandchildren."

"That's more like it," Farquhar said.

His phone rang. "Damn idiots," he said. "Can you pick that up and hold it to my ear?"

"Five hundred dollars," she said.

"Are you really fifty years old?"

She smiled; three of her upper teeth were capped in silver. She reached the phone up to his ear with her right hand and with her left hand flipped her bra straps down.

Part 9: Jenny

Jenny dropped her purse on the floor of her bedroom. Her roommate leaned in the doorway eating a raw hotdog. "So he shows up about two hours after we'd expected him. Apparently he'd gone to the movies."

"You want one of these?" her roommate asked.

She sat on the bed. "And I think he wanted to kiss me when he got there, but everyone was there so I backed off."

"This one has no cheese. Or wait. Oh."

"I pretended that I had a gift for him. It was some dumb pin my mom sent me." She flipped through her mail, pre-approved credit, student loan bills. "And there was this weird guy who showed up. No one knew who he was. He had this look on his face like he knew he terrified people but didn't know why. Like a dog that looks mean but isn't. My neighbors had a beagle that when you got close to it it would bark and growl and snap at you. One time my little brother—he was six years old—walked right over to the dog. I was watching from an upstairs window and yelling for my parents to run out and stop him, but they weren't home. I ran downstairs and out into the yard and over to the neighbor's. My brother was kneeling by the dog, rubbing its belly. The dog looked nervous and ready to pounce. He wasn't wagging his tail. He had this strained look in his eye, like he was unsure. I guess no one had ever pet him before. When I pulled my brother away, the dog reared up and pulled against the chain and started growling and barking again."

"So what happened then?" her roommate said.

"He died a while later."

"Your brother or the dog?"

Jenny looked at her.

"Shit, Jen. That was supposed to be a joke. Sorry. Jesus. You even told me that before about your brother. Leukemia?"

Jenny got her cell phone from her purse and plugged in the charger beside her bed. "There is something weird though about Lee. Can you have your friend run his number?"

She lay on her bed in the dark with her clothes on. Another deception, she thought, having her roommate run Lee's social security and license plate numbers through the Secret Service; her roommate's ex-boyfriend worked as an agent. That deception in addition to the lies she'd been telling about publications, agents interested in her work, her contacts at Random House. Random house seemed about right to her.

She was about to get up and tell her roommate not to bother; but she

was tired. She remembered, too, the cake Lee had brought out to her before she'd driven off. She'd rolled the window down, thinking he would lean in and try to kiss her. Instead he handed her the plate and said: "You didn't seem to have gotten enough of this, so take some home." Was that a fat joke? she wondered. Not from Lee. She didn't believe he would make a fat joke. He was shy. He was quiet. He was silly but not stupid, funny but not cruel. She liked him. If nothing else she had the excuse to call him back so she could return his plate. But first she would have to eat the cake. Then she would begin her diet and Lee would see her as she had once been, chubby, as always, but more energetic, with better clothes, too.

"That license plate doesn't connect with anything unusual," her roommate said the next morning. "But apparently that social security number belongs to a dead woman from Erie. Maybe you got it wrong?"

Part 10. Paxson and Lee Giles

Before they got out of the city Paxson's cell phone rang. It was Farquhar. "As long as y'ins're in Pittsburgh," he said, "stop by Duquesne. I want you to pick up a package for me." Paxson hung up. If only he, like the man from Nanty Glo, could escape. But Paxson knew of no place to hide. This trip to Pittsburgh and back was going to take long and cost him the rest of his life.

The drug deal, very simple, took ten seconds—a fat white kid in a wheelchair handing them a Penguins duffel bag. The kid barely looked at them and they drove off.

"The plan," Gus said, "is to get some meatball subs and fast or something."

But Paxson went to go back to Lee Giles' apartment, #22; he wouldn't become like Lee Giles, running from Farquhar forever.

He opened the unlocked door, found Giles asleep in a chair with a book in his lap.

He looked at him. He pulled out the gun. The book was called *Kafka on the Shore* and Giles awoke and looked down at the book's cover and opened it as if to resume his reading. Then he looked up at Paxson.

"Farquhar," Giles said, and closed the book.

Paxson shot him in the shoulder. Lee's legs kicked and the next round went clean into his forehead and one leg kicked again.

Paxson ran to the car. Gus had taken off his coat and stuffed the cuff of one sleeve into his mouth. He was moaning. The cigarette lighter lay on the driver's seat. It sounded to Paxson as if Gus was trying to say, tell me you didn't do it. Paxson couldn't believe it. Gus, his best friend since Sunday school, his tongue blistered in his own mouth and by his own hand, worrying about Paxson's soul.

"I didn't do it," he told Gus, "there are some things I won't do. Like you said, Fuck Farquhar, you know? And fuck Melanie."

Gus pulled the cuff from his mouth. "Don't say that," he tried to say.

Paxson gunned the engine and planned to head to the hospital. The streets were dark.

The gas tank was near empty. The snow fell in dizzying sheets. He assured Gus—now seemingly unconscious, maybe in shock from the burns on his tongue—that he would get him to the hospital. "We're almost there," he said.

But he didn't know where a hospital was.

Part 11. Melanie Grassmier

She turned the page. "Oh! I can't get over the way I had my hair cut then. And that's my sister, Deb, holding the bucket. She really wants to see you too. And her husband Tom. He does roofs, or he did. Oh there I am in my Kentucky Fried Chicken uniform. God. I worked at Arby's too for like three years before I met your dad. And those are your cousins, Becky and Austin, who really want to see you too. All of them really can't wait to see you, especially Grandma."

But the child had long before gone to the kitchen to play with the plastic lids on the shelf of the microwave stand.

"They really do want to see you," she called out. "It doesn't matter what you did before with—"

She closed her eyes and counted to five. She blew her nose into a napkin and wiped her eyes. It doesn't matter what you did with all those boys and their cameras and websites and high-fives when they were all filming you in the bathroom and they were eating Rice Krispie treats you made and they were laughing and when you told Gus at the Fourth of July party he put that sparkler on your leg and said he wished he'd never been born.

She stuffed the yearbook and photo albums and letters into the box. She went to the backyard without her coat

It was snowing. The snow stuck in her hair, her eyelashes.

She cast the box into the burning barrel. She lit a match but it seized out in the wind.

Her husband would return soon and she hurried.

"Everyone really does want to see you," she said, and cupped a newly lit match in her small hand. 

Before Breakfast

She wonders about her own ghost: its dimensions,
its dislikes, if it is waiting in the back of the closet

with the magenta cardigan that never, even when hung unbuttoned,
falls from her hanger. She thinks her ghost is as thin as a stair,

clumsy enough to seep through the carpeting into the basement,
dripping like any old leak onto the ping-pong table.

From the basement she can look
up at a backyard window, see the seam of earth

that crosses the screen, see the bottom of her fishpond.
Today, there is only a frog. She wonders if it wonders

if its ghost is like its tongue, testing the air when something
wings by. But it's not like that for her. She does not live in water.

She barely leaves the couch. Her ghost
never opens like a rose, never eats a horsefly.

Her ghost is not so different from her.
It opens the refrigerator and decides on eggs.

De-incarnation of a Back Page Story

On October 30th a woman in her mid twenties
was found dead on the east shore of Lake
Minnetonka. Authorities noted the probable cause
as a single knife wound to the abdomen.

—Minneapolis Star Tribune

I make my way across the faceless lake
made seemingly old by waves and autumn wind,
refracted maples grayed and silently ached

by un-remembered seasons. Voices spin
around the metal hull. Whisper. Sigh
like fires in a sudden rainstorm. Again

I feel the way it must have been inside
that body. A careful push against the bone,
a stuttered pulse of torso cresting high

as legs flew upward, kicked the sky alone,
no person near enough to hear. Asleep.
The world had seemed a newborn child just then

waking from itself—tasting air with steep
gulps of rusty blood, smooth tongue like metal
against the mortar. Everything must weep.

All echoes travel toward the deepening middle
where memory leaves you slipping, incidental.

Et In Arcadia, Ego

I've taken to sculpting dioramas
in our spartan apartment,
late at night when I can't sleep.

I started with happier classical scenes—
Demeter frolicking with Persephone, Cupid
in bed with Psyche, Perseus saving Andromeda—
all in pom-poms, pipecleaners, and papier-mâché.

Then the work got darker—the demise of Socrates,
Cronos consuming his children, Orpheus looking
back at Eurydice. Every day, when you wake,
I show you what I've done. This one's called,

Even in Arcadia, I, Death, hold sway.
It contains only two figures, but I've gotten really good.
They have our faces. They're deeply in love,
but they're going to die anyway.

"For Chrissakes," you say, "quit being morbid."
I turn. In their construction paper cemetery
beneath a soapflake snowfall, their dance
is slow and beautiful. Like a ballet.

Family History

My people hail from Macchu Picchu and Vladivostok
And my great-grandmother was half coyote.
She was famous for howling at the moon
In the backyard, well into her eighties.

Uncle Zheng, baffled and battered by political swings,
Was in the end fired from his job at the spermbank.
It's so hard to take up a new career, one-legged,
Given to visions, and three feet and half feet at the shoulder.

Every fall when the geese formed their great Vs
Mother sneaked down to the docks and ran off to sea.
A congenital condition, salmon or sea turtle genes,
while Father found consolation with yoga and tai chi.

She returned in May in her worn yellow slickers,
Reeking of fish, showing off her tattoos and scars.
Please don't ask about my sister with her Hopi husband,
and about my aunt's coven, my lips are sealed.

It's true I haven't been all I should have been
and my relatives are embarrassed when they see me.
But you, with your big toe stuck in the bathtub faucet,
shouldn't laugh at me at all, you shouldn't laugh at all.

Ghosts

When it comes to the potential sale of a haunted property, Arkansas State Law requires the owner to disclose to a prospective buyer the nature of the haunting. This is one of those archaic laws, like those against spitting in front of a lady or riding a horse drunk on a Sunday, which the state has not taken time to clean off its books. The existence of such a law was first pointed out to me by Mr. Vaughn, also known simply as Old Man Vaughn, of Vaughn Title Insurance of Pope County. My future ex-husband and I had recently purchased one of the finer old homes of Russellville, Arkansas. We lived in another house my husband had already shared with his first ex-wife, and were well into an extensive remodeling when Old Man Vaughn called to tell me this. Rumors had reached him from ductwork, plumbing, and general construction people around town. He was giggling. He also wanted a tour of the home he remembered from its first unveiling, when Mr. and Mrs. Wilson opened it up for a community viewing.

"They had one day set aside just for the coloreds to see it," Mr. Vaughn said. He seemed to think this was incredibly gracious.

The five thousand square foot home was designed by a former student of Frank Lloyd Wright. The original design had been featured in an architectural magazine, and copied meticulously and enhanced by the Wilsons. It contained creamy limestone and chocolate colored marble floors with delicate orange feathering, a custom mahogany kitchen from Germany, floor to ceiling glass that slid on heavy rollers to open to the outside, walnut tongue and groove walls, an indoor swimming pool – it was lovely and rare and no one in Pope County would buy it. Russellville was a land that subscribed to model #809, new, French country home knock-offs in solidly Baptist, caucasian neighborhoods. There was something disturbingly atypical for Pope County about this home. Since the death of Mrs. Wilson it had remained empty on the market. Even just a few hours away in Fayetteville, the house would have been snatched up at over a million. We purchased it for \$157,000 with a loan my parents insisted on making to us, half of the original construction cost, and began our renovations, stunned at our good luck. We walked through the vacant house several times a day, kissing and hugging one another. Then the ghost, or ghosts, made their displeasure apparent.

"I'm betting its Mrs. Wilson, if I know her," Mr. Vaughn said. He walked with his son beside him, a man in his late fifties, who occasionally steadied his father with a slight touch to his elbow.

Mrs. Wilson had been dead for six years. The house was placed on the

market by her surviving children (an airline pilot living in Memphis and a mentally disabled daughter living one block away) one year after her death. When I had viewed the house, a mattress still lay in the master bedroom atop blue shag carpeting, the surrounding walls covered in a delicate, baby-blue filigree pattern copied from an Italian Villa. The daughter occasionally returned to sleep there in the same room where her mother had died. Several windows were broken, which the broker told me the son had done immediately following his mother's death. He also killed all her pets. Despite further questioning, I learned little about the Wilsons as a family. Whatever animosity could make a fifty year old man break perfectly good windows, was concentrated into a hard, private place.

"But would she be doing all the hammering and sawing in the basement?" I asked.

"Nope. That was Mr. Wilson's workshop," he said. "It's where he had a heart attack not two years after they built this place."

Ah hell, I thought.

"What do you think they want?" I said.

Mr. Vaughn just shrugged.

"Maybe your attention."

I WAS UNSETTLED BY THE PROSPECT OF GHOSTS, but not surprised. Since I was seven I had experienced unexpected visits and insistent noises in the home where I grew up. Doors would unlock themselves and open before my eyes. Footsteps placed with deliberate impact on an empty staircase demanded attention late at night. Stereos and lights switched on without any contact, and often at three o'clock in the morning. Suspended flashes of light balanced directly at eye level in the center of the room, like an invisible person was taking a Polaroid. Streaks of light smeared through the core of the house.

People unfamiliar with ghosts, or those who flatly deny their existence, might attempt to explain away these phenomena. I do not argue with disbelievers. That is as pointless as debating the existence of love. You've either experienced it or you haven't. I've heard multiple theories. Perhaps we had seen reflected light from a passing car, there was an electrical surge, or the house was merely settling, as if it were a dog making a customary three turns before laying down to sleep at night. These are all fine theories, but when someone a little on the dead side makes an appearance, they do so in a way that leaves no room for speculation. You are not alone. That was not the TV in another room. It is happening right next to you, and no amount of foundation problems would have made that noise. Disbelievers would have a harder time explaining the disembodied voices, clear utterances from thin air.

The ghost in my parents' home made more frequent and vocal visits

as I grew older. When I was twelve he first announced himself by banging into a dresser, as if he had accidentally stumbled against it. My antique dresser shuddered slightly with the impact. Bottles of Youth Dew and White Shoulders clinked against a pink china box of my grandmother's displaying a Victorian couple under a spreading willow. Sometimes he did it hard enough he knocked a bottle over. I was usually reading. I would look up at the noise and realize who it was just as the hair on the back of my neck did, a hazy mirror reflected only myself in an empty, iron bed in the lamplight. He liked to sit at the foot of the bed. The presence of him causing the steel springs to creak as a strange weight came over me. He sighed a lot. His sighs heavy and sad as his invisible density. Deep and breathy. However, beyond whatever terror I felt at his presence, there was one thing I always thought. *Asshole.*

"I love you," he said to me once. I was sixteen. His voice was clear and calm, almost kind. A man's voice, loud, directly by my right ear. I leapt from bed, ripped my door open, and stood in the hall debating who I should wake first. Come quick, a ghost is in love with me! This didn't seem like a feasible option, not because no one else would believe me, but because I was embarrassed by what the ghost had said, something no living male had ever told me. The imposition made me angry, and what's more, I didn't believe in the sincerity of his declaration.

To my sister Sarah he said, "I can see you but you can't see me," as he hovered in a dark lump at the foot of her bed, outlined against the moonlit window. She awoke from a bad nightmare and groped for her glasses. The thing was still there. It repeated itself slowly to make certain she heard him, the mass of it blocking the glow from the moonlight. Twenty-one years later she still has difficulty speaking about it. To my mother he would do the sighing routine as he sat on the bed, or whisper the same word into her ear over and over again. "Prepare," he liked to tell her. My father is completely deaf in one ear and he wears a hearing aid in the other. He has never heard the ghost, but he does see the lights.

"What do you think it wants?" I asked my mother.

Although she didn't have a theory, she liked to associate the ghost with her religious beliefs, thinking maybe it was some kind of angel come to tell her to ready herself for a great undertaking or impending tragedy.

"That's no angel," I said. "Look what it did to Sarah."

I didn't tell her the ghost made me feel dirty, like an old man was sitting in the corner every night playing with himself while I got undressed. Whatever it wanted from me didn't feel clean. Plus, its approach with each of us was entirely different, like it had been watching us trying to figure out which routine would have the greatest impact upon whom. Its motivations seemed to be to toy with us individually and throw in an occasional light display for a group show. The ghost really needed, wanted,

lots of attention, but what for and why? I imagined him as an aged, living man, alone and dissatisfied, lingering after his death because he mistakenly believed he still had a shot at some earthly happiness, finding nothing but frustration and misunderstanding.

I THINK I UNDERSTOOD WHAT MR. AND MRS. WILSON WANTED. They wanted us to go away and not come back, leave their home intact as they originally and lovingly designed it. Perhaps they truly wanted to be together there as they had only shortly been in life. Even the wallpaper in the master bedroom had been custom-made from a fresco in Italy they saw on their honeymoon. I hated most wallpaper, especially baby blue, and immediately set about stripping it. The second night I was in the home working alone, the hammering began in the basement. I had hired a general contractor to redo some of the bathrooms, and mistakenly believed he may have slipped in while I wasn't looking. It was eleven o'clock at night, an unusual time for anyone to start working on a bathroom.

"Hello!" I called down the stairs.

The hammering stopped at once.

I walked slowly down the stairs, my Tiger Claw wallpaper perforator poised like a weapon. The basement, a 1500 square-foot room designed to be a fallout shelter by the forward-thinking Wilsons, a foot and half of poured concrete over my head, steel beams every two feet, was totally empty. I quit for the night.

"There's something going on over there," I told my husband.

He laughed and said I was too sensitive, maybe even a little crazy. His work kept him more and more on the road and I was jobless, hence my designated remodeling position. In Russellville the main employer was either the chicken processing or nuclear power plant. When we went out with any of his friends or family, he told them about my tendency to hear things. I would pick at the paint on my fingernails as I listened to them laugh at my silliness.

My labor continued, during the day, late at night, as furiously as my desire to move into the home I regarded more and more as a palace. We were living in a small, ordinary house with stenciled, pineapple remnants his first ex-wife had begun on the kitchen walls, a tiny, dark, narrow hallway connecting all the bedrooms. My elbows were constantly bruised carrying laundry baskets down that hall. Dense taupe carpet that absorbed the humidity lay on all the floors, except for torn linoleum in the kitchen. After our marriage, my husband had renegged on his agreement to allow me to remodel (it was his home), and fought bitterly with me over the discard of even an inoperable electric can opener. "Do you know how much these things cost?" he'd yelled when he saw it in the trash. "Eight dollars at Walmart!" I'd yelled back. "Try and get it rebuilt for that!" He was making

more than six figures a year at the time. The low, acoustic ceilings caught all dust and cobwebs, and tiny knick-knacks the first wife hadn't wanted to take with her, such as a heart-shaped wreath made of straw over the door, still littered the house despite my protests. A ripped couch his first ex-wife had wanted to get rid of sat in the livingroom, the tears so large my feet would frequently get caught in them if I tucked them under me. In the Wilson's house, the soft glow of the wood when the sunlight hit it, the smooth comfort of the limestone beneath my bare feet, the emptiness of it, were delightful to me. The hallways were eight feet wide, more a thoroughfare than a hall. It was my first real home with my new husband, and I imagined all manner of happiness possible there. Later there would be gardens filled with color outside the glass walls. There were so many perfect spots for a Christmas tree, I would never limit myself to one. The imaginary kids could play in the expansive back yard. I wanted to turn the basement into my personal art studio.

The hammering started up again within days. Each time I yelled down the stairs, each time it stopped, although I did not go down to investigate the emptiness I knew I would find. I'll just focus on the living room, I thought. One evening, very late at night, on a new, lone couch I purchased from my own savings and had delivered, I lay down to rest my eyes. My arms were aching from stripping wallpaper, and I could feel the warm stillness of the house resting around me until the footsteps began. Ah hell, I thought, suddenly chilled, refusing to open my eyes. Maybe he would quit if I ignored him. There was a pause, and then it seemed almost as if he had backtracked to take the same purposeful steps in what sounded like men's, leather-soled dress shoes on the limestone floors. I lay very still, trying to keep my breath steadier than my heartbeat. He took the steps again and coughed loudly, clearing his throat like someone making a request for directions.

"I hear you old man," I said, irritated he had come upstairs.

After that, the Wilsons escalated their approach, perhaps due to my rudeness.

I NEVER SAW A SPECTRAL VISION OF EITHER ONE OF THE WILSON'S, but once, when I was seven years old, I had seen the ghost in my parent's house. It had been late a night when I awoke from a deep sleep, instantly and unreasonably terrified. I put on my glasses. In the hallway a man's face peered through the open door, his expression unhappy, even a little angry, disapproving and bullish. As I recall, he looked something like a severely displeased Perry Mason. His face was gray and semi-transparent. I lay there unblinking, unable to move, until it gradually faded away. I had never seen him before, nor have I seen him since.

By the time I was in my teens, the ghost found newer ways to torment

me. Car keys frequently turned up in the freezer. Envelopes of money would disappear completely until I returned from a frustrated trip to the bank to find them propped in the center of the coffee table. I began to regard the ghost as a mannish-boy, prone to turdish behavior, and got into the habit of speaking to him directly.

"What the hell did you do with my keys?" I'd demand, stomping through the house. "Goddamn you son-of-a-bitch!" But after my outbursts I would leap into bed only when I was completely exhausted, hoping to sleep through any retaliatory shenanigans.

Later, in my own apartment in my early twenties, I was dismayed to find the ghost still plunking his spectral butt down on my bed. He rarely spoke and then it was only to say my name. His tone was vaguely reproachful, as if I had walked past an old friend without recognizing them at the grocery store. He still frequented my mother, sighing around her room, and insistently messing with my sister's head at her new apartment in Fayetteville. One night, as she and her boyfriend were leaving her home, he opened the door ahead of her and quickly slammed and locked it. When she asked her pale and shaking beau what his problem was, he explained that a column of light was hovering on the doorstep, like it was just about to knock. The sightings and experiences were never limited to the four of us. Anyone who came to stay at the house or spent time with us was fair game. Overnight guests complained about the lights and noises and I learned the one response I shouldn't give if we didn't want them fleeing to a hotel; "Oh, that's just the ghost." "I can't imagine what that is," was the correct response, usually delivered in a soothing, completely imperturbable voice.

MORE AND MORE WORKMEN CAME TO THE HOUSE, and as they did, the Wilsons became louder and louder. I would arrive midday to find shaken plumbers, men in their late fifties, refusing to go into the basement alone. Duct cleaners, there for just one day, demanded to know what was going on in the upstairs bedroom. "Goddamn, uh, excuse me ma'am, but I mean, I really need to know." I heard it, too. It sounded like someone was repeatedly dragging a heavy chest across the floor, then banging a paint can as hard as they could against the wall. My husband, who initially scoffed at all the reports, had his first experience when we were trying to fool around in one of the empty rooms. A cacophony of noises erupted.

"What the hell is that?" he said, yanking his pants up and immediately searching the empty house, room by room. It was the only time anything had ever stalled his motor.

"I told you," I said.

The Wilsons took to slamming doors behind people too, which was especially noticeable given that the doors in the house were of the pocket variety. It would take a strange wind to do that.

"What am I supposed to do?" Curtis, the marble man, demanded of me. "If Mr. Wilson come up behind me and say, 'Boo Curtis', then what am I supposed to do?" He had already experienced numerous noises and door incidents, and was reluctant to continue driving from Little Rock to install new flooring.

I did not have a reasonable response to this question, but I needed Curtis. So, I offered to hang around the house more whenever any of the men were working, in effect, babysitting them and shaming them into finishing the job.

"Too scared to go in the basement Curtis?" I'd say, stomping down the stairs and turning all the lights on.

Another person began to frequent the property, an off-kilter looking woman with thick glasses and eyes that continually darted about. Her hair was shaggy and uncombed, and she appeared to have dressed randomly, clothes and colors lacking any symmetry on her body. The workmen said they had seen her a few times lingering in the yard. She never looked me once in the eyes when she explained she was Margie, the Wilsons' daughter, and it didn't take me long to see that questioning her about her family or the house was useless. I would find her wandering in the backyard, claiming she was picking pecans. I told her she was welcome to them and invited her inside.

"I don't like it," she said, taking one quick look at the absence of any carpet, orange and lime green wallpaper stripped from the kitchen walls, and the newly marbled baths. "I don't like it," she repeated with each new room she peered into.

"OK," I said, understanding completely.

The date was fast approaching when we would be moving in though, and the thought of what the Wilsons could do, all that they must not like, worried me more and more. They could come to us as we slept in our bed. I did not want to wake up and see Mr. and Mrs. Wilson's disapproving faces glaring down at me. I phoned Mr. Vaughn.

"Tell me more about what they were like," I said. "What did they do?"

"Mrs. Wilson was something ornery. Mr. Wilson got up early and swam each morning before walking to work at the pharmacy," he said. "They made most of their money selling mother's little helper. It was back when you didn't necessarily need a prescription for things."

"Oh," I said. This wasn't helping me nail down a way to please the Wilsons. All I was learning was that Mrs. Wilson was a bit of a bitch, and her husband a fierce exerciser who nevertheless was taken out by a heart attack in his fifties. Mrs. Wilson had probably spent those 27 years of widowhood just a bit pissed off before finally succumbing to pneumonia in the bedroom my husband and I would soon call ours. I felt like I needed my

own supply of Valium just to move in there. So, I called a friend who was well versed in all things out of the ordinary. She had a doctorate in Cultural Anthropology and never blinked at any weird tales I brought to her.

"Make them dinner," she said.

"What?"

"Make them something for dinner you think they would like and talk to them about how you feel," she said.

I made them New York Strips, medium, with baked potatoes and a green salad with ranch dressing. I had tried to imagine what they would have considered fine dining in their day, but settled on meat and potatoes. They each received a glass of cabernet (I figured druggists wouldn't be teetotalers) and a candle placed in between the plates on the countertop gave them some romantic ambience. Then, I walked all through the house, explaining to them how much I truly loved it, how much I connected with it, and that this was thanks to them taking all that time and effort many years earlier to construct such a unique home. I told them the changes I was making were not about changing the house, but merely adapting it more to the time period and our needs. The dinner remained out overnight, and in the morning I threw it away. When I told my husband about the dinner I had made, he complained about the wasted steaks. "You just threw it away?" he said. "If you eat it, then it isn't for them," I said. Three days later we moved in. There was nothing, not another noise, and within a few weeks of living in the house I began to relax completely, feeling as if we were finally the only occupiers. I was also pleased that, on some level, maybe the Wilsons had accepted us, and this seemed like some sort of blessing.

THE GHOST I'D GROWN UP WITH LEFT ME sometime in my late twenties, although he visits my mother occasionally with his sighs, and my parents' home still has infrequent light shows. I think I drove him off. His bedside visits of more than twenty years had made me indifferent and angry, rejecting him both as something I should fear or someone I should welcome. The last time there was a telltale bump and then clinking of objects on my bedroom dresser, I looked up from my book and said, "Fuck you. Don't even think of sitting down." He didn't. And he never came back. Exorcism by insult. I wonder whose bed he sits on now, or if he has found some entirely new pursuit. In a strange way I miss him, although I do not want him back. He was a constant presence that is rare to find in the living.

THREE YEARS AFTER THE MASSIVE RESTORATION of the Walker house, I returned from a Faulkner Fest conference in Oxford, Mississippi to find a note from my husband on the refrigerator. By then I was attending graduate school at the University of Arkansas, commuting two hours either way. My fellow attendees had requested a tour of the home. Before I discovered the note, a missing bedroom set and the absent couch tipped me off. My husband's

study I designed for him to relax in was completely empty except for his gun collection. He had worked quickly and had to leave many things behind so as not to cross my path. I would later send these, along with other remaining personal items, to him via movers. They would steal his grandfather's Belgium made Browning .22. In the note he said he needed someone more typical and was filing for divorce. How do you argue with "typical"? Especially if it is a Pope County kind of typical. The mysterious hang up calls I had been receiving for months stopped at once.

Selling the house was my responsibility. There was no question of my remaining in Russellville since the only person tying me to the place had gone in search of something else. It was a profoundly bitter and difficult chore. The eventual buyers were petty, complaining, and incredibly irritating—frequently calling me directly to threaten or whine about something instead of the broker. Their threats were hollow and often pointless. "We can sue you, you know," they said, concerning a malfunctioning toilet. "Why don't you just not buy the house then," I said. But I had moved back to Fayetteville, back to my parent's house, and could not afford the upkeep any longer on a graduate assistantship. The massive utility bills and lawn maintenance were more than my monthly salary. However, the sale, especially to this particular couple, was more than reluctant. I did not mention the Wilsons. After the papers were signed, before the keys were handed over, I made one last pass through the house alone, patiently explaining to the Wilsons what assholes the new buyers were. It was petty and malicious, and I understood completely how you could love something so much you couldn't let it, or any idea you associated with it, go.

"They don't appreciate what went into this place," I said. "You wake on up and give them hell."

I STILL DREAM IN THAT HOUSE. It is the most unique and beautiful place I have ever lived or probably ever will. I still dream in that life, when I thought I could build a home with someone else that would last. It was a place where I manufactured endless and pleasant ideas about the way things were going to be, and it was the last place I could do this. That was the location, as if a misstep in a dance, where everything went off track and I suspect may never get back on. I wonder if a log truck takes me out on a tight corner if that is where I'll end up wandering back to. It is a horrible thought, the idea that whatever you desired in life could follow you in death. The Wilsons' desire to preserve their home, the immense, needy loneliness expressed in the sighs at the foot of my bed, all haunt me more than any of their ghostly acts. I had always hoped death would mean the absence of desire, a release, peace, but there is the frightful possibility that it is a densely concentrated and hopeless clinging to what has been lost, and nothing is scarier than that. **F**

Letter

The moon is so large tonight. It's pushing out most of the stars above the desert and the mountains to the northeast. I'm sitting on a crate of ammunition, near the edge of our camp, trying to make smoke rings that will expand as they ascend. I'm not very good at it. My teeth chatter.

Georgie left a minute ago. It's getting cold here (you wouldn't believe how cold), and he said watching the sky wasn't worth it. He called the moon a 'cruel moon,' and he's kind of right. I tried to tell him about the times we lay together on your roof and made our own constellations—the guitar, the bottle, the fish bones, Santino the hung, Kathryn the chaste and all their bastard kids—but Georgie said my stories never went anywhere good.

The M.P.'s are paying close attention to me. They have to make sure that I don't wander off again. I only went that one time because I had found some empty bottles and wanted to fill them with sand and send them to you. I thought, maybe, you would get them and pour them onto the wood floor in your living room or the blue tiles around your tub, and you could stand on the same earth that I have stood on. In the morning though, by the time those guys found me, I realized how stupid that was and left the bottles buried in the desert.

The same morning, when I was being led back, three marines were lost in a minefield. I never saw their bodies. But I saw their silver caskets consumed by our flag before they were loaded onto a plane and sent home.

We get the American papers here, about a week late. We don't see much about ourselves anymore. It seems this war has been all but forgotten, overshadowed by the more pressing conflict. Some of the men grumble. Some say it is good luck. Georgie says, silence frightens him more than the dark or the ground. He walks slowly now, even within the camp, never really picking his feet up but sliding along as though he were on ice. He studies the floor beside his cot each morning and sweeps away the first layers of dirt with his hand before he gets up. It's a habit that a lot of people are copying.

That's not why I'm writing though. It's not what I want to say. I want to make you understand about this kid. I never knew his real name but I called him Junior. He was eleven or twelve, playing baseball with his friends when he chased a pop fly too far. His glove was still on his left hand when they brought him in, but his left leg was gone and his right was a stub. I tried my best to stop the bleeding but could barely see most of the time. I told him he'd be all right. I told him I would teach him how to throw a nasty curve when he got better, how the trick was in the elbow, not in the wrist or the

grip. I don't think he understood. He was so quiet. He lived longer than he should have. I didn't expect to see his name in the papers, even though I looked. He was a little brown child, not American, not news at all.

We didn't hear anything else about that kid, not for weeks. There was no reason for us to expect to. Georgie called it a shame and shrugged it off and slid away. The others hadn't been there. But for two weeks the baseball glove sat on one of our shelves by packs of gauze and a box of rubber tubes. Then this teenager wandered into the ward, Junior's eyes and Junior's face stretched out thinner. He looked lost. All of us stared at him and he stared at all of us, over each face, deciding who to go to, who to ask. He came to me. He said, "brother." He said, "baseball" and pointed at his hand. He said other words I couldn't understand and tugged at the chest of his shirt. I need you to see him. He was all alone, surrounded by our fatigues. He was maybe as tall as our shoulders, in torn shorts and a dirty polo shirt. Once he stopped talking, his arms fell at his sides and wouldn't move. I left him there and went to the shelf to get the glove. I thought to wash it first. I don't know why I hadn't washed it before. He waited ten feet from the sink. I kept my back between us as I scrubbed at the leather. I had to scratch with my fingernails to get most of it off. Can you understand? My hands worked beneath the faucet; they slid between the fingers and picked at the stitches. Tell me you can see it. The glove in my hands, and the stained water pooling in its pocket. **F**

Don Giovanni On Earth

A woman comes up to me on the street, smiling.
“How are you?” I ask. “Starving,” she says.
Well then, we are both starving, I think.
And how about these people on Broadway?
Some are starving more, and to them
we should give change. For the others,
the young with their beautiful skin,
we should take the phones gently away from their ears.
I am thinking of Jean, who was robust and hairy
two months ago. Today he is nearly dead,
bald and small as a vulture. It crosses my mind
to dye my hair, or flirt. Or starve and exercise.
Or touch my son’s hair. When I finish this poem,
I still won’t believe I’ll die. But at the end of it,
I may think how a really lovely make-out session
with someone I’m not supposed to do that with
wouldn’t be so bad—looking at it from a hospital bed,
and laced with morphine. Who are we to starve ourselves?
Everything departs as it arrives. Tastes and odors remain.
Which become memory, insubstantial and delicious.

Joined at the Lips

We never kissed because kissing entails courtship, an approach before contact, then a backing off and that quick glance into each other's eyes from two feet away that expresses—false or true—how good it was.

He would have been better off as a flower or a tree, inhaling my carbon dioxide and greening, giving off the oxygen I needed beyond what I took in through my nose. His nose never opened, like some late bud twisted into its fear of efflorescence.

His tongue held back from speech, if he ever had one, as if he'd been spared the trouble of articulating such strangeness, the grooming of bunched teeth. I'd always feared the clench of metal braces, the dentist's hand working in such tight space.

And now he is getting smaller, deflating as if our common breath, and only that, had kept him afloat. As he deflates, his eyes close and I finally see how bad his hair is, dusted with bread crumbs, tangled from neglect, the delusion that everything mine was his.

I am thinking: we've gone back to the point of his origin, that birthday when he, my twin, was no more than spit and bubblegum, the strange idea of composing such a companion out of so little, growing him soft and pliant inside my mouth.

Iowa Cross Dresser

One click past the border,
blacktop breaks into gravel.
He checks
his face in the side-view.
Left eye's prettier. He shifts
his head to make the right eye vanish—
left, right, left—
until he's dizzy. Mother's
plastic overshoe, shaped to fit
a high-heeled pump,
is tucked in the glove compartment,
in a paper bag. Take it out.
His foot arches. He could drive
a hundred miles and not get caught.

When she was at work
he'd wear the snowmobile suit
around the house,
the quilted blue-gray thing in ladies'
triple X. Mailman saw him hanging up
the wash and winked.
All her stuff fits—pants, shirts, wool
socks. They vote the same
but he feels safer in another state,
steering the truck with his knees
as he lights the last of her Camels.
He trembles at detour signs,
places he could
stop and try the boot
and comb his hair.
He ought to double back.

Jawbone

It's a piece of jawbone. Ella is sure of this. It rubs against her tongue like a chunk of granite, a quarried piece of stone. She touches it obsessively, its sharp edge, the bone of it almost cutting at the softness of her tongue. Like all injuries to the mouth, like all missing teeth and canker sores and cavities, this feels larger than it is. Feels like a mountain of bone, a veritable ruined city, a tooth too large to be a tooth. It must be bone instead, she reasons, a fractured fragment of her skull jarred loose, nosing up through the soft tissue of her mouth.

Ella eats dinner alone, tired from the work week, typical; she watches *Temptation Island*, and decides that all relationships are doomed to failure. They are all fucked up. She turns up the heat, wraps her feet in a blanket, but the lump hump soreness in her gum is impossible to forget. She is helpless, unable to ignore the outcropping in her mouth. Her tongue probes the knifelike edge, mouth twisting until the muscles ache, until she is tired. She shuts off the television, her stomach faintly turned, a knot in her gut: what's wrong with her? What is it? Tooth, bone, scar, scab, infection? Where did it come from? She feels it pushing through her gum, forced upwards. A volcano. An underwater underskin eruption.

Upstairs in her bathroom Ella flicks on the ugly vanity bulbs above the mirror and opens her mouth wide. Twisting her neck, shoulder pinched, she writhes her head before the glass, trying to see inside the cavern of her mouth. She tries to see through to the raw gum where two days ago there was a wisdom tooth and now there is just the chunk of bone that shouldn't be. The dentist wouldn't leave a chunk of tooth behind, she thinks. Wouldn't he have noticed? Shouldn't he have known? The mirror is useless. She can't see a thing. Her own mouth, lips and teeth, block the light, cast a shadow over the spot she is trying to see. And beyond the barricade of pink gum white teeth, her tongue lies disobedient, impossible to move out of the way.

In bed she tries to sleep, willing her tongue to still in her mouth, to leave the tender spot alone. It occurs to her that she might be making it worse. Whatever it is. She might be making it hurt. Or rather, hurt more. If she didn't live alone, there would be someone here to help. Or at least someone here to tell her she was nuts, to tell her to leave it alone, that the dentist wouldn't have jarred loose a piece of bone or left a chip of tooth enamel embedded in her gum.

In the late night early morning she finally sleeps, but she dreams of being in an elevator with her newest, cruellest, ex-boyfriend, the man she's recently X'ed out, or is trying to X out, the man she is willing herself to for-

get. They are rising together, side by side boxed near by the elevator walls. The doors open and a stranger boards. Ella steps backwards to make room. The doors slide shut and the elevator presses upwards. The stranger's body blinds her, fills the space with coat, hat, body, heat. Ella twists her neck, glances at the floor, red-orange diamonds, and sees the stranger yank a gun from his jacket and slam it into her ex-boyfriend's side, pressing the metal hard up beneath his ribs. She starts to speak, her first panicked reaction, to beg for mercy, take our money, take whatever, just leave us, leave him, but the stranger's free hand rises to Ella's mouth. Her words break. Close your eyes, says the stranger, and he has no face. Ella, heart hammering, obeys and as her lids drop she hears a hiss of air and realizes, though it makes no sense, that he has sprayed something, that he has drugged them, that this is more than a mugging. As she is sucked down drowning behind her closed eyes in the closed elevator she thinks: This is going to be bad. She thinks: This is really really bad. And then she wakes up.

Her mouth hurts. Her tongue moves unbidden to the back corner, strokes unwilling the eerie piece of her own head. But that's what a tooth is anyway, she thinks to calm herself, a chunk of bone. I used to pluck them out still bloody and wash them under the tap, grin at the new gap in my mouth. I used to put them under my pillow. But that was different, she reasons, tongue pressing backwards, that was supposed to happen. That was not like this.

Ella looks up the dentist's phone number because she can't find the appointment card she had in her purse. It's Saturday. The answering machine tells her if it's not an emergency to simply call back during work hours: Monday to Friday nine to five. She reaches a finger into her mouth and touches the tender spot tentatively. An emergency? She doesn't really think so.

She eats breakfast, then, like it is just another day. Isn't it? She reads the paper and attempts the Saturday crossword, but quickly gives up, finishes her coffee and goes to the gym. She does the laundry, picks up groceries, runs to the bank. When her mind is occupied she can keep her mouth still; she can forget about the soreness, the strangeness. She can move past the images that keep surfacing—the curve of a jawbone, by itself, a specimen on a lab table, the close terror of the bodies in the elevator of her dream.

Back at home in the early afternoon, she is surprised by an email from the X. The man she is pretending not to love anymore. The man she is just too busy to think about. She types out an answer, then deletes it. Doesn't send him anything. What is there to say? My mouth is broken perhaps. But she knows that's too obvious. I'm in love with you, she had said, batting lashes over limpid pool, puppydog eyes. She reaches her tongue back and presses down hard, feels the peak of bone painfully pushing against her flesh. She tests the hurt, sees how hard she can push, how far she can

take it. Where are the edges of the wound?

In her car Ella sings along to eighties pop. She watches her hands on the wheel instead of watching the road. She catches a flash of her own forehead in the rearview mirror: beautiful. She scans the face of every man she passes. Want me, she thinks. Commanding. She meets a friend for coffee, though she's already had two cups. She doesn't let her tongue stray back to the tooth piece, the excavation, the injury. She watched herself in the mirror this morning, saw how absurd she looked as she probed at the spot (her cheek bulging out, lips pursed, skin stretched taut below her nose, crinkled tight between her brows), so now, in the sunny Starbucks window she keeps her tongue still when she isn't speaking. She sips a gingerbread latte with whipped cream, the only Starbucks coffee she likes.

So tell me, her friend says, what happened.

What is there to say? It imploded, she says, or exploded, I'm not sure which. I was supposed to stay for two weeks, in his apartment. Someone pulled the rug out. Someone handed me a made-for-tv movie script. I found a condom. He'd been sleeping with another woman.

Her friend's face registers shock. Ella can't stand this. She knows it will get harder, stranger as she tells the story. She remembers the fainting feeling from the elevator dream and lifts her shirt away from her skin, letting in the air, suddenly hot, her chest and neck flushed and itchy.

It gets worse, she says. We had an open relationship, but he'd lied. He said point blank that he hadn't had sex. The week went downhill, skiing, sliding like an avalanche, a tumbled storm. We weren't communicating. I was angry.

Well no wonder, her friend says.

Ella tastes gingerbread, wipes whipped cream off her upper lip. Thinks of his mouth. Then pushes that away.

It gets worse, she says.

How?

I made him pancakes, with bananas and chocolate chips. His favorite.

Her friend looks lost. Ella's tongue sweeps backwards. She stops herself.

He felt guilty. He needed me out of his space. I was a lump of pressure, a reminder of his own lies, a quivering thing. I made him pancakes. I wanted to be indispensable. I wanted him to need me like I needed him. He told me he couldn't do it, have me there. I was an interruption, an unnecessary piece of punctuation. I changed my flight.

I'm so sorry, her friend says.

I'd already made plans to go see an old friend from high school, outside the city. I didn't want to cancel. I told him I'd stay there the next night, come back, pack up my things, and leave for the airport.

Sure, her friend says. That makes sense.

But the other woman, Ella says. Her smile feels lopsided. It feels cracked. It must be a piece of my jaw, she thinks again.

He was talking to her. He'd been talking to her all week, though he knew I didn't want that. He was fleeing, tail between his legs, and he fled to her. She spent the night when I was gone. He had her over. My things were still all over his apartment. He couldn't even wait until I left town.

Her friend's face drops like a waterfall. Ella hates this part of the story. She tries to turn it into a joke: I didn't realize I was so easy to forget. She smiles, eyebrows up, sarcastic, followed by the punch line of her shoulders: a shrug.

Her friend speaks: It's hard to imagine.

It happened, says Ella.

I left, says Ella.

Well good riddance, says her friend.

Ella can list the determined statements she's been hearing, each time she tells the story. You're better off without him. How could you ever trust him again? You can't. So move on. You're a strong woman. You don't need him. He's obviously got some serious problems. What a jackass. What an asshole. What a prick. Dick. Jerk. Bastard. Fucking shithead. Fucked up. Everything got so fucked up, wait: that is her own voice. She can't even see anymore what happened. He chose to need someone else. Not her.

Probably had too much coffee she thinks, as she lies wide-eyed in bed that night, sweeping her tongue past the crag in her mouth, the matterhorn. She touches the spot with a fingertip. It feels bigger now, like it is rising from her gum, emerging. Maybe it is working itself out? She touches it again, wondering. The gum around it feels swollen, the corner of her mouth throbs just slightly, enough to keep her awake. She gives up trying to make herself comfortable. She reads the book review. She takes some Nyquil. She falls asleep.

On Monday morning she phones the dentist. She speaks to a hygienist. Ella can picture her commercial smile on the other end of the line.

It happens sometimes, the hygienist says brightly. It should work itself out. If it's still bothering you, by, oh, Wednesday or Thursday, call back and we'll squeeze you in.

This doesn't make Ella feel better.

Don't worry about it, the hygienist says.

Ella can smell her, saccharine, through the phone. It will get easier. You'll see. Each day will be a little better. He's obviously not right for you anyway. Just forget him.

Ella hangs up the phone.

ON THE PLANE RIDE HOME AFTER THAT DISASTROUS week there was hardly

anyone on the flight. It was late boarding, late taking off, and Ella killed time at an airport Chili's with a margarita on the rocks. The salt stuck to her chapped lips. On the plane, she had a row to herself. They sat on the tarmac as the wings were de-iced; a voice over the intercom warned the passengers that the cabin might smell strange for a moment, the fumes from the de-icing agent pumped momentarily, accidentally, into the air circulation system. The woman across the aisle from Ella was wearing a familiar pair of boots: knee-high, low wooden heel, brown leather wrinkled loose around the ankles. Ella twisted towards the aisle and spoke over the low hum of engines, the shhhh of chemical spray. Excuse me, what kind of boots are those? The woman looked up from her book. Frye she said. Ella smiled. That's what I thought. They look exactly like a pair I have. The woman shook her head: these are really old. They were my mom's, from her hippie days. That's so strange, Ella said. Mine are from my mother too. Seventies hand-me-downs. The woman turned back to her book, but it was enough. It was enough to float Ella through the flight home. Outside the plane the wings ran wet, no ice. Snow fell flat over the airport arteries and was plowed away. The plane followed the light-hemmed path through the fat wet flakes towards takeoff. When they rose above the clouds, there was no more snow. Ella imagined the woman across from her, the woman wearing her boots, as a doppelganger. In the dim plane across the aisle, a reflection of herself. A version whose heart was not broken. A different way for the week to have gone.

SHE IS EATING WHEN THE MOUNTAIN in her mouth finally rock slides apart. She feels it break loose. She stops chewing, spits into a napkin. In the spare bare light of the kitchen she picks the bloody bit of bone from the mess she is holding. She wavers, sees her washed-out face in the window-pane. She places the white threaded red piece down on the counter, fills a glass of water and shakes salt onto the surface. It gathers and sinks. She stirs it with a spoon, then gargles the lukewarm salt water. She spits into the sink, watches the red strands pool towards the drain. She rinses her mouth over and over and over, afraid of the bleeding, afraid of infection, afraid she is falling apart. Finally the water she spits runs clear. She turns back to the piece on the counter. It's not a part of her tooth. Of this Ella is sure. It's not the right shape. She takes it into the other room, where the light is better. She has a sudden urge to document. She takes a series of photographs. My jawbone on the table, she thinks. An art project, she thinks. Pictures of my insides, a fragment of skull. A piece of my head. The private bits of me pulled out, focused, magnified.

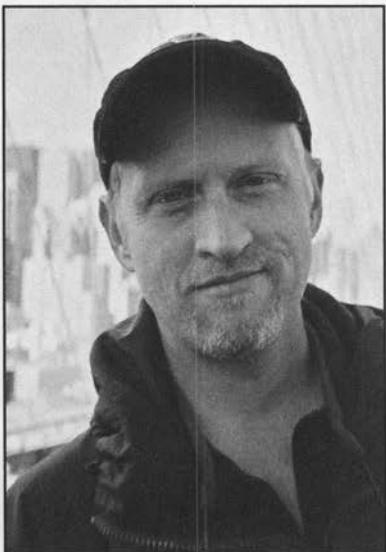
When she uploads the images to her computer screen the fragment is larger than life. It is larger even than it felt in her mouth. It must be half her jawbone, she thinks. How could she not have noticed? She reaches

her tongue back. There is only softness. There is only empty space. A canyon now where the mountain was. She feels her cheeks cave in, nothing to support them. No shape. Her teeth float out from their sockets. There are no sockets. She can't speak. She can't speak.

What is there to say? **F**

—Interview—

Campbell McGrath on Place, the Prose Poem, and the State of Poetry in America



Campbell McGrath author of *Pax Atomica*

Ecco/HarperCollinsPublishers

Photo Credit: © E. Lichtenstein, 2004

Campbell McGrath was born in Chicago in 1962 to Irish Catholic parents. His father, an ROTC student moved the family to Washington, D.C. where McGrath grew up. But, he returned to Chicago to complete his undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago. This is also where he met his wife, Elizabeth Lichtenstein. In 1988, McGrath completed his M.F.A. degree at Columbia. McGrath and his wife now reside in Florida with their two sons where he teaches poetry at Florida International University.

Chicago is a place where McGrath lived and returned frequently, but he also immortalized it in his award winning book,

Spring Comes to Chicago. His other books include: *Capitalism*, *American Noise*, *Road Atlas*, *Florida Poems*, and *Pax Atomica*. In these intensely musical books of poetry, McGrath captures both the beauty and corruption of the American culture.

McGrath is the recipient of numerous awards which include the McArthur “genius” fellowship, the Kingsley Tufts Award (for *Spring Comes to Chicago*), and he’s a former Guggenheim Fellow.

I had the pleasure of meeting Campbell McGrath during his visit to the University of Idaho where he taught a one-week poetry workshop. The following interview took place during the winter of 2005.

Sara Kaplan: Place is something you’ve discussed in depth in other interviews. In *Spring Comes to Chicago*, Chicago is literally and figuratively a place of meat. It’s impersonal. You don’t romanticize places, but rather leave them raw. The city isn’t necessarily loud and cumbersome, but rather you focus on the issue of class where rich men wear fur coats and the Wal-

mart is ever present. I wonder, in your poems about Chicago, what does the speaker long for?

Campbell McGrath: Maybe it's the very materiality of place I respond to. Those alligators you allude to—some cultures look at animals like that and see a powerful force of nature to be worshipped, we see a nice pair of shoes waiting to be purchased. Oh well. The whole battle of “the environment” is to get people to adopt a broader perspective, and start to believe even a little in the “sacredness” of place. If people in Florida did that perhaps we would stop paving over the few natural places we have left down here. It's one of the central notions of Romantic poetry, at any rate.

SK: Do you consider place a mythological force in your poems, a sort of religion? In other words, what are we left to believe in, in terms of our contemporary society? Do we hope for a “golden age” the “wonderment” of alligators that you muse upon in “A City in the Clouds?”

CM: There's a Joseph Campbell quote about meaning and value in people's lives deriving from their “local mythology”—which your question reminds me of. I don't usually think about things in those categories. I'm not a religious person, I'm a rationalist and a materialist but I think “place” is as close as we come to something sacred in these times.

SK: Location seems to be not only significant in terms of topic but also is intrinsic to your aesthetic. How to locate a poem on the page is risky. Your poems are generally very long sequences rather than shorter moments—how did you learn to extend the voice for many pages at a time?

CM: Length is one of those formal responses. If you play with a lot of toys you need a big box in which to throw them. In “A City in the Clouds” I wanted to tell an extended narrative, a fable, and to do that I had to imagine it growing larger on the page; to keep it from feeling static. I shift forms from section to section—some lyrical fragments, a prose section, and the long-lined narrative sections that drive the story forward.

Would the whole poem be better served in prose? Possibly. Sometimes I think I got the mix wrong there, and there should be more prose sections—some of the lines are flat. But I was learning—I'd never written a poem like that, and I'm happy with it, flaws and all.

SK: Can you speak specifically about one or two of your poems where you were faced with some of the challenges of writing longer poems? And, in general, what makes a long poem appropriate for your subject matter?

CM: There's "The Bob Hope Poem," a real monster in terms of length. But that poem couldn't be any smaller to contain the set of ideas and reflections that are in it, and here is the truth—I did not make that determination, the poem did. For years I wished that poem would "finish itself," would find its end-point, would allow me to wrap it up and be done with it. But it kept suggesting new connections, avenues, issues, and I felt obligated to fulfill that vision, however sweeping. This poem is not a narrative but a symphonic structure, with themes and motifs that recur, interconnect, shift, evolve—the poem is internal, and the form tries to mirror the free-floating consciousness of its narrator on one snowy day in Chicago.

It's not just the material, it's the attitude toward the material that help dictate form. If the poet wants to document the external world, to write horizontally, putting the world on the page, then the poem swells—the more you put in, the bigger it gets—that's more or less a Newtonian process of physical expansion. There's no requirement that a poem be large, of course. The lyric poem is probably more logically suited to vertical thinking—to the voice of the poet, freed of external reality, singing a song, or a prayer, or an argument. It would make no sense at all for Dickinson to expand her poems or for Whitman to contract his, just to match some ideal vision of poetic form. What those two great forerunners demonstrate is that singularity of vision requires finding a form to match the voice and content—or not finding that form, which suggests that it is just out there somewhere, under a rock. It's really about creating a form, inventing it, doing whatever it takes to house the poems you have in you to write.

SK: America and popular culture seem to be two of the most prevalent influences for you. When you were developing your aesthetic, who did you read who most moved you?

CM: Whitman wrote long poems, of several types and lengths, and that was an early model. Then there's Patterson, William Carlos Williams, a great model for pastiche, collage, and documentation. Robert Pinsky's poem "An Explanation of America" was a model for "The Bob Hope Poem," and so was James McMichael's "Four Good Things."

SK: Have you ever been fond of shorter poems, writing or reading them?

CM: Yes, I do write shorter poems. I have a new book coming out in 2007, which is a very long book, but composed of mostly short poems. It's another attempt at finding a form to accommodate my compositional desires—this book tries to reflect a year in the life of its narrator, to be a little bit journalistic, but remain firmly lyric. So, it's modeled on notebooks, but it's really a

group of interlinked poetic suites that also chronicle a year in the life.

SK: History seems deeply rooted in your poems. You reminisce to the “beautiful and useless, flowers/ bloom and die,” to a conscious inevitability towards a cycle of life. But, in the end you seem optimistic that “today” as you end your book, *Florida Poems*, is a new beginning. How do you see contemporary poetry fitting into a historical continuum when in *Pax Atomica* the poem ends, “John Lennon is dead.” Have we forgotten our traditions and who peopled them—what they meant? Can we still create once parts of the past die? Do you see a new poetic movement emerging? As the speaker in “Guns N’ Roses” asks, “where do we go/ now?”

CM: I love history. History is a kind of travel—it is the closest approximation we have to time travel. I learn from it, as I do from driving around the country, and so it often enters my poetry. Right now I’m writing a book-length narrative poem about the Lewis & Clark Expedition. Why? Because the history of that speaks powerfully not just to the past but the present. Driving across Montana, much has changed since 1805, but much has remained, and history lends insight beyond what I see today out my car window. How do we understand the world we live in if we don’t understand the world it just was, ten years ago, two hundred years ago, three thousand years ago?

There is, as you suggest, a very real relationship for me between poetry and travel. There’s also an analogy between location in the world and on the page, and so physical travel and exploration can hopefully lead to expansiveness of vision. But at the same time, I’m very scared to “travel” around the page too much. I cling to the left-hand margin, and seldom venture out from its sheltering shore into the wide sea of the page. There’s a kind of experimental temperament that tosses words around the page, which is not my sense of poetry spatially.

My formal experiments have been driven by my desire to get large topics and chunks of information on the page, whether ideas, history lessons, descriptions of place. The lyric poem is not the most accommodating form to that kind of data, so I’ve tried to expand its parameters. I’ve never believed that there were some topics “unfit” for poetry; if you change the form, you can make them fit. It hasn’t always worked, of course, but it has taught me a lot to try.

SK: When you talk to students of poetry, do you help them realize what they are writing about should mean something to them but also to an audience who might object? You write, “I will not mistake the message for the

voice." You title one of your books "American Noise." Poetry seems to be at least, in part, for you about sound, melody, musicality. And effective noise requires skill. How do you strike a balance between technical or formal aesthetic devices and voice when a student argues that all poetry is art?

CM: Poetry is a schizophrenic art form. In MFA programs we spend our time analyzing the text, in poetry slams people are bowled over by the sonic power of the art. But poetry exists in their intersection—it is the music and the message.

SK: What do you say to students who say "all poetry is art?"

CM: I say-maybe. I say-prove it.

SK: In *Pax Atomica*, the voice is musical, repetitious, rhythmical as the word "song" for example is repeated in a list in the poem, "Train Journal." Similarly, form and movement are especially important in "Of Pure Forms." These poems seem to grow organically from the form whereby the techniques are in harmony with the conceits.

CM: Poems are not like organic beings, they are organic beings. They begin like little seedling popping out of the soil. The poet's job is to grow that into a plant. But some poems are tomato plants, some are oak trees, and some are weeds. How do you know the difference? Practice.

The more poems you read, the more you understand the categories of poetic possibility; the more poems you write, the more you grasp your own capabilities, strengths, tendencies.

SK: When you compose, what do you generally consider first—theme or technique? What is your writing process?

CM: At first, most poets spend a lot of time trying to turn weeds into oak trees. But eventually you learn to differentiate, to learn from the poem what it is likely to become and nurture it in that direction. But one should err on the side of generosity and positivism. Never throw away a draft, a stanza, a line—someday you may wake up realizing the rest of the poem it belongs to, or how to fix it, or what transformation it might be subject to. That is, poems that appear to be tomato plants sometimes grow into oak trees. And even weeds may turn out to be dandelions—which are beautiful things in summer.

You have to tell the truth in poetry. You have to be willing to say what you

think, and be wrong, and fall on your face, and have jaded sophisticates laugh at your naivete, and have cool populists laugh at your pompous elitism. Whatever, dude. You have to respect the deep seriousness of the act of writing a poem and be willing to stand behind what you have written before some kind of grand tribunal that might beam down from the Elysian Fields to check up on us. I don't mean biographical truth—poetry is not memoir, not autobiography. Truth to the language, the form, the emotion, the history, the belief—whatever the poem's central concern, it must be handled without hypocrisy, chicanery, or general bullshit.

That's all we have in poetry land: the truth. We are not well paid, and we are not respected in our land or time, but we can tell the truth. We don't have to accede to the hypocrites and half-truths that surround us. We are not driven by a market economy whose rewards bend and corrupt us. That's a great gift and worth the economic trade off.

SK: You end *Road Atlas* with a portrait poem—"Campbell McGrath." You say "I image that ultimate voyage...taken the long way." Where does the poetic voyage end? Where did it begin? Will you ever stop traveling? More practically, how do you find an end to a poem, a book?

CM: "Closure" is a great word, and one of the most important in the craft. Everything ends, but not everything has closure. The unexamined life, the war in Iraq, the sound of a car alarm—these are things that will end without closure. Closure is a musical and thematic idea in poetry, it derives from syntax and from rhetorical structures, from the ideas or emotions of the poem working their way towards their necessary culmination. Barbara H. Smith's book *Poetic Closure* lays out the various categories—it's a dry but useful guidebook. Closure is usually one of the last things a poet learns, and many poets never really learn it, if you ask me. If you pick up a literary magazine, nearly all the poems start off well, but not that many end that way.

SK: What is your response to "the state of poetry in America today." Do you think more people than ever are reading poems avidly, or has the audience (from what you can tell) remained limited to academics, fellow poets, and a noble handful of friends and relatives?

CM: The state of our poetry is not unlike the rest of America today. There's too much of it, nobody agrees on its basic principles, its got factions and partisans destroying its innate sense of community, its got some visionaries and some hacks, some hard-working citizens and some cynical careerists. It's a chaotic, overly-rich grab bag, which is its charm. The continuing

expansion of MFA programs means there's more poetry written now than ever—thousands of books a year get published, thousands more seek a publisher. Critics point to this and say—look how much bad poetry gets published! True. But that ignores the good and even great poetry being published, which is likewise greater than ever. America believes deeply in excess, and it took a while but poetry has finally joined that club. **F**

Campbell McGrath

Krome Avenue

Flocks of ibis on old tractors in cleared fields sliding to sawgrass,
cartloads of corn, or mangoes, or clean fill dirt,
orchards of citrus and avocado, shade houses of the enigmatic orchid
growers,
dusty horses in a crude corral fashioned from cypress limbs where the canal
is edged with sugar cane and banana trees by the freight tracks
hard against the Casa de Jesus,
convicts collecting trash along the roadside in their FLA CRIMINAL
JUSTICE jumpsuits with the SHERRIF'S DEPT school bus on the
shoulder, joyless troopers overseeing what appears to be a collection of
high school kids caught with bags of pot in the glove compartments of
their Trans Ams,
security towers around the Krome Immigration Detention Center, razor
wire reefs on which the rough boats of the losas bound for Lavilokan have
run aground,
gravel quarry gouging the template, coral rock pits and barrows,
panel truck offering shrimp and stone crab claws from the Keys,
pickups selling roasted corn or watermelons, pickups heading into the fields
loaded with campesinos,
faces of the Maya picking pole beans in the Florida sunshine,
Krome Avenue: the Third World starts here.

*

Mid-winter, and we have come to pick strawberries and tomatoes, flowers
and herbs, our annual nod to hunting and gathering, a voyage into the
remnants of agricultural South Florida, vanishing order endangered as
the legendary panther. Sure enough, Rainbow Farms has been swallowed

by exurbia, and we must head further south in search of a passable field, crossing the canals where anhinga hitch their wings to hang like swaths of drying fabric beside the dye vats on the rooftops of Marrakech, tree farms and nurseries on all sides, freeholds of the Old Floridians or ranchitos run by cronies of long-deposed Latin strongmen, ranks of potted hibiscus and party-colored bougainvillea, bromeliads, queen palms, Hawaiian dwarf ixora. When we finally find a strawberry field it's late afternoon and many have given up, but there are still a few families in the rows, hunched abuelas with five-gallon buckets they will never fill today, and I wander out among them and lose myself altogether.

The strawberries are not fully ripe—it is the cusp of the season—yet the field has been picked over;

we have come too early, and too late.

Lush, parsley-green, the plants spread their low stalks to flower like primitive daisies and I seek the tell-tale flash of red as I bend to part the dust-inoculated leaves, spooking the lazy honeybees, but mostly there is nothing, the berries are pale, fuzzed nubs. Of the rest what's left are the morbidly over-ripe, fly-ridden berries melted into purple froth and those just at the bursting brink of rot—in the morning, if you bring them home,

these will wear a blue-green fur, becoming themselves small farms, enterprising propagators of mold.

But here's one perfect, heart-shaped berry, and half a row later, three more, in the shadows, over-looked. Where has my family gone? Where is everybody? I find myself abandoned in the fields, illuminated by shafts of sunlight through lavender clouds, bodiless, unmoored and entirely happy.

*

White eggplant and yellow peppers—
colored lanterns of the Emperor!

Lobular, chalk-red, weevil-scarred tomatoes—a dozen errant
moons of Neptune!

Vidalia onions seized by their hair and lifted to free a friendly
giantess from the soil!

Snapdragons!

They carry the intonation of Paris

on a rainy day in May, granitic odor of pears, consensus of slate
and watered silk.

Elizabeth snips a dozen stems
with flower shears

scented by stalks of sage,
rosemary, flowering basil, mint.

*

From here the city is everything to the east, endlessly ramified tile-roofed subdivisions of houses and garden apartments, strip malls, highway interchanges, intransigent farmers holding their patchwork dirt together with melons and leaf lettuce—the very next field has been harrowed and scoured and posted for sale—already in our years here it has come this far, a tidal wave of human habitation, a monocultural bumper crop. And to the west is the Everglades, reduced and denuded but secure, for the historical moment, buffered and cosseted, left hand protecting what the right seeks to destroy. And where they meet: this fertile border zone, contested marginland inhabited by those seeking refuge from the law or the sprawl or the iron custody of the market, those who would cross over in search of freedom, or shelter, or belief, those who would buy into this world and those who would be rid of it alike in their admiration and hope for and distrust of what they see. And what they see is this: Krome Avenue. What they see is the Historical Moment caged in formidable automobiles gorging on fast food, definitive commodities of the previous century to be supplanted by what? The next Historical Moment, and the next, like a plague of locusts descending upon the fields, or the fields descended upon, or these fields, now, just as they are.

*

This may be the end of it, I suspect, the last year we make this effort. The kids are getting older, less pliable, the alligators in the irrigation canals pushed ever further west, carrying into the heart of the sawgrass the reflection of a world grown monstrous and profound. If so, I will miss the scratched hands and the cucumber vines, the hibiscus focusing their radar on the sun, the taste of stolen strawberries eaten in the rows, chalky and unwashed, no matter their senselessness here, in fields reclaimed from subtropical swamp, these last remaining acres empty or picked over or blossoming or yet to

blossom, again fruit, again spoilage, again pollen-heavy dust.

No, the Third World does not begin at Krome Avenue, because there is only one world—.

It's late. Cars are pulling out, mobile homes kicking up gravel, a ringing in my ears as of caravans crossing the Sahara resolves to Elizabeth calling on the cellphone—Hey, where are you? I can see her by the farmstand, searching the plots and rows, not seeing me, still drifting, afloat, not yet ready to be summoned back. It's time to go—where have you been?

Where have I been—can I say for certain? Where have I been? But I know where I am. I'm here,

in the strawberry field.

Here.

I'm right here.

A Varying Border

I woke on a Thursday around noon, packed my school bag, and walked outside into an early afternoon spring day. I stood watching the street, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the sunlight. Across the street, a new house was going up, the workers were all out on the roof and the sound of pneumatic nail guns could be heard. I paused there, watching them, measuring the amount of work that was to be done before they finished. My body was in a sort of daze, a half consciousness between this outside world and the one I had just left. Cars came and went along the four-lane road in front of my complex. A pickup truck passed in the closest lane, a boy younger than I sticking his head out of the passenger window until he caught my eyes in his.

Spic—the boy yelled, looking me over as he said it. The tires on the road or the truck engine not enough to swallow up the sound of laughter quickly following. The boy had his head out the window possibly just a second longer, looking to see how the word registered in me, until he pulled his head back into the cab of the truck. The truck slowing into a flashing red at the end of the block then veering left around the corner and out of sight.

This was the first time anyone had ever said something like this to me. I was twenty-two.

HOW DO I BEGIN TO TELL YOU WHAT THIS WORD meant to me? Would it surprise you if I told you I was the last son of a Mexican family that had been gradually erasing itself for four generations? Would it help to know that I—like this boy—shared the same fear of Mexicans; that this fear had been taught to me? And that I was in my own way filled with biased conceptions, hateful ideas, and a distrust for my own skin?

I WAS BORN IN SEATTLE, in the same hospital where my mother worked nights as a nurse. My father worked days as a bicycle salesman, and between the two of them they raised me. All of my life I have known that we have been alone, distances apart from any other family, and that this was a choice my mother had made. My mother was seeking a place away from a childhood of abuse and overcrowding, where my grandmother found it necessary to do cruel things in order to keep a household of seven children quiet. There, in my grandmother's household—a household that followed the borders of Mexico from El Paso, Texas to Long Beach, California—Spanish was

used as a secret language. For my grandmother's children there was only one language, that of English. And only when there was some secret to be told would my grandparents choose Spanish over English, using Spanish the way mothers and fathers spell words to each other dinner tables, so the children cannot understand. This secret language was the washed out bridge between the two countries we will always belong to.

I cannot blame any one member of my family for the slow erasure of our culture. As I have learned to live, so have they before me in a made up land somewhere between the American ideals of the time and a fictitious birth of Spanish origin.

There are stories my mother tells me about my grandmother. The seven children will get together and laugh about these stories. Because deaths and marriages are our only excuses to come together, the families must catch up for years of distance in a very short time. And in this time we learn the small pieces that tie us all together. We are still learning the things stored away in boxes, the pictures we have no memories of. "Is that Mom?" someone might say, or "Look at Dad, he's so young." Going through pictures we may come across people we do not know, places that do not exist anymore. It is the chance to reinvent ourselves, to imagine the past that had been hidden from us. And it was the chance my grandmother's family found to reinvent themselves as well.

There are birth certificates that place my great grandparents in Mexico. How they managed to end up in a small New Mexico town named San Marcial is beyond any of my family's knowledge. Although I can only assume that it must have been very easy to move from one country to the other, across a varying border not yet solidified in the minds of the people as Mexican or US. This is where my grandmother was born. And where she was told and continued to believe, or at least protect her own children with the myth of their Spanish origins.

San Marcial is where all things begin to disappear. I can imagine my great grandmother saying things like, "Speak only English" or "You are Spanish, from Spain, never let them confuse you with a Mexican." It was the hope then to build within our family, knowledge of the skin we possessed, the dark hair and auburn brown eyes. There was safety in the Spanish ancestry, a sense of belonging to a new America. Mexicans were coming north at this time, if not already established in the area, and white Americans were coming south and east. And among them all was the fear—of the other, unlike them.

From the pictures left over in the boxes of my grandparents I gather the lives of San Marcial together. A life of plough and horse, lines upon lines of baking earth and the Rio Grande so close offering up its waters for irrigation. There are pictures of the family then, three children in their various shades of off-white, charcoal, and black. Their parents, my great-

grandparents, stoic behind them. I cannot begin to even guess at the life they must have led then. One of constant labor, sun burnt skin, coarse dirt and pebbles, their eyes looking out—white amidst the darkness of the picture. And underneath it all, the struggle with identity, and the lies beating like a heart inside.

When my grandmother was in her teens the river overflowed and erased, once again, the lives of our family. After the flood, the town of wooden houses and farmland was completely gone, only a few foundations left to suggest there was anything there before. This was the opportunity my great-grandparents took to travel south, like many other Americans; they too would travel south and become part of a growing America in El Paso.

The pictures stop here. Whether they are missing or were never taken I cannot say. I can only assume that something good came out of this move. That there was some prosperity to it, some glimpse of solidity in the fictitious heritage they had created. Much later, in an Aunt's house I come across a picture of my grandparents in their twenties. My grandmother dressed for nursing school and my grandfather in his border patrol uniform. These jobs would take them from Texas to California a few years later, where the family would be reborn again, creating new realities for my family to believe in.

THE STREET I GREW UP ON AND THE STREET my parents still live on is a one-lane road of early 20th century bungalows. Much like the neighborhood, the street was built on a plan that did not involve traffic or account for cars traveling in opposite directions. Cars meet here between lines of cars parked to either side, each driver having to find his own place to pull in, whether it be a driveway or merely just reversing back up the street in order to let the other car pass.

I grew up here, one block up from Interstate-5, between wooden houses built on cement foundations. We lived in a two-bedroom house with two tiny yards that my mother planted with raspberries, blueberries, pear, and rhododendron. The yards so packed that it was possible to hide among the stalks of raspberries, or behind the broken cement wall separating one neighbor's yard from our own.

The neighborhood was filled with other couples like my parents, couples caught up in the freedom to be whoever they were. Like my parents, they were couples running from Catholicism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, overbearing families of faith and restriction. They were the children of California, of New England, of the Midwest, all of them trying to start something new. These couples bought houses like ours, houses with rotten floorboards, rusted nails our parents placed hard Styrofoam over, sealed in duct tape. Houses that sagged at the roof, growing green lichen between the shingles, paint chipping, and screen doors that creaked loud enough

to be heard from down the block.

There were many families like mine, many families with mothers of one color and fathers of another. My closest playmates then were the son of a black father and a Jewish mother, the daughter of a German father and a Chinese mother, a Muslim boy with a white stepfather, and two white brothers that lived opposite my house.

I knew no other person of my same background, assuming instead that we, for the most part, were all of the same color. That we all belonged to some larger race of mulatto children, the brothers across the street even blending to some extent with their skin, baked by the sun till it turned brown and their hair growing blonde. And for the most part we were all the same, children as indistinguishable as those in any other integrated neighborhood of the time.

There were no divisive names then, none of the names we would learn later as we went to our various schools, labels we would learn to distinguish ourselves by. Of course no one would speak these names in the manner they were intended. They became jokes of our own, little niches of understanding between ourselves. We were all part of families hiding from families, and living in a place where friends and neighbors became closer than blood.

With these playmates, I salvaged boxes from the dumpsters of stores one street over, making elaborate fortresses of plastic sheeting and duct tape. And from within this place, filled with various tunnels and rooms, we lived a sort of cut off reality of games, making up rules, various hierarchies of power, and treacherous missions through neighborhood back yards. We played football in the streets, enlisting children from different blocks, Chi and Eji, the sons of a Nigerian and Jewish couple, Ben, the son of a black father and white mother, and Tony and Corina, an Italian German brother and sister. Most of these games ended up with someone getting hurt, a bloody nose, or a scuffed knee, the type of thing that hurt for a minute until the child forgot about the pain and either continued or grew bored with the game.

In the summers we listened to the sound of orangutans calling to each other—loud, haunting calls, brought up from the belly and released over the expanse of the Woodland Park Zoo. We took bike rides in the park, finding pathways between the trees, or feeding rabbits in a clearing of the park's forestry. At night the trains navigating the Sound could be heard through open bedroom windows. During the day, a dollar bought a game of golf at the local nine-hole, but a quick jump and faster legs could get you a free game. We went swimming in two lakes then, Green Lake, where the water swam with milfoil and ducks made a sort of floating island, or Lake Washington where we could watch speedboats far out and catch crayfish with our hands on the rocky bottom.

This was my childhood, although later we would all be pulled apart by

some un-seeable force. Being placed, each to our own group of like colored or minded groups, where the divisive names we toyed with as children took shape. The children then were not the boys and girls they would grow up to be, nor were they the men and women who exist now, they were something in the middle, a place between our childhood identities and those we hold onto now. But then, in those summers and winters before middle school it did not matter and the life outside our neighborhood had no bearing upon us internally or externally.

SOON AFTER MY GRANDMOTHER DIED, my mother took a flight down to El Paso to put some things back in place. My Grandmother's death had stirred things up in the family, raising questions all of her children felt and wondered about. The house in which they had all grown up was to be sold. No child wanted to take on the burden of revitalizing the place.

I spent the weekend of my grandmother's funeral, only a few months after my own nineteenth birthday, walking around the house on my grandmother's old plastic walkways, hearing the shuffle of my feet like the sound of my grandmother's feet on the plastic. In the kitchen my uncle showed me how to make guacamole, taking me to three supermarkets before he found the perfect avocados. "Never add garlic," he said, his nose flaring as if in anger. My aunts all watched as he cut up the red onion, tomato, and lime, shaking salt over the mixture.

I took my time in the backyard that weekend, moving from the small brick patio my grandfather had built to the grass lawn rimmed with an old grapefruit tree, rose bushes decades old, and grape vines that stretched in and out of the chain link fence. This was a place of hiding for my mother, the field behind the house now a golf course, and a place where I had hid many times myself when my grandparents became tired of the squabbles of cousins.

It was months later that my mother bought two roundtrip tickets for my father and her. They would arrive in El Paso with the addresses of family no longer seen. There had been no one from my grandmother's side of the family at her funeral, none of her siblings nor her cousins, only a handful of old nurses like her, their sons and daughters, and us. At the time I was living in Hawaii and listened to long distance conversations about the family, filtered through trans-Pacific telephone wire and my mother's emotions. The family was now fighting with itself over what remained of the estate, a cabin in the Sierras and various pieces of wooden furniture my grandfather had carved from the sequoias near the cabin. In our house hung a gaudy painting, rimmed in fake gold, which had once hung in my grandfather's study. Looking at it I always became depressed, as it offered no link to anything I knew of him or of myself.

My mother called twice during her trip to El Paso. She described the high plateaus around El Paso and the Mimbres Mountains to the north, she described the Rio Grande, she talked of how wide it was, how dark and muddy. My mother has always been good about this, about avoiding things and replacing them with the fantastical, the moments of event and significance, avoiding at all times the normality of things. I wondered from so far away why she had said nothing about the family she was searching for, her uncle, not seen for twenty years, or the aunt that had always been described as bullish. She described the drive out of El Paso, on I-25 into New Mexico. She told me about the way the Rio Grande curved in and out here, how the road cut and bridged across the river several times, and how the juniper and sage grew and grew with the altitude.

They drove all day, at times my father sleeping beside her; at other times they switched, my mother sleeping herself. By the afternoon they had come to San Marcial, the place the pictures had been taken. I imagine my mother holding a manila folder, copies of photographs, birth certificates, and directions neatly compiled within. I imagine the small downturn of the exit, merely just a turn around now, a place where semi trucks and late night driver pull over to sleep. I think about the Rio Grande here, how it has tightened its wide body into something altogether new and unlike the river bridging the border between America and Mexico. Snow must have been on the ground at this altitude, at this time of year. I picture the slow movements of the water and the sound of thousands of small pieces of ice, shuffling across the expanse of the water. Each piece making a sound so slight, as a whole, only making the sound of wind in the trees or a room of dancers who do not speak, but merely keep on dancing without music.

Of course what I hear of the place is nothing more than what my mother tells me. But living in my family, one learns to interpret things for oneself. She tells me of the willow trees near the river, the small amount of snow on the ground, as if it were something left over from the night before. There is a wild pecan tree among all the larger trees and various bushes of mesquite. What she does not tell me are the thoughts that must be going through her head, how at some point in the past this was a place, a real place filled with people like her mother, a family she does not really know, and will most likely never know the true story of. Perhaps she hugs my father in that expansive emptiness, feeling in him some human warmth.

There are a few foundations left, a few crumbled down walls that rise only inches from the ground, the earth climbing up them year after year, until finally there will be only a mound then nothing else. Pieces of an iron fence are found, so rusted and forgotten that the bars break apart, rusted scale by scale, in the hands of my mother when she bends to touch it. What does she think about here? What did this fence protect? Who were the owners? She does not even know in which direction her mother

lived, only that she did at one point live here.

IN MIDDLE SCHOOL I LEARN TO WALK TO SCHOOL, avoiding certain neighborhoods while favoring others. I learn what shirts not to wear. People call me Blood, because my favorite shirt is red. My mother bought me identical t-shirts in every color. I alternate between yellow, blue, white, red and a few long sleeve button ups. I wear the red one until a friend of mine is beat up in our hallways for wearing his red sweatshirt. I wear the blue one till it rips on a tree in the park. I learn to wear only white.

There is a definite division here, a system of belonging and not belonging. All of the Asians wear yellow and red, the blacks wear blue, and the Mexicans wear browns and blacks. The white kids try as they can to fit in, some joining one group or the other, some forming their own group of skateboards and bicycles. I try to hold onto the friends I have, the next-door neighbors and the friends from across the street, but they are all joining one group or the other. If there is a piece of you, like there is a piece of Mexico within me, then there is a choice to be made, the color of our skin now so much more than we realized it could be. I lose friends and make new ones. I begin to think of things in terms of sports, basketball becomes the only place where every colored shirt plays together, and out of this I begin to put together friends again. Some are friends from the neighborhood; others are friends of theirs from other elementary schools, who now have been brought together here in middle school.

Here, in the hallways of middle school and on the basketball court I learn what it is to be Mexican. Three people stand out for me, an Irish Mexican named Steven, who has red hair with skin like mine. Another is Ernesto, five years older than us, but still in middle school, and finally Manny, who is Filipino and Mexican. I respect Manny the most out of everyone, he wears a red shirt and hangs out with the Asians, but at any point is able to walk over into the circle of Mexicans. I think he is like me, belonging to one group while being able to walk among others. All I know then is the hatred my mother has for the secrets of her family. I know there is a part of me that is Mexican, and that is all.

One of my first friends is a boy named Adrian. He is a small boy and lives in a house near the freeway under-pass with his grandparents, aunts and uncles, and his mom. While Adrian is white, it is the first time I see generations of family and different races other than my own in one house. He is a blessing child, the last of many, born when his mother did not think she could have any more. He is the youngest and already has great nieces and nephews who are black. I trace the family lines through pictures they hang on the walls. I watch as the color of the children changes over time. In a series of school pictures I see Adrian dressed in a sailor suit from grade

two through five, the suit gradually getting tighter and tighter on his body as he grows.

At school I knew none of the words the Mexicans threw around. I knew nothing about what they were talking about. About what they did or who they were outside of school. They became for me something of a subject to study. I tried at times to slick back my hair, using coconut oil, forming lines down my scalp with a comb. The hairs would clump together and I could feel the slippery clumps of hair falling at times onto my ears or when I played basketball, pumping up and down across my head. When I became bolder, I bought Dickies and black sweatshirts, but never felt in touch with anything besides basketball. In my spare time I watched from across the playground, or listened for stories. And I suppose to them I was in some sense an outsider as well, I did not dress right, did not act right, and certainly did not speak anything near fluent Spanish.

I knew stupid Spanish, like how to say I was cold, or that I was hungry. Things I imagined a three year old was able to say, simple statements to survive (And indeed later in life I would end up realizing when I couldn't understand a Mexican friend's little sister, that I was unintelligible even to her.) I followed the movements of my three figures through class and afterwards if possible. A friend of Manny's was shot in the South End, something that I thought dangerous, but somehow cool at the same time. Ernesto was caught masturbating under a lab table a month later. This became the story of the school, spoken only in whispers; since it was rumored Ernesto carried a knife and was seriously connected into the gang life. And for a brief while I became a friend of Steven, the large Irish Mexican, who became infamous later in the year for pulling a pistol on a member of another school's gang. Although I didn't know then that he carried a gun or that he would never finish middle school.

For a brief week in seventh grade I met Steven before class at the playground just beyond school grounds. I had been skipping the first few classes lately and this is how I ran into him; of course we knew of each other. But what purpose I served during that time was simply to watch out for him as he smoked a joint, or when he didn't have any papers or a match, ate the weed raw. I remember trying to hold back the gagging when I put the weed in my mouth and chewed the sticky clumps between my molars, the fuzz off the buds getting caught on the top of my mouth. After which we would walk down to McDonalds and eat breakfast, while Steven told me about the catholic schoolgirl who was giving him blowjobs after school.

The time Steven and I spent together only lasted a week because eventually my skipping caught up to me and there was no more skipping to be done. I spent the next week in detention where I could watch Ernesto, looking down or away as soon as he looked in my direction. He was the type of guy who was already growing facial hair even then. I do not know

if he was really five years older than us, although that was the rumor. And somehow to be held back as much as that made you somehow popular. At the end of that year, Ernesto would rape one of our classmates in the bushes out by the playground. We never saw him again, and never cared to see him.

A year later Adrian found a large knife, complete with serrated blade, and brass knuckles on the handle in these same bushes. And although we knew that the police had gone through the bushes already, and a year before, and that the weapon used by Ernesto was nothing like the thing we held, it still claimed some sinister quality all its own. Of course, the story of Ernesto and what he did was forwarded to all parents at the school, leaving for our parents an impression of insecurity. But what most surprised me about this time were the generalities parents—including my own—were making about race, gang life, and everything in between.

WHAT MY MOTHER GAVE ME OF HER EL PASO TRIP was a day's journey through the distance of desert and mountain plateau that connected San Marcial and El Paso. What she didn't give me were the names of the uncle and aunt she had been searching for, the detail of her search, or the frustration she must have felt. I think of it now, her many days sleeping in hotel rooms, my father nearby watching TV or reading a book, my mother going over and over again the roads of El Paso, the various addresses of connection to her mother. Did she look up at my father, frustrated with this search, or did she remember the few years she had spent there before the family's move to California? Did she trace the roads that were under construction when she left until she found the plot of land that had once been theirs? Would she remember nights when the family came together, her grandparents, aunt, and uncle at the family house?

I wonder about these now, because there are still things that my mother does not tell me, whether they are secrets meant to keep up the good views of my grandparents, or because she has banished these memories herself. I cannot say for certain. I only know that they spent a week in El Paso and that only a day is accounted for. My mother will tell me the day to day of things, she will tell me what she had for dinner, how much she spent at a local store, the movie she watched late at night on TV when there was nothing else to do. But what I wonder about are the days they spent driving around, searching out street names and taking dead ends. Did they ever find the addresses they were looking for? Or did they simply sit in the car, smelling the clean vacuumed smell of their rental, perhaps a few bags of chips spread out in the back seat, while the radio played some song they no longer remember, frustrated with their search?

I guess that there was never closure. I want to think that my mother

found them, that she hides this from me still and that somewhere out there I still have a history to look up for myself. At other times I picture her pulled up outside a house she might remember from her childhood, waiting in the car, watching the lights come on with night, or possibly the lights go out, my mother too scared to confront what she could never ask her own parents. And I guess that there are no gravestones telling of what happened, because this would be too easy, too much of a quick fix, too concrete a solution to my mother's history and my own. But what I believe has happened is that my great uncle and aunt have disappeared just like the town of San Marcial. And that they are out there still moving further and further away from where they began, to a place where no one, not even their own sister would recognize them.

WHAT I HAVE NOT TOLD YOU ABOUT THE BOY in the pickup truck, and the young-man I was then, is a story that surprises even me now. I have not told you that the city I was living in then was a small city in Northern Washington, where the primary source of industry was and still is agriculture. I stood there on that block for what must have been a minute, the growing city going up around me, and the sound of the pneumatic nail guns still firing across the street. At the time I was pushing a pair of car keys over and over again in my pocket, thinking about the possibility of catching that truck and using the softball bat I kept in my trunk for other purposes.

Over all the years that have passed in between middle school and that moment outside my apartment complex, I was still friends with Adrian. We had both moved north out of the city and were roommates and classmates again in a small state school. But what crossed my mind then was the knife he still held onto, the blade, sharp and serrated at the end, as if meant to skin a deer, or cut through large pieces of sheet metal. I wondered at the possibility of my hand beneath the metal knuckles of the blade and at what cost I could bring myself to use it.

These thoughts I do not think are odd, or even ridiculous. I think that there is a fear like this in many people. The way I have fit neither one place nor the other and have always been forced to choose between the two. People, I have come to realize, see me as they want to, they hold within their heads some format into which to fit me. No, I am not surprised at this, because I have judged people myself and have watched many do it before me.

What does surprise me is that in this growing city, built on agriculture and becoming more and more dependent on Mexican labor, is that I was in that moment my great grandparents. For the shortest second, standing on the street outside my apartment I wanted to—like my grandparents and their parents before them—disappear into white America. **F**

Absorbed in Therapy

It's all that they can do
to hold up the great weights
of their heads, subjected to
disturbing interventions—
“The burdens of some hats
are more than we can bear.”

They set some private records
recording their attachments,
but why is love the worst
of many stringent diets?
“It seems a good example
of the temple of the flesh.”

Exposing what they need,
to take some firmer stand,
they understand a good deal
more than they believed:
“We can be together for
an hour and feel as empty.”

The Values of Antiquity

Like the first wild horses, borne from the seas,
not knowing how someday they would be broken,
he asks her name, her date of birth, he says,
so they can collaborate past confusion.

"But what's the point of even going out,"
she thinks, "to the heart's park? It's flaming red,
but that's not why I'd want to take a boat
and float around the mirror-lake instead."

She knows the cock crows twice: he's not above
twisting friendship once everything's changed;
he'd leave the party with her, his latest love,
or leave her there alone, completely estranged...

If his audience seems too insecure,
and proves it to him by laughing out loud,
(as if she didn't get his jokes long before
he's beaten every line into the ground),

unlike some other artists, he'd create
a masterpiece of pent up energies
in one short space of time, thus giving back
to her what she has lacked, fond memories.

Thinking it's more desirable to fail
to commit slow suicide successfully,
they're brash, assuming that they'll fail to fall—
yet, might be proven wrong, romantically.

Lauren Goodwin Slaughter

Osmosis

Days burn into gummy
sleep—exploding

kindred, splintered
spoon-lakes, vicious

gulls and mean, sweaty
carnivals. I'm jealous

of your dreams; kites
lift you over oceans—each

phosphorescent fish
a mirrored hinge

of constellation. Some nights
you're hired just to sit

at diners and eat endless
plates of eggs. Sometimes

it's a bed made of helium
balloons that jar

during sex. Yes, red.
So here—press

your forehead
to mine like a goat.

Chains

In the woods near the picnic tables, years ago, when Meg was a child, she heard teenagers whispering to each other about her father's crying. On the fountain walls, the white paint faded away under crosses and encrypted symbols of gangs long gone and hearts with girls' names spray painted inside. Her father painted circus animals on the fountain – elephants and tigers and lions and hippos. His sprawling circus dominated the graffiti with white roses of cotton candy clouds in the sky above royal blue tents, cadmium-red hoops of fire, and huge muscular beasts with bright, intelligent eyes. Often he cried when his animals were painted over by the graffiti artists in the park. Sometimes when one of his favorite animals was defaced, he disappeared for weeks so that Meg wondered if he was ever coming back.

Her childhood was marred by his leaving, just as his painted animals were marred by teenagers who laughed as he cried, smearing the tigers with silver chains.

Ashes clung to curtains inside the log cabin where her mother played harmonica, the songs her father loved, songs about the railroad and men who worked nights returning to sleeping children. Her mother's metallic music drifted through open windows like rain, the melody inviting him to come back home.

Remnants of Meg's childhood littered the living room, a stuffed monkey made of yarn, a large ventriloquist's dummy dressed like Donald Duck, and a naked Rainbow Bright doll turned upside-down on the windowsill. She once loved that doll more than anything in the world, and it bothered her to see the doll abandoned. But because her father's circus had been painted over again, or because she was pregnant and hadn't yet told her mother, she was too embarrassed to pick the doll up and dress it and put it in the rocking chair where it used to sit.

As she lit a cigarette, a man's hand reached through the open window to graze the doll's foot. The hand lifted the doll into the air by its bright red hair, and the doll was gone.

She opened the door and saw her father stroking the doll's hair, dirty fingers catching on tangled yarn. With his new beard, he looked like a much older man. He was dangling a handful of silver jewelry, which he held out to Meg. She didn't want to put the necklaces on, but she did anyway. Tangling and untangling, the tingling silver dazzled her in moonlight.

As her mother approached her father, fingers running through his matted beard, he ignored her and only looked toward Meg. The necklaces left

dark marks on her hands when she touched them and made her neck itch. She was afraid to ask where the necklaces had come from.

"You're pregnant?" he whispered.

She didn't answer.

After entering the house, he kept dropping his cigarette in the wrong places, forgetting to snuff out the tip. He set the couch on fire, and Meg's mother killed the flames with the fire extinguisher that flooded the room with white powder. Meg could barely see her parents' faces through the smoke-haze. They were coughing, and she could hardly breathe. But the fire was out. Her mother opened a window as her father clutched the doll to his chest.

"Hank," her mother yelled, "for God's sakes."

"What have you done?" Meg asked.

"Hell," he said.

"You drink too much," her mother said to her father, "and you smell bad."

"I smell?" he asked, sniffing the doll.

Meg wanted a cup of coffee and offered him one. He refused and she suspected he had never liked her coffee because she mixed Maxwell House with Folgers Crystals and Starbucks Breakfast Blend.

Before he left that night, he asked to take the doll with him. She was drinking coffee with her mother. They held the warm cups in their hands, waving to him on the dark porch as he drove away singing a lullaby, buckling the doll into the passenger's seat as if it were a child riding beside him.

"Say bye-bye, Rainbow Bright," her mother whispered as if to the wind.
"Say bye-bye, Daddy."

Meg didn't want to say anything, so she went inside to pour herself another cup of the bittersweet coffee that tasted of metal, ashes, oatmeal, stale cigarettes, roses, rancid cashews, and candles.

A month later, Meg noticed her belly's reflection in the lake. As she stood on the shore, her mother and father whispered to each other about the chains. The girl's body drifted slowly, and the boat stalled. When the boat reached the shore, men were tugging the chains, taking up the slack, dragging the body to the grass.

The girl's hair was full of mud, and some of the mud was coming off on the rocks. The sheriff put a towel over the girl's face, or rather the place where her face used to be. People crowded closer to look at the body before the coroner came to take it away. The girl's skin was gray. Her chest was torn, and her broken ribs resembled driftwood.

Meg's father stared at the lake and hid the doll inside the folds of his army jacket, hunched against what he concealed as he crept along the muddy shore.

MEG FOLLOWED THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER in the trees and found her father dancing in the moonlit park. The darkness of oak shadow surrounded him as he spun the doll above his head. Cigarette butts floated in rainwater under the golden monkeys he had painted. The monkeys' red hats burned above slender necks encircled in delicate chain. The chain stretched outside the frame of concrete wall behind the fountain, tethers unseen.

The shadow of the doll's hair hid his gaze in darkness.

Meg watched in silence. The way he caressed the doll with tenderness and pure, undisguised joy – wonder, even – made Meg shiver. She couldn't bring herself to turn away. The doll was filthy, stained, torn. It hurt that her father seemed to love the doll more in spite of its stains.

She took a step closer to him. He stopped twirling.

"Who are you?" he asked, approaching.

"You're my father," she whispered, unwilling to look at his eyes. Not wanting to see his face, his expression, she focused on his old boots, the thick, uneven crust of caked filth that clung to the snakeskin.

"I know who I am," he said, spitting on the grass. "Who the hell are you?"

"Meg."

She looked at his eyes, his wide clear eyes, and saw his face was splotched, splattered with what appeared to be black paint, almost dry. His hands were glistening with the dark substance that stained the doll.

"Meg?" he whispered.

He stepped closer and held the doll out to her. She knew better than to back away.

She pretended to admire the doll.

"She's dirty, ain't she?" he asked, his lip trembling.

That's when Meg smelled blood. He stepped into a patch of moonlight and the redness glistened – blood drying on the doll, his face, his hands, his boots.

"Ain't she?" he asked, again.

"Let's give her a bath," Meg said, leading him to the fountain.

They knelt beside the fountain, dunking the doll into the murky water. Ripples of blood ebbed as she reached down to touch his fingers, rubbing her hands against his, holding his wrists.

Once the blood washed away from his skin, Meg was sorry to see that he had no wounds, that the blood was not his own.

"Our baby," he whispered, gesturing with his bearded chin toward the wet doll, limp and heavy in his hands.

Meg almost took the doll from him, then reminded herself that it was just an old toy. She imagined her baby forming like a secret inside and tried to think of ways to keep it away from him.

"Who died?" she asked, speaking to him as if he were a naughty child.

"Whose blood is this?"

He laughed at her.

When he was asleep in his car, she pried the doll from his hands.

The police, displeased with her for washing the doll, wanted certain incriminating details, and she knew what she looked like during the interviews—the unfortunate pregnant girl talking to the young detective.

"The doll," he said, "could prove useful, whether or not a victim is located."

Thinking of the body in the lake, she studied the doll on the desk and wondered what her father would do once he realized the doll was gone. Wrapped in thick, clear plastic, the doll looked like trash, like cloth and yarn and plastic that had been tossed away with scraps from the butcher's shop.

"He's a good man," she whispered.

The detective left the room and rushed back, his short hair wet with perspiration.

"We found him in his car and the lady in the trees behind the fountain."

"How is he?"

"She's dead, and your mother wants to take you home. I don't want you to go with her. Okay?"

"Why?"

"He's asking for you. He says he wants the doll back, says he needs it. Says he will only talk to you. Get him to write it down. It will be easier that way."

When her father looked at her, he began to whimper.

"I want to make things right," he whispered.

"Write it in a letter to me," Meg said.

He reached for the pen, pulled the paper closer and hunched over the pages for hours – sighing, snorting, growling, and ripping at the tablet before he was finished.

Afterward, he handed the pages to Meg and slept for hours. He would never talk about what he had written.

"It's not much, but it's enough," the detective said, relieved.

The letter, which looked as short and sloppy as she expected, was much more coherent than she imagined, although as a confession it never made much sense. Her father's tears had turned the paper soggy and fragile so that the pages dried crisp and brittle, wrinkled. His words read as follows:

Darling, I saw her in the parking lot, one of the people from old times. But she wasn't old. She was as young as she ever was. She saw me. She knew. I

walked to her. She walked to me. I touched her. Hi, ya, she said, as always she said to me when I was a boy. You remember me? Yes. You remember what happened? Yes. Can you do it just like you saw it? Yes. You will? Yes. You remember what it looked like? Oh, yes. Pretend like I am it and you are the one with the chains. The chains are in the trees. You'll find them there. Pretend like I am not me. Do it, just like you saw it. Don't stop, not matter what, until it's finished – even if I tell you to stop, even if I beg. Understand? Yes, I said. Then, I did.

After Meg's baby was born, her father kept asking the police if he could have the doll back, but the doll wasn't really a doll anymore, just hunks of molded cloth, wispy stuffing, mashed plastic, and frayed yarn. Somehow he just couldn't understand. He still wanted the old doll, now more than ever, and even began to write Meg letters about the doll although she claimed she had no idea what had become of it.

"Where is she?" He kept asking. "What happened? I don't remember what happened. Where did she go? Please, I just want to hold her and hold her."

Meg visited him in prison with her son in her arms, the boy burping milk on her shoulders as he smiled at her father. She wanted to tell her father what her life was like now that she had a child, but sometimes she found it hard to explain things to him. He had no patience for her stories about raising the child. In fact, he didn't want to talk about his grandson, the boy she had named after him. He only wanted to talk about the baby elephant from his childhood that was beaten to death after refusing to perform a circus act.

"He was screaming and trying to crawl away on his knees like a human being," her father said.

Putting her hands over her son's ears and smiling at her father as if nothing were wrong, the way she sometimes smiled when he was near, she imagined her father as a boy watching the elephant die, but she couldn't imagine the expression on his face. Secretly, she suspected that if the elephant had died another way her father would have been another type of man. He might have been free, holding his grandson in the open air and laughing at the park, carrying the child near the fountain.

A week before her father was sentenced to die, someone sent her a weapon that looked like a small flashlight. The package had no return address. The note, which wasn't signed, read:

This will render any attacker helpless and is safe to use on animals and persons under the influence of alcohol and narcotics.

After unwrapping the weapon from its clear package, she turned off all the lights in her house. Her son cried for joy as she flipped on the switch and pointed the weapon at the windows, but it was only a tiny light shining in the dark. **F**

Capp Street Incident

She stands under the 101 overpass on Capp Street. When I pull up she sticks her head through the window, parting my legs with her hand. I ask her how much. She tells me and then gets in. We pull around the corner to a spot she likes. She looks vaguely familiar but I don't say anything. She puts the condom on me with her mouth. After a few minutes she says, Baby you got to hurry; I got to get back out there on the stroll. I tell her not to worry about finishing me. She is relieved. She cleans her mess and puts everything—the money, the limp rubber, the soiled tissues—in her little black purse. Then I remember. Her name is Del and I recognize her from high school. We had Spanish together. She had a crush on me and I never gave her the time of day. When I mention this she laughs and says, Boy the tables are turned now. I laugh, too, and then she gets out. She says, Baby you shouldn't drive in that condition. I smile and ease away from the curb. I smell her from ten blocks away. Cigarettes and sweat and dirty feet. Then I get sick some more in the Office Depot parking lot. With an old newspaper I clean what ends up on me. I try to picture the girl she used to be and I cannot. It is difficult enough to remember what I was like back then. **F**

Instant Replay Glitch

Puny pennants are flicking like gossipy tongues
above body billiards as a vestigial scoreboard
flashes numbers built of dots on rungs.
Gold dust clings to the bullish horde

whose many shoulders twist in all directions,
youthful skin a defense that's stretched too thin.
Surge and muddy slide to ameboid pile.

Gleaming heads groggily reassemble
the tilt of thunder on a slanting diagram.
Repeat in decaying sunlight until a fumble
hovers there. Time flinches and leaps.

Dead, angry crowds start to tumble
from the stands, clutching their tickets and roaring “scam!”
as the players, frail old men, collapse in heaps.

Paradise

Monsters safely in their lairs for now.
Clacking of wooden shutters as sunset streams
redly among our mountain azaleas that bow
and huddle closer to withstand the cold of dreams.

I'm filling in the blanks on a sheet of homework.
French verbs and nouns. With each sturdy
sentence I complete, the world winks
its warm approval. My obsessive love of study

pleases all, though soon this won't be true.
The fat, yellow tome named BEETHOVEN lies
open above the keyboard to "Les Adieux."
As scattered stars begin to salt the skies,

twin forsythias fluoresce in the gathering dark,
lifeboats about to sink in sullen ink.

Migrant

My fire-sparrow, Coriolanus, whose plush
golden crown contrasts with burgundy wing
and blue tail, is Neverbird in the hush
before the ceremony of its doomed homing.

Arcing across waters at the edge of sight,
acrobatically veering through torments and squalls,
seeking a distant bull's eye through the night
of a single window surrounded by decrepit walls

darkly open to late summer air.
Yes, in fear, we were both born there,
where a stopped clock proffers its blank face.
And yet your striving cannot be deterred,

your frail sonatas, lost in the boiling race
where luminous broken constellations are stirred.

Hillside Wraith

There is a moment after you regret
what you have done, when the veil
of otherness encloses you and all you feel
is disconnected from your bones.

Like the time his mother
slapped him. He was twelve. Sneaking
from his bedroom window, he
rowed on Cattail Pond and watched
the raindrops forming pockmarks
in the shallows.

And the night before they buried her—
his own son then was almost six—
she came to him after midnight in a dream.
They existed then as hills exist. The moon
stood tumbled and weighty on the ridge.
And he sensed her there
as pockmarks in a pond.

Rope

Outside the porch at six AM, a hummingbird
settles itself on the top ring of a spider web.
Sunlight catches on the crooked circles,
the difference between light and dew, unnoticeable.

The hummingbird slows its wings,
feet clutching the thickthin rope.

My back to the room, a voice from inside
says, *you know, of course, you can have*
whatever you want, and I know it's true
but that doesn't make anything easier.

I want to set out the dish of sugar water
for the bird to splash in and eat.

If I close my eyes and hum out my ears
I won't hear movement, and it will cease
to exist. I can have what I want, but if I am blind
I don't have to choose.

Sculptures

imagine dusk a streetcar your empty
window sheets of rain coating glass
your hand riddled with age peels back
the thick skin of an orange as in the city
below your past is slipping past
unnoticed in the scores of headlights
you move to shut the blinds but don't

there was truth once you tell yourself
there was the mold and then ash settling in
the kiln you saw her face once in marble
in granite her face chiseled on the face of
some mountain somewhere you'd never
been in a clay bowl you poured by hand
in a catch-try for the orange peels for the
collection of acid and rind and you try to
piece things back together one by one
try to stop time and speak backward in
tongues to bind the vinyl coat with wax

you close your eyes and imagine decay
dissolving fruit falling up to the branch
and striking with enough force to fuse stem
and wood but things don't move that way
here gravity pulling from the center
three dimensions collapsing in two like a
photograph as your only love slips by
unnoticed among the passing headlights
her face glinting in the rain like polished
stone a stranger on a streetcar at
dusk

The Picnic

The sun rises in a clockwork
of brass,

in a slow sitar bend,

this town's two
or three steeples like

two or three goats on the hill
above the fen.

Take this fruit

and we'll sit on the grass
and watch the beetles crawl,

beetles who know all
there is to know

about means and ends.

Just a Few Places I've Been

In North Carolina, the kudzu grew thick all fall and the babies cried in church. We went there, me and Lewis. All these adventures we took. Big road trips to nowhere. "Let's get lost!" we'd say. "On purpose!" As if no one in the world had ever thought of it before.

He'd drive and I'd lean back in the passenger seat, one hand out the window. Someone far away singing a song we knew, a low hum, some kind of spiritual that wasn't ours.

LEWIS LOST HIS JOB AT THE DRIVE-IN RANGE, so we drove all summer. What the heck? we said. This was just after I'd won five thousand dollars in the state lotto. Not bad, I'd said to my mother on the phone. Enough to get away, she said. So that's just what we did, me and Lewis. One hand on the wheel, the other resting easy on my knee. Like a beautiful cliché.

THE FIRST PLACE WE WENT TO WAS DELAWARE, because we'd never been that far south before. Delaware was a border state, we thought, some liminal place between north and south. Well, it wasn't. We learned this on a plaque by the river, as in the Delaware River. Little words carved into a square chunk of wood. Maryland was the border state. Delaware was firmly north. We couldn't wait to cross the Mason Dixon Line, so we got back into the car and kept on driving. But then I fell asleep and Lewis was listening too closely to his Aerosmith tape and we missed the Line entirely. Drove right past it. This was our first disappointment.

We stopped again in Maryland, staring at the Chesapeake.

"Well," said Lewis, "should we go back to see it?"

I stood there looking at the river, which stretched to the edges of the earth just like the ocean. Some dark clouds were blowing our way. A storm coming. Thunderstorm season. Lewis loved the lightning.

"Nah," I said. "let's keep driving. We can see it on the way back."

We slid back into Lewis' pea green Chevy, *nineteen seventy-four*, he loved to say to strangers when they asked, *year of my birth*. Strangers found Lewis peculiar but interesting. The kind of person they'd chat with at the diner counter, eating pastrami sandwiches on a lunch break. Chummy.

His pants were always too short, like he was still growing and they couldn't keep up, ankles exposed in a way that made me want to kiss him. "Flood coming?" Maybelline, High-School-Beauty-Queen, would say to Lewis in town. That was her actual name. Maybelline. Strutted around Orleans, Massachusetts like some movie star's tasty treat, only no one liked her. Not really. They called her that name with an ironic edge to

their tongues.

Lewis and I had this thing, finally, *this summer thing* is how Lewis called it. He thought of us being together as just a fling. But for me, it had been something longer-coming (waiting through junior and senior year and these last six working months), and I was swallowing it whole.

AFTER MARYLAND, WE DROVE ALL NIGHT until we reached Georgia, around eleven o'clock the next morning. Sixteen hours in the car. Quick stops for pee breaks and French fries. Lewis' mother would have had a fit. She wouldn't have fried food in her house. Wouldn't eat it or let Lewis eat it, either. "Our bodies are our temples!" she'd say in a very calm, emphatic voice.

Georgia is quite a bit hotter than Delaware, I can tell you that for a fact. And it's lucky, too, because it was in Athens that Lewis' beautiful nineteen seventy four pea green car broke down. Just up and quit, like they say.

"Shit," he said. "You got enough for a mechanic?"

He turned to me all blue-eyed. A certain strange beauty to his ugly face. Crooked nose and bony cheeks and all I saw was God.

"Lewis, we have more money than this car and two of its brothers and sisters are worth, put together. Of course I got money for a mechanic."

"But we still have months to go. We gotta save it. Maybe we ought to take the bus?"

We agreed to give it a trial run, the Greyhound. Lewis had never ridden a bus before, because he'd never gone anywhere very far away. Never had any reason to, really. The farthest he'd been from home was Maine, for his father's funeral five years back. A man he didn't even know and he had to pay fifty dollars each way to see him buried. His mother insisted. My mother said, *What a waste*. And I said, I think his mother's paying his way. And she said, *No, I mean the man*. Turned out my mother knew his father once, a long time ago, when they were both teenagers. But that is another story for another time.

I had ridden the Greyhound many times. I'd go to see my sister and her family in Philadelphia every year, so I got on in Chatham and rode all the way south with a kink west. We saw the Liberty Bell each time, her little girls holding my hands. Some kind of tradition Bess couldn't let go of. Something our uncle used to do with us every summer.

We bought two tickets South, to Gainesville, Florida. We'd leave in the morning.

That night, we slept on the university campus lawn, where hardly anyone walked – so quiet it was like a ghost town, except for those cicadas humming a rage all around us. Electric-wire-in-the-rain bugs. What a racket.

But we took advantage of all that noise. Sweetened the air around us, touching in the night, and then fell into a hard sleep in the humidity.

LEWIS LEARNED QUICK THAT THE GREYHOUND is no picnic. A man to his right sleeping on his shoulder, woman in the back yakking about her grandkids playing Little League and Football—their positions, their strengths as players—two girls up front on their cell phones the whole way. A couple of friends sitting side by side, shouting into their phones about the party they were planning for Friday. At The Rhino. Eight o'clock.

"We ought to go," said Lewis.

"Sure," I said. "Sounds like a rager."

Well, we got out in Gainesville and had a look around. What's to see in Gainesville? Crocodiles? Palm trees? Some brick buildings lined up along the roads? Yes. All of these things.

And a yellow Victorian house all big and square on a pretty green lot. And a man in camouflage carrying his baby (we hope it's his baby, we said laughing), down the street, blue bundle in his arms, wearing his boots in ninety degrees. And a woman in a pink dress that was too tight for her rear end, practically splitting the dress wide open, swish-swashing down Main Street.

We took a crocodile tour, which is how Lewis lost the very tip of his finger. You don't really need the very end of your finger; it makes you look even better, *rugged and tough*. I kept telling him this, all the way to North Carolina, back in the pea green car. I was trying to make him feel better, because Lewis always loved his hands—long lean fingers that his mother said were like his father's. But he couldn't hear it.

The swamp around us sang with frogs and the water sloshed against the edge of the boat. A white plastic canopy arched over our heads so the sun couldn't reach us. The riverbanks were jagged and muddy, as if the land was sliding slowly into the river.

The man at the front of the pontoon boat wore a red striped shirt that stretched across his sagging belly. He had a megaphone that he talked into.

"On your left, ladies and gentlemen, is where we often see the biggest darned 'gators you ever seen. Ten feet long. Hungry females. Keep your hands in."

We looked left. Black water splashed against the boat, green damp trees beyond the banks. So humid there the air practically dripped on us.

"You see anything, Lou?" I said. I leaned toward him. He was on the outside edge. Our sweaty arms were squashed together for a moment. Disgusting bliss.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all."

"Where where where?" screamed two little boys at the back of the boat.

They were pointing far away, upriver, screaming about what they saw. "Big croc! Big croc!" they said. They jumped up and down, rocking the boat, a flimsy little vessel, really. Their parents rushed back with their fanny packs and baseball hats, ready for a monster.

A moment later, the father called up: "A log. Just a log." And the mother said, "Boys, enough."

She walked back to the front of the pontoon, where the megaphone man was preparing a bucket of popcorn to pass around. She said, "They've been doing this the whole trip, talking about crocodiles. Pointing to rocks and logs and even dogs."

She leaned her head back against the plastic seat.

"They're alligators," said the megaphone man, and handed the bucket of popcorn to a quiet old woman in the front.

No one suspected that this was the last moment we would see Lewis' finger in its entirety. But the little boys ran up to the front, lost their balance when they reached me, and knocked me hard against Lewis, who fell against the boat, his left arm flung into the water. Underneath the surface. Where an alligator waited, patiently, as good alligators do, biding their time.

Snap.

The fingertip was gone. I screamed and Lewis cried and the two little boys just looked at Lewis stunned, in what their mother said later, when it looked like Lewis wouldn't die, was the longest span of quiet they'd had in a week. She and the boys waved us off from the Gator Tour Lobby and the Megaphone Man, Harvey, drove us to the hospital, red striped belly just inches from the steering wheel. Lewis held a white towel on his finger, the blood oozing through. Then came a long wait in the Gainesville Hospital's emergency room. I read *People*. Stars getting married and breaking up, breeding along the way. We walked out with fifteen stitches and some Tylenol.

"Not even codeine," said Lewis. "What a rip-off."

But we emailed some pictures back home of his stitched up finger and a shot of the pontoon boat (when we first got on, of course, not after the bite). My mother got a thrill out of that. Warned me to be more careful. Not to lose any of my fingers. Lewis' mother asked if he was being mindful of his temple.

IN ALABAMA, LEWIS LOST ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS. We didn't know how. It just slipped out of his pocket. I got mad and walked alone for two blocks. Fast mean steps. Finally, though, at the corner where the bank stood tall red brick, I turned and waited for him to catch up.

Then, in Tennessee we got so lost we slept in the car for a night and tried to work it out in the morning. When we woke up, sunrise was working hard to make us smile—reds and oranges like I've never seen. God singing

hallelujah in the rays. Rolling green hills like some backwoods version of the promised land. Even Lewis thought so. Even he said, "This is a God moment."

We made our way back to North Carolina, greeting the south with what they said were our Yankee accents and funny ways. *Wicked*, we said. *Rad*. Words they didn't use. *Y'all. Sure is nice. Susie Lee, what's your last name?* **Lee** is my last name. Oh, I see.

And North Carolina hung onto us for awhile. For two long months. It's funny how that can happen, how you can land in a place and it sticks to you more than you stick to it, and somehow, you end up there until it is a piece of you, really. Until it is something you can't—don't want to—let go of.

This was what happened to us.

LEWIS AND I SET UP IN A LITTLE BED AND BREAKFAST on Rhubarb Lane in Davidson, North Carolina, college town divided by railroad tracks, black and white – also a cliché, but these things you can't make up or cover. These things are true.

We were in Davidson when we realized I had one thousand dollars left. Between gas and food and the mechanic (oh, that greedy mechanic) and places to sleep, it had all slipped away. So, we decided to stretch it out for awhile. We'd been gone a month already and we liked the feel of traveling. Besides, what did we have waiting for us back home? Lingering tourists at the Cape for vacation, and once they thinned out, it was just people we'd known forever living along the crooked finger of land that had always been ours, which was beckoning us now to come home. We refused.

We got jobs at the Cushion Café downtown, little place filled up with relics of the college football team. Scrawny boys in tucked-in uniforms with well-combed hair parted evenly to one side and greased to stay. Helmets tucked under their arms. Old cleats, browning, hung up on the walls by their laces. Little fan flags in purple and green pinned above the booths.

"We are famous for our milkshakes and our tuna melts," said the owner. Fat man in a white apron. Long sad drawl, drooping eyes. Hound dog of a man.

"Taste," he said, handing a cool metal shaker to me and Lewis, who stood beside me on one hip.

I tasted. Chocolate. Thick. Delicious. Behind me the door rang open and closed, little strip of hot air drifting to us before the air conditioner killed it. A tall blonde man walked in.

"Morning, Tucker," said the owner. Dill. Like the pickle. Such a name.

"It's a frappe," I said.

"You Yankees. It's a *milkshake*. Y'all made up that name. Frappe. Psh."

He shook his head and turned away, toward the counter at the other side of the restaurant. "You want to work here, you call it a milkshake, y'hear?"

While Dill had his back turned at the register, Lewis took a quick sip of milkshake and kissed me behind my ear – cold wet lips that sent a chill down my spine, cool spiky tendrils riveting through my hands.

Dill turned to us again.

"Yes, sir," said Lewis. Lewis had learned some manners since we'd been in the south. Sir and Ma'am going all over town, nodding hello with a smile when we walked down the street. I'd never seen the boy so happy. He even stopped sulking about his lost fingertip. With the help of the owner, he turned it into a legend. Told the customers about it. "You like to hear about my alligator attack?" he'd say, finger jutting into the air, abbreviated.

Everyone nodded yes, please.

LEWIS BECAME FAMOUS IN THIS TOWN. Over the weeks. As the Yankee who had survived the alligator attack. Famous among the kids, alright, but still famous. They'd run in after school and make him tell it again and again, little heads propped up on their hands, jaws dropped low, as they listened, sipping milkshakes. Milkshakes. Dill said it was good for business and told every new person about Lewis' finger.

Even the college girls, who liked something about Lewis' way. *Mysterious*, I heard one of them say. She started to come in on a regular basis, sitting in his section only, which was the front of the restaurant, and eyeing him hungry as she watched him walk away, even though there was a big fat burger sitting on her plate. And a boyfriend on the football team, Dill said when I asked. Running back.

Days and then two and half weeks passed and Lewis and I had not touched in the night. He slept on his side at the B and B, turned away from me now. I stared up at the ceiling, red floral sheet pulled up to my chin, wondering what to do. The air conditioner blew its chill over me, and Lewis kicked the blankets off as he rolled to his back. One morning on our walk to work, just as we passed the one-pump gas station, Lewis said, "Let's take a little breather," and when I said, "Is this about Mitzy?" he said, "Don't be ridiculous. We don't want to get serious, do we?"

What could I do but call my mother and go to church. Plenty of churches there to attend, so I went to the Presbyterian one right on campus, and when that didn't suit me (too stiff!), the Episcopalian a block down, which seemed too showy (tambourines and microphones and stage lights), so then, two miles away, I found the Baptist church, where people sang and laughed in service. A strange freeing thing, this way of praying.

But I felt funny going there. Like I was barging in.

So I stopped for awhile, altogether. And instead I researched this blonde girl. Mitzy. Almost as bad as Maybelline.

My mother said, "Keep your friends close, your enemies closer." She loved her sayings. *Don't complain about the darkness if you can light a candle. Early bird gets the worm. Do your best and God will do the rest. Leave room for the Holy Ghost when you go dancing.*

Well, the last one, who could keep that sort of promise.

COLLEGE GIRLS AT DAVIDSON DROVE BMW's and Mercedes. *But used!* they said sometimes when Lewis or I mentioned it.

Lewis showed them his *nineteen seventy four* pea green Chevy.

"A classic," he said, one hand arcing over it in the parking lot. It was always the same. I would roll my eyes and storm back to the Cushion Café, hoping he'd notice. No such luck. One day, a week after we'd decided to take a break but kept on sleeping in the same bed (I laid there hoping for the first few nights, and then stewing each night after), I followed him out and promised myself I'd stay there in the heat-wave parking lot. Promised to *do something*. My mother's magnet on the refrigerator all my life: *Do something!*

He gave his usual talk, two girls with bows in their hair behind him, going ooo! ooo! like a couple of trained birds.

"It's in mint condition," he said. "A real rare find."

They giggled, stepped toward it. One of them, the one in the skirt that practically showed her business, said, "Can we sit in it?"

"You've sat in a car before, surely," I said. Crossing my arms. Apron too much in this weather. Mid-September and still in the eighties. Lewis wiped the sweat from his craggy brow. Big black eyebrows from his father's side, he said. He'd seen pictures. He wore a black t-shirt. I heard Mitzy tell him he looked sexy in black. Last week. When he'd set her check on the table. She left ridiculous tips, so big they were insulting. "You won't accept ten dollars for a five dollar bill, will you, Lewis?" I asked one afternoon. He just grinned and tucked it into the pocket of his black t-shirt. Black every day. "We're getting rich," he said. "This is way better than the Drive-in Range. Shoulda moved here ages ago."

"Sickening," I said. "Gluttony is a sin."

"Lighten up, Suse," he said. This is when I knew we were in trouble.

So, in the parking lot, I stepped forward, taking action. Saving us, really. Beause if Lewis didn't have the guts to resist, I sure did.

"There's a line of rust along this edge," I said, pointing to the base of the door, front to back. "You see? The paint's chipped away."

Lewis said, "What? There's no rust there, Susie."

The girls looked at each other, back and forth, big owl eyes.

"Sure is. It's been there for years. You know it, too, Lewis."

He looked at me narrow. Stood there with his hands in the front pocket of his apron. Stupid sun beating down on us hard, reflecting off the pave-

ment and the glass windows of the Cushion Café and the windows of the car and all the green metal, just slicing into us.

He turned slowly to the girls. "Ladies," he said. He opened the front door. "Step in. We'll go for a ride."

They sighed and slid in, one in front, and then, when he opened the back door, the other in the back. Into my seat, my passenger seat for our long adventure summer. For our whole long lives, kindergarten holding hands to the busstop, middle school with braces and Mr. Halo the meanest math teacher that ever was (a united front, was our tactic when he picked on us), and then high school and graduating and long working days at the Merry Mart, the Woodberry Inn, the Drive-in Range. All of it swept away with the rumble of the engine and the laughter of two snide giggling girls, who waved their fingers in a mean slow fan at me, knowing that they'd won.

They drove away, even though Lewis had two hours left on his shift, and I—I covered for him, like a ninny. A ninny in love, said my mother when I cried to her that night.

FOR SEVERAL DAYS WE DIDN'T TALK. Worked the Cushion Café like a couple of strangers, smiling robotically to all the customers. College kids and professors and people from town in for a bite. Most of them white, because the black families stayed on the other side of town, except occasionally. In the Cushion Café there were birthday milkshakes and newborn babies over women's shoulders and the kids still coming in (fewer now, but still) to hear Lewis' story.

"A fingertip," I said under my breath. "Just a fingertip."

Dill heard me. Said in his hounddog way, "Susie, he'll come back. Don't you worry, girl. He'll come back to you."

I made a grimace face. Ugly and mad. "How do you know, Dill?"

I was begging for hope. Lewis had taken a separate room at the B and B, now that he'd saved some from his tips, Mitzy's the lion's share. I told him one afternoon that he had used me, and that I would not cover for him anymore. He could get fired for all I cared.

"I know a thing or two," Dill said.

"Is that why you have such sad eyes? Because of the thing or two?"

"Let's just say," he said. "I had the most beautiful two sons in the world. And a wife could knock your socks off."

"What happened?" I asked.

But Dill turned away. Wouldn't look at me for the rest of the day. Washed dishes. Whistled a sad and lonely tune, which I was singing right along with in my heart.

DILL INTRODUCED ME TO A BOY NAMED TUCKER, who took me to the top of Chambers, the big brick building with a white dome in the center of

campus. Each path led to Chambers, one from every direction—North, South, East and West.

We walked in through the open doors, never locked because this place was run by honor. *Honor-bound*, said every student like a mantra. They left their bikes unlocked. Loose dollar bills stayed where they were on the ground as if their owners would come find them. Excess change from soda machines was left in the little metal divot, unclaimed. I imagined all these pieces staying where they were forever, until vines grew over them or they rusted into place, all these loose ends taking root.

Tucker walked us up to the third floor, where we squeaked down the hall in our sneakers. He turned to me with one finger to his lips. “The Giant might get us,” he said. The Giant was the guard everyone feared. He was six foot seven. Black. Had three children and ran a nursery with his wife, working at Davidson part time to fill the gap.

Dill told me once when he came into the Cushion Café. But none of the students knew this.

“I think we’re safe,” I said.

Tucker picked the lock of an old wooden door with a credit card, sliding it through the crack and then pushing. We slipped into a dark storage room where things were leaning in at angles and boxes were piled haphazard. At the far end of the room, a small window let the moonlight in, casting a slivered glow on the edges of everything and shaping oblong shadows all over.

We climbed a ladder. Pulled ourselves to the roof, and there we were: above everything. Stars shining up in that thick blue sky, and campus planted out below us like a topographical map. Treetops. Wide grass-shadowed lawns. Little lights of Main Street glittering half a mile away.

“Not bad, huh?” said Tucker. I looked over at his moonshine face, which was all lit up like Christmas. He was waiting for a reaction.

“Beautiful,” I said. “I’ve never been up so high.”

And it was true. But most of all I was missing Lewis. Wished Lewis was there for this kind of treat. I didn’t want to share those stars and the whole world sprawled out below us with this Tucker, who was blonde and good, with a long straight nose and football shoulders—but not interesting. Not mine.

We sat on the ledge at the front of the building, our legs on either side of the robed statue that stood above the school’s motto, which was etched into the stone: *Alenda Lux Ubi Orta Libertas*. A little plaque on the lawn explains that revolutionaries wrote the Declaration of Independence right near us. *Let learning be cherished where liberty has arisen.*

When Tucker leaned in to kiss me, I kissed him back and tried to like it. But after a minute of his hand on my cheek and him pulling back to gaze at me—too much sweetness for a couple of strangers—I made a face,

by accident, a grimace, then caught myself and smiled and said, "Actually, I'm feeling a little scared of heights."

Which I wasn't, not at all. But it got us down quick and painless.

At the edge of campus, by the church, we said a crisp: goodnight, and his was weighted with a little twist of anger at the end (*goodnightuh.*) like he was throwing something back at me.

FINALLY, AFTER A WEEK OF WORKING and walking through town alone, poking in at the dress shop, at the bookstore, reading on the campus lawn pretending to be a student, Lewis came by my room and said he was going on a date with this one, this blonde girl who called him sexy. This Mitzy.

"That a fact?" I said. "You're going prep-school now? The thing we've always avoided?"

"Susie," said Lewis, "we don't have a thing. Dill told me about Tucker."

"That's right," I said. "No thing. I have no claim on you. We have nothing. And there's Tucker to consider. So go on, then. Go on and have your fun."

THEY WENT. THEY WENT ON A DATE ON A TUESDAY NIGHT. Because Mitzy didn't have class on Wednesdays. She could stay out as late as she liked. They went to Krup's Kanyon, rumored to be owned by the KKK, which didn't bother either of them, morally. It was a bar beside the limestone quarry, where kids jumped in off the rocks. Skinnydipping late at night. I knew why they chose this place. All that potential.

But they didn't swim. Not as far as I know. They had drinks, and they laughed some, and they even had a little kiss. This is how Lewis told it later. The story never changed, not since that night, not even in the slightest detail. So I believed him.

After the bar they went to the grocery store two exits down the highway to pick up some beer. A six pack of Piney Brew, which Lewis had grown to love. And this is where I saw them, at the grocery store.

What would you have done if? I asked him for months after. *If it hadn't happened? What would you have done? Would you have slept with her?* He'd say, *Jesus, Susie Lee, I love you. I love you. Have always loved you. That ought to be enough.*

I harassed him sometimes to his limits, because I was so scared of not enough love. Of something slipping away, forever, between us.

I'd noticed on my way that the sky was turning a funny color gray, so gray it was almost yellow, a strange look so late at night. Tornado warning on the radio. I heard the DJ's voice over the song as I drove Dill's SUV to the store, some kind of station screw up and the DJ was saying, *This is the wrong song. This isn't number nine!* What, I announced that already, and the

song kept playing right along with his voice, neither of them hearing the other. A slow violin and a piano and this man's voice, all out of sync.

"It's too late for tornadoes," said Dill, "just go get the buns." We were having a cook-out at his house. Barbeque on the deck and no buns for the hot dogs. This was my cheer-up cook-out, a surprise from Dill. He'd even bought my favorite relish—red pepper.

I ran into them in the beer aisle, hands in my pockets because of the chill. Mitzy was bent in front of the glass row of windows, leaning forward. Lewis was looking up and away, at the lights, the ceiling. Later, he would say he didn't know it was coming, but I think he sensed it, the way he was looking up, sort of waiting.

He said no. He was thinking about me, he said. In that moment. He was missing me.

That I appeared like an angel.

And then, before any of us could say a word to each other, just as we stood watching, mouths open, about to speak, that moment was frozen that way forever—because then there was a roar that stepped in and took over, shutting us all up. Ripping through the building in some terrifying sound. Some sound we had never heard, not in all our hurricanes on the Cape, right on the tip of the world, taking the brunt of the blow. No, nothing like this.

Tornado. Taking up the building and traveling with it in its windy yellow arms. Ripping off walls and floor and ceiling. Metal beams bent upwards. People screaming all around us, and running, running for the front door, as if that would save them, to run into it.

We ran to the back of the store and stood in the doorway to the storage section, rubber doors pushed behind us, wind howling—yes, howling! —and all of us clinging to each other, hoping for the best. Hoping we would make it out.

I prayed out loud, screaming to the sky.

Lewis put his arm around me in the doorway, his other arm around Mitzy, trying to protect us both.

"Get your hand off me," I screamed. The wind was tearing at my hair, pushing it in my face so I couldn't even tell Lewis off right. "I don't need your help. Protect Mitzy," I said. "She looks like she needs it."

Mitzy was hiding in Lewis' shoulder, and shaking. Poor sad girl, I thought, you should've worn pants.

"What's your problem?" Lewis screamed back. Boxes from the storage room lifted into the sky, spinning. "You went out with Tucker, Susie. Jesus."

"No I didn't. I didn't even like him. We just went to dinner and climbed Chambers and I went home. You're the one who broke us up. You're the one needed an adventure."

"Well I wouldn't have asked out Mitzy if it hadn't been for blonde Southern Tucker, with his big swagger walk."

And then Mitzy screamed: "I love you, Lewis! I just wanted to say, because of all this, I wanted you to know!" She did, screamed it right at him in the middle of the tornado. Glass breaking and metal bending, and Mitzy said I love you. I could have torn her head off and thrown it up into that God-finger stirring up our world, drenching us in rain and grocery store sauces—soy and mayonnaise and who knows what else—I could have, but I just gave Lewis a look, which I know he read right. I was telling him he'd really made a mess, hadn't he? I was saying, Ha, like to see you get out of this one. Both of us so angry I thought maybe we'd made that tornado up, maybe it was something we'd created with all that fierceness between us.

"She's waiting," I said. I shouted over Lewis' shoulder so Mitzy could hear. He stared at me for a long second, eyes all dark, and then he turned to Mitzy. I could just see the edge of his face, jaw moving up and down.

"Yeah?" he said. "Well, good. Because I love you, too."

THE STORM WENT AWAY FAST, lifting off land and spinning itself away. The grocery store in Davidson, North Carolina was the only thing hit, the roof torn off and bottles and boxes and cartons of things strewn all the way across town. Dill would tell us later that he woke up with ketchup bottles and milk containers on his front lawn, wondering who had vandalized his house.

In the silence after, no one moved. Or spoke. There were three breaths of stillness when the whole world paused. We looked around to make sure we were still alive.

And then Mitzy turned to me and said, "I'm sorry, Susie," because she knew all along what she'd done, and she thought that now she and Lewis would run off together and get married, that this was just the beginning for them.

"It's fine," I said. "You two have fun."

I left them there in the grocery store and picked my way over the refuse. No one was hurt; everyone walked outside, stunned, looking up to make sure it was really gone. They pointed to the roof, whose metal beams were still turned up, crooked necks reaching for the sky.

I got into Dill's gold SUV, which was only a little bit scratched, and drove through kudzu darkness all night, humming old church songs to myself and crying.

WHEN I FINALLY GOT BACK AT SIX IN THE MORNING, Dill was waiting at the counter of the Cushion Café, face in his hands, going, "What took you so long, Susie? Where *did* you go last night? I thought you'd been killed." He'd just learned about the tornado on the radio, how it had hit the grocery store

and that was all, the only spot in town where it dipped down and then swooped back up again and headed for the coast. By afternoon, they'd tell us that it had fizzled out at sea, harming no one.

Before I could answer Dill, Lewis walked in behind me. I heard the bell ring and then his voice saying, "Susie, I've been looking for you all night."

I turned to see his wicked face, ready to tell him everything he deserved.

He walked right up to me, looked into my red eyes, ugly by then from all that crying, and he touched my chest with his abbreviated alligator finger, saying first, "I'm so sorry. You know that wasn't true," and then, only: "Home," in a cracking E.T. voice that made me laugh and also love him again.

I let him back into our room on Rhubarb Lane, where we stayed until November. Almost all the leaves had fallen. We wanted to get back before Thanksgiving. The night before we'd leave, Lewis sank into the rose-sheeted bed and curled up against my back, staying just that way all night. The air outside chilled into the year's first frost, all the flowers curled and wilted by morning, and each blade of grass coated in white. And we thought that night, and for the whole year that followed, that we would be together forever, the two of us in love, the first ones to feel it like this.

We didn't last much more than the year before we slipped away from each other, me asking too many questions (reassure, reassure), and Lewis wanting something big and wild from the world that—he thought—I didn't have. Maybe, right then, I didn't. But I would one day. One day, he'd come looking for me again.

THAT TORNADO MORNING AT THE CUSHION CAFÉ when Lewis and I found each other again, Dill took one look at our faces and got this slow sweet grin, and his eyes lost their hound dog look for a minute while he saw himself in his own good past, his whole other life that he never told to us. Living for a moment in sweet private secrets. Rooms with doors that close on shadows, rooted that way forever in our minds. **F**

Traveling To The Big Empty

is first a turn inward.

The getting comfortable with awkward self-consciousness.
Or knocking heads with loss,
absence a hailstorm of words
wiping clear the fields of the unspeakable.
And seeing it all, then, as a thing beautiful.

Hideous nothing is everything of value:
the cat staring as at the unseen ghost,
knowing that it's there, as a past written
or as the inevitable turn at the next corner.
It's being haunted and the fear of sleep
and the fear of life and of missing it.

Soon enough the trip outward comes,
to the territory of all things significant, even there.
All the inflection, all the inference,
from the singing drop of rain to the deluge,
the solitary snowflake or the white out.
The night breathes like a man leaving us,

and the day yawns because the departure
was nothing, after all, unusual.
The plains are the flat line of a heart beat
and every pitch of hill or mountain the man revived.
Electricity in the world is the spark of blackbird,
the shock of wren. And we bear witness.

Babel

The dusting of footprints scatter
across the ocean. With it, jasmine
tea leaves, curry powder, pottery shards.

There are translations that never reach
the ears. In the beginning the Word gave breath
to the hand, narrator of needless tragedies.

Childbirth, before the Father cursed it,
came without trauma—a silkworm
spinning cocoons in the mulberry tree.

Everything was named after the seventh day:
weeping willow and goose feather down,
bread sweet as clover honey.

Out Of Round

Oh, the moon's been torn
to shreds by metaphors.
On a clear night you can see
the yellow shards float
like broken plastic toys,
like gilded stepping stones
thrown at random. Oh,
the manhandled moon can't
inspire anymore, and the stars
are much too distant. Soon only
the old will remember
it whole and round
and tell the young about it,
whose minds will be bored by perfect
icons and news older than themselves,
or their selves will ever get.

The Making of an Insomniac

Once upon a time, in paradise since lost, lived a sleep-indulged, sleep-happy girl who fell asleep whenever, wherever and stayed asleep at length and at will.

A deep-dreaming sleep junkie, she was—very much her father's child.

After six days of hard field labor, this father, Dubby, devoted his Sunday afternoons, post church and substantial midday meal, to napping on the living room couch. Certainly he deserved the rest. Add to the constant worry of equipment breakdowns and field pests, the backbreaking effort of digging drains with a shovel, weeding acres with a hoe. During planting and harvest seasons, he worked first to final light, and in all but the rarest of circumstances worked alone, unable to afford hired help.

On those Sunday afternoons while Dubby napped, his daughter stared. Not for purposes of mischief or mayhem. It soothed the daughter to watch her father sleep. Sometimes she'd bring in a cat or dog to watch along with her. Occasionally she'd ape his deep breathing, chest swell for chest swell, fake snore for real snore. When her father opened an eye and caught her hovering, never did he ask what she was up to or shoo her elsewhere. He'd grunt, say "hey," roll over onto his side and drift off again, the very image of peace.

Or so I recall.

But who can trust memory any more than fairy tales?

WHEN I WAS TEN, A NEIGHBOR RAN OVER THE FAMILY cur and crushed his right hip, dog bones no match for a Chevy truck. From necessity and through experience farmers tend to be unsentimental, fatalistic folk. My parents' generation expected to lose dogs, cats, pigs, cows and horses the same way they expected hurricanes to blow in periodically from the Atlantic and devastate in a few hours what had taken six months to grow. Kids tend to be more stubborn in their fate-resisting, also more melodramatic. Clinging to my wounded dog, I bawled and begged until my father broke precedent and agreed to a vet visit.

A poor farmer, yes, but also a daddy.

Dr. Dahl of Elizabeth City worked out of an office attached to his house and wore khaki, uniform fashion, shirt and trousers. Besides the implements of his trade, his office contained stacks of pulp fiction, pride of place going to James M. Cain. A taste for sensationalist fiction, a livelihood earned by patching up the bloody and broken—there's laudable symmetry in that pairing. While my father and I waited, Dr. Dahl patched up our broken

critter and afterward sent the three of us on our way with a paper bag full of suggested reading.

While recuperating, the dog snoozed on the back porch. During that period, my father also napped on the back porch, the ailing dog resting his paw on Dubby's shoulder as if the two were longtime sleeping buds. My mother noticed the shift from couch to porch and commented on it; I also noticed and reoriented my sleep watch, gazing through the screen at the two of them from a kitchen chair. Anyone trying to get in or out of the house while they snoozed had to use the front door, the back entrance blocked by dreamers. My mother complained because their obstacle threw off her ramped up/waste-no-motion timing, but I didn't mind the detour, perfectly willing to circle the house or slog a mile of ditches if need be.

My daddy and my dog were sleeping. I couldn't have wished better for either.

WHEN WE WERE BOTH PRE-TEENS, ON FRIDAY NIGHTS, my best friend, Shirley, often slept over at my house. We'd gab until we conked out—typically toward dawn—then make up the deficit by sleeping till noon, unaware and undisturbed by the hustle and bang of breakfast prep, morning chores, the perpetual slamming of screen doors. Around midday we'd rise, primp, chow down on cheeseburgers, bat a tennis ball back and forth, adjourn inside and resume our marathon chat, prelude to another conk out.

Sheer bliss, the entire schedule.

THOSE OF US WHO VENTURED OFF TO SLEEP-AWAY camp in Currituck County during the 1960s boarded a borrowed church bus and made the trip to the 4-H camp in Manteo. The Head/Heart/Hands/Health enterprise, added to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension program in 1914, championed the learn-by-doing approach and rewarded industrious farmers' kids with ribbons blue, white and red. During the school year, we 4-Hers completed and wrote up our individual projects ("cooking" deviled eggs, raising brood sows), but come the summer we gathered en masse along the shores of the Croatan Sound. Concrete defined the experience. Pathways and driveways: concrete. Sleeping quarters: concrete. On concrete, we showered. On concrete, we dined. On concrete we roughhoused, fell and bled. And when the wind blew through, concrete formed the base of the mini sand dunes that linked craft building to mess hall.

At night we slept four to the room in two bunk beds. Through some lottery (paper/scissors/rock?) I got the top bunk and my year-older cousin, Linda, the bunk below. Thin and ripe with mildew, those seen-lots-of-kids mattresses; needle sharp, those rusty iron bedsprings. Regardless, I slept so deeply even rolling off and smack-landing on the concrete floor didn't entirely wake me. Climbing back up, I stepped, Linda says, on her hair.

She also says she pinched my ankle to hurry me along. Since she typically, reflexively, pinched in retaliation, there's no reason to doubt that detail. Of the sequence, first to last, I remember only this: I woke where I started, on the top bunk, snuggled in.

TO SWIM IN THE CROATAN SOUND meant hiking beyond concrete, through a yaupon grove. Along that patchily shaded trail, we kicked up bits of burning sand and snapped towels at one another, messing around while we could. No horseplay allowed in the water. To keep track of us in the Croatan Sound, the swimming instructor had erected a corkboard with numbers. A number turned "in," toward cork, meant the camper was in the water; number turned "out" meant the camper had returned landside. Before each lesson, the swimming instructor harped on the importance of the check in and out board while we fidgeted, restrained from diving in by his authority—but just.

Then came the afternoon when, wrapped in damp towels and queued up in standard Head/Heart/Hands/Health fashion, we counted off and were told to count off again. And again. In all three instances, our numbers were off by one. On the board, we now noticed, a single number faced inward. In a voice that alarmed us far more than the wayward digit, the swimming instructor ordered us into a different kind of line, one that stretched to his left and right, parallel to the water's edge. Arms linked, when told to walk forward, we walked forward. If our fellow camper had drowned and sunk, if that sunken body had snagged on seaweed or other underwater debris, our death chain aimed to free it. The water sloshed around our ankles, then our knees, and then our waists. No one joked or whimpered. No one said a word. We walked staring straight ahead, not looking down as we usually did to avoid antagonizing vengeful crabs, praying, on that expedition, to disturb crabs and only crabs. Until the water reached the shortest camper's neck, we walked and then we turned and sloshed back.

We didn't dislodge or discover a body, young, old, friend or stranger. As it turned out, hurrying to the bathroom, the missing camper had forgotten to turn her number—the best of all outcomes, but because that happy ending took awhile in arriving, during the anxious interim a patch of summer lost its carefree glisten for campers and counselors alike. The night after our water walk I couldn't have been the only sun-toasted, concrete-scabby 4 H-er afraid to close her eyes, afraid dream would replay the day's trauma. I couldn't have been the only one afraid, after lights out, to feel again the Croatan pressing hard against my shins and thighs—harder than I thought those calm waters could press in resistance or warning. But whether I counted as one of several scarcely mattered. I was shunning sleep at sleep-away camp.

My first bout of agitated wakefulness.

A break in the pattern.
A novelty, an exception.
—Or so I presumed.

MY SOUTHERN HIGH SCHOOL WAS NAMED for a Yankee philanthropist who bought 2500 acres on an island in the Currituck Sound after World War I because he loved to duck hunt. With his third wife, a Mississippi belle, Joseph Palmer Knapp settled on Mackey Island and together the couple attempted to improve the county's dismal schools, most operating without heat, lights or running water and none in session for longer than three months of the year. The Knapps generously funded two schools, three "teacherages" to board instructors and underwrote a hot lunch program, but before any educational facility in the county bore his name (and only his), Joseph Palmer Knapp had been dead ten years.

During my era at J.P. Knapp High School, the student body, all told, numbered fewer than 180—a yeasty microcosm, 180 teenagers. Athletic, social and scholastic rivalries were unrelenting, nasty, supercharged and intensely personal. Classroom intrigue tacked onto locker room intrigue tacked onto lunchroom intrigue. A mix and match of cattiness, cruelty, behind-the-back snickers and in-the-face confrontation. All very exhausting, even for a healthy sixteen-year-old. Every few weeks or so I simply wore out under the pressure, faked sickness and slept in. I needed those breaks; I needed the oblivion and restoration of sleep. To get what I needed, I probably would have done much worse than lie to my mother, but she spared me the escalation. For reasons of her own, I now perceive, on those mornings when, instead of rising, I burrowed deeper, she did no more than check my forehead before she closed the door and left me to it.

AT UNC-CHAPEL HILL, WHILE I LIVED ON CAMPUS, I lived in Parker Dorm, part of a three-dorm residence college. Innovative for its time, Parker featured suites of rooms that opened onto an open-air posterior hallway. In our suite, mine was one of the rooms that faced the hallway and courtyard. In theory, all rooms were identical, but in fact night noise divided them, two by two. The front side of the building took the brunt of street noise and panty raider pleas; the backside, the rush and jabber of co-eds on the go. Nonetheless, when I closed the books, plumped my pillow and switched off my flower-decaled bedside lamp, I slept as if sedated.

TO EARN MONEY FOR A CHARTER FLIGHT TO EUROPE and summer Eurail pass, I took a job waitressing at The Pines the spring semester of my junior year. UNC basketball coach Dean Smith frequented The Pines, so the place had cachet. It was a dark and cavernous, multi-leveled establishment, the highest level an interior balcony accessed by stairs fairly treacherous even

if the climber didn't shoulder a tray of prime rib. A very efficient pro named Mae tutored me in the fine art of table hovering and the unobtrusive distribution of lobster bibs. More importantly, she demonstrated how to get through the constantly swinging kitchen door without getting rammed, dropping my tray or bloodying my nose. Expert guidance notwithstanding, I made a wretched waitress—never calm, visibly panicked. The dim lights probably helped to disguise some of the panic, but a total blackout couldn't have concealed all. (In a statistically significant number of diners, server ineptitude must elicit pity. There is simply no other explanation for my impressive tips.) Past eleven p.m., no new customers were seated, regardless of how creatively they tried to bribe the hostess, which meant the staff knocked off after midnight. Any dating I did began after my shift. Maybe, maybe, I turned in by two-thirty. No matter: the instant I decided to go to sleep, to sleep I went and stayed in that fair land till morning.

ON THE EUROPEAN VENTURE, sooner than expected, my tip cache ran short. Booked on a charter flight, I couldn't fly home early without spending more money, so I decided to hole up in a cheap bed and breakfast on the southern coast of England and by other strict economies stretch the funds remaining. For food, I made do with the breakfast provided and a mid-afternoon fruit pie. For entertainment, I walked an overcast beach and read and reread a falling apart copy of *Anna Karenina*, courtesy of a used bookstall in Switzerland. When a book leaves a lasting impression, where I slept and what I dreamed while reading it figures prominently in the recall. *Anna Karenina* logs in thus: English seaside, mahogany bed, snow and lots of it.

And there, in Camber by the Sea, the sleep idyll ends.

OR DOES IT, SINCE AN ENDING PRESUPPOSES a beginning that builds into continuance that settles into a given that an ending rejects?

BESIDES BEING A PLAGUE, a scourge and despoiler of equanimity, insomnia turns out to be a naysaying quibbler. It quarrels before it accepts. Right now it's quarreling with the previous descriptions of my sleeping past.

Not strictly within the boundaries of accurate is the implication.

Quite possibly a whitewash (if not outright hogwash).

Very likely delusion dressed up as nostalgia.

Sleep *nostalgia*.

That's the charge, the argument, the defamation of character that finally makes me blink. How pathetic. How juvenile. The worship of that which no longer exists, of conditions that no longer apply. The blinder response of a cultist who can't bear to admit that some portion of her paradisiacal drowsing might actually have been sullied by disruption.

It's the doubt, the suspicion, that throws me, that reduces me to fret-

ting about what was, when.

And so, again: *Sleep, A Personal History*.

MY FATHER'S SLEEP COMPOSITE, I'm pleased (and frankly relieved) to report, holds up just fine, second time through. Even subjected to a skeptic's hair splitting and overzealous hunt for inconsistency and contradiction, it withstands the scrutiny, resists revision, remains intact. Dubby was a man who loved to sleep and given the opportunity did so without fanfare or difficulty.

Bravo for him.

Nonetheless, Dubby represents only the male side of my formative household.

First time through, I shortchanged the female influence.

Unconscionable *and* very ill-advised.

Never, in any circumstances, is it a good idea to slight the women.

—Particularly when the two women in closest range, my in-house hyper mother and next-door grumpy grandmother, were both chronically sleep-deprived. Several times a week, as I now recall, my mother left bed to sew or iron clothes. An excess of energy, I thought (or was lead to believe). Up with the owls and the roosters, Grandma Dora watched television nonstop. Because she was bored, because she was lonely, I thought. But maybe she simply chose to stare at a television screen instead of a ceiling when she couldn't fall to sleep.

From our kitchen window, her black and white portable appeared to be a floating box of flickering light.

How could I have forgotten that focus point within rural night?

How could I have not remembered Dora, in her rocking chair, perpetually awake and crabby?

ANOTHER TELEVISION FLASHBACK.

Mom off to her Women's Club meeting, Dad settled in with the newspaper, yours truly planted close, too close, to a broadcast of Walt Disney's "Darby O'Gill and the Little People." Several times I glance over my shoulder to see whether Dubby has lowered the newspaper, hoping he'll be the one to say: "Turn it off. Quit watching that mess. You heard me. Now." But my father keeps reading and I keep watching: filmy banshees, headless coachmen, death dolled up and speeding toward thresholds. By the time my mother returns, I'm not only afraid to go to bed; I'm afraid to leave the living room.

Tucked away, that incident, on some higher shelf of memory. But once the rummaging starts, great heaps of the forgotten come tumbling.

The Year of the Nightlight, for example.

A pink plastic nightlight, its on/off switch a fiery, complementary

red.

When plugged into the outlet next to my bed, that nightlight so peculiarly illuminated my own skin that anytime my arm twitched I succeeded in scaring myself. When the contraption was plugged into the electrical outlet near the foot of the bed, I faced a wall of hooligan shadows. After my parents lost patience with me and my brigade of boogeymen, I confided in cousin Linda (the pincher)—a strategy bred of desperation, but a smart one nonetheless. Once victimized by her own shadow posse, Linda not only understood the dilemma, she'd already discovered and pre-tested a solution.

Beset by creepy shadows?

Name them: Betty, Arnold, Sassafras and Clyde.

Lights out, summon forth those demons for a chat.

ID them before they have chance to leap out and terrify you.

Excellent, excellent advice.

THAT PARKER DORM NIGHT NOISE DESCRIPTION. Some fleshing out required, I now realize.

My roommate, a journalism major, was a scholar, an activist, and a major player on campus. She excelled in the classroom and outside of it she volunteered, organized and led what needed leading, soon distinguishing herself from her trifling, lackluster, so-called peers. A campus honor society for women, The Valkyries—very prestigious as well as very mysterious—took note of Brenda's accomplishments and voted her into their ranks. Given the high-drama spookiness of the induction ceremony, it would have been nice, kind, or just plain commonsensical to alert Brenda's roommate about the pending event, but in keeping with the organization's hush-hush traditions, both the inductee and I turned in for the night none the wiser.

Before I woke sufficiently to hear and identify the actual gong, I dreamed that unsettling noise coming closer, honing in. Much worse: the real gong replicated my dream gong, beat for ominous beat.

I claim I would have appreciated advance warning but no warning in words could have prepared me for five strangers in hooded black robes swooping into my night room brandishing lit candles. As a cluster they moved toward Brenda's bed, then fanned out around it on two sides, forming a semi-circle with Brenda trapped inside. The gonging ceased; the murmuring began; the candles steadily flickered. I can scarcely believe even now that she, I or the two of us in tandem refrained from serially screaming. Bolt upright, sheets to our necks, backs plastered against headboards, we didn't move another inch until one of us was instructed to do so. Wearing pjs, hair nesty, Brenda, as bidden, followed that dark entourage out the door and into the night to the sound of revived gonging. In the wake of her chaperoned departure, I didn't turn on a light, didn't get up, didn't go

to sleep, didn't dare. Fully awake I was and awake I stayed, tensely alert, ears big, eyes bigger, awaiting the safe return of the snatched.

RESIDING IN PARKER DORM AT THE VERY SAME TIME, a co-ed who embodied what lay in store if only I'd known or cared how to interpret the image, decipher the code.

An onsite, ongoing model of a girl and sleep prematurely parted.

English honors student Susan, her nominal bed on the south side of the dorm, adjourned to the second-floor study room around 10 p.m. weekdays and weekends. With her books, notebooks, pens, pencils, highlighters, paper clips and six-pack of Tab, she settled on one of two hideous vinyl couches for the duration. The study room, stark, sterile and morgue grim, was long, narrow, lit by fluorescence and echoy. The floor: black and white scuffed linoleum. The walls: institution green. The single window: bereft of curtains. Above that naked window, an oversized wall clock. Otherwise not a photograph, not a Van Gogh print, not a clothes hook to break the monotony of the space that surrounded honors student Susan, sitting by her lonesome, hour after hour, dressed in fluffy bathrobe and fluffier slippers, clock ticking, fluorescence buzzing, window panes hugging night.

An insomniac in an insomniac's lair.

UNRESTRAINED SPLURGING WASN'T THE REASON my money ran short in Europe. I seldom ate in restaurants, stayed mostly in hostels and, to scrimp further on lodging costs, took a lot of overnight trains. Whereas French and German trains zipped along, Spanish trains proceeded at a pace that seemed to extend rather than conquer night. En route to Barcelona, I shared a compartment with five others, some of those snacking to pass the time, others sleeping or faking the checkout. Whenever I closed my eyes and tried to relax into the jiggle and sway, the songster seated next to me leaned over to spit-croon: "Ooo, baby, baby, issa wile world." My Spanish being what it was—pathetically inadequate—I couldn't say *For the love of God, shut up and let me sleep!* Nor could I think of the Cat Stevens equivalency in English. And so the Spanish night wore on, sleep and I separated by song.

IT WAS IN ITALY, IN FLORENCE, that I caught the nasty cold that morphed into chills and fever. Usually ultra-diligent about sticking to my sightseeing schedule, this day I couldn't muster the energy for art or architecture, however majestic. The room I dozed in played host to several cots in addition to my own, a portion of a private home given over to commerce, but after breakfast the other occupants had cleared out for the day and I was alone. The landlady transacted business in the front parlor, where several of the local lads also lounged, checking out the foreign traffic. I didn't hear the door open. I didn't hear the journey, door to cot, but I could identify

what jumped on top of me: one of the parlor boys, Victor by name. Victor had the advantage of my recline, wooziness and astonishment, but I had the advantage of adrenaline. I got him off. No serious damage inflicted on either side. Even so, prior to that grope and grab, I had never worried about such a thing happening and after it happened, the fear and expectation of repetition lived with me, side by side. Darkness and night most especially raised my guard.

To be absolutely clear: physically, Victor did me no harm. I was neither raped nor near-raped. I kicked; he landed on the floor. Yet our skirmish colored everything from Florence through Camber through the trip back to Gatwick. On that final train ride, a mother and daughter overheard me talking to another American about a filched suitcase, an extra I'd left in an unlocked basement, my security screw-up, my fault, but the mother, holding tight to her daughter's hand, came over to my seat and in recompense invited me to spend my last night in their country in their home. An extraordinarily gracious and generous offer, both touching and embarrassing. I was sorry she had overheard my whining, sorry to have given the impression that I considered England a land of thieves, very sorry to decline her hospitality. But I couldn't have accepted, not just then. In a stranger's house, however kind the stranger, however comfortable the stranger's bed, I wouldn't have been able to sleep. Not a wink.

COLLEGE PREPARES; IT ALSO, IN MOST CASES, postpones the full-bore stresses and worries of adulthood in practice. For my first job, degree in hand, I worked out of a deserted strip mall office from four to eight p.m., scheduling house-call appointments for salesman selling backhoe training courses. As a newly graduated bachelor of arts, before misplacing my talent for sleeping altogether, I slept hard to avoid consciousness of an existence no longer punctuated or defined by the classroom and the letdown of that withdrawal. Ten-, twelve-, fourteen-hour sessions by night, multiple catnaps by day, usually in a chair that was losing its stuffing by the fistfuls. To label the self of that period "depressed" doesn't quite cover the entire symptomatology of my malaise. I was listless, yes, and blue. But I was also stark raving terrified. What if the best was already behind me? What if one day I woke up from my catnap and decided there was no reason, ever, to leave that decomposing chair?

AS WE FLOAT IN OUR MOTHERS' WOMBs, three-quarters of our sleep is REM sleep, rapid eye movement sleep, dream sleep. The instant we're born, the REM percentage drops to fifty percent. Once we become adults, another percentage drop, down to twenty-five. During my molting-in-chairs phase, had I known such statistics, I would have scoffed. I would have scoffed louder had anyone suggested to me—a sleeping *genius*—that I would ever

be deprived of that knack, that crutch, that comfort, that destination, that divine right and trusted means of instantaneous escape.

TO THE MARVEL AND INTEREST OF PROBABLY no one other than myself, my sleep history precisely mimics the sleep histories of legions of insomniacs. Once upon a time we slept with pleasure. Another once upon a time we slept interrupted. And now, God help us wretches, we sleep hardly at all, left to the torments of capricious night, to parameters of darkness inside of which we feel undone, helpless, and mythically alone. Inside of which hope becomes a message written in another language from another millennium. Inside of which nothing good seems doable; nothing bad, avoidable. Inside of which no solutions exist, only complications subjected to further complication.

I, along with some 70 million of my countrywomen and men, abjectly mourn the lost, profoundly crave the denied. Sleep, that "serious and complete thing" (Robert Penn Warren), that "spirit touching earth" (Nina Berberova), that Shakespearean wonder that "knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care" no longer consumes one third of our existence and the time re-distribution is cause for deep, deep sorrow. However much I may wish my situation to be otherwise, the facts of my current condition are these: the want, the need, the *determination* to crawl into bed, close my eyes and sleep until morning simply won't get the job done. To desire is not to achieve or to sustain. Not anymore.

AND SO, AWAKE, I BROOD INCESSANTLY, neurotically, about being awake.

Circadian rhythms, melatonin production, the unwelcome news that caffeine can linger in the body for up to twelve hours. "Short sleepers" have higher metabolic rates, heart rates and body temperatures. Short sleepers also consume more oxygen, secrete more cortisol, which translates: *more stressed*. After eight days and nights of staying awake for charity, disc jockey Peter Tripp hallucinated spiders in his shoes. When REM pioneer Nathaniel Kleitman was asked to define the role of sleep, the scientist/philosopher replied: "Tell me what the role of wakefulness is and I will explain the role of sleep." "Pity us! Oh pity us! We *wakeful*," bemoaned Rudyard Kipling.

Foxes dig up the ground, circle, tamp and circle again before they bed down. Benjamin Franklin favored a well-ventilated bedroom. Someone named Norman Dine filled a fiberglass tub of water, dumped in 25 pounds of salt, heated the mixture to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, eased into that briny bed and tried to sleep afloat. Tuckered out by coup planning, Lenin and Trotsky napped on the floor at the Smolny Convent, awaiting the fall of the Winter Palace. Wilbur and Orville Wright pitched a tent in windy, mosquito-plagued Kitty Hawk and forewent rest for the sake of aviation.

Most memorable celluloid insomniac?

David Bowie as the rapidly aging, sleepless vampire in the film *The Hunger*.

Best description of a sleepless politico in print?

Woodward and Bernstein's *Final Days* sketch of Richard Nixon, roaming the White House corridors, gibbering at the presidential portraits.

Who among the famous and infamous *should* have slept badly before which life-altering event (even if, in fact, they slept like bats):

- Bugsy Siegel, after his mob cronies met in Havana.
- Andrew Borden, stretched on his living room couch, August 4, 1892.
- Ted Hughes, after Assia Wevill came to lunch in Devon.
- Ernest Simpson, before the English Midlands house party that introduced wife Wallis to Edward, Prince of Wales.
- Ditto the above for Edward, Prince of Wales.
- Patty Hearst, before that knock on her Berkeley door, 1974.
- Lev Davidovitch Bronstein, before allowing Ramon Mercader into his Coyoacán study.
- Anna Akhmatova before composing *In Praise of Peace* in "repentance."

You get the gist.

And if you are an insomniac, you've played this tired and futile game. **F**

Planting Dahlias with a Pick-Ax

I have made their grave:

hacked at the ground with a pick-ax
a rough plot, some inches deep,
and shoved the squat butts
to the dirt. It was a quick job
at afternoon's fade, and without
apology to the chopped roots
split white and topside,
the infant border vine, slapped
by the backswing, or the brute implement
itself, blade messed with green, stuck
with grass like hair to the bone.
I rake cover with my hands,
scuff back the dry moss, wish
the best for their vegetable souls—
full sun, steady rain, mild nights—
and assume the worst. Then turn,
shave the earth under my pink nails
and let the postman now striding near
bring whatever benediction he can.

Postage Stamps, the First Date Series: Watching the Kingdome Implosion Broadcast, Seattle, Washington

Lips to lips; dome to bits: with centered
weight the sofa sags though not
as fast, this pair dipping, as imploding
concrete ribs and

ramps, which can't be seen—TV's

gone gray, this detonation
just as planned: neck and back
and tip and *oh* and thigh and all that
space.

Two Years Ago This Morning

You were always feeding me glass apples and speaking in tongues,
kissing places I didn't have names for,
running your fingers over me,
tracing me like a chalk line on the street.

You'd press your silence against me—
let your toes brush the bottom of my feet,
write poems on my chest with your cheek.
We'd creep like soft shadows toward dawn.

But when day finally came,
we were sunflowers in violent light
chasing different suns.

THE EXPERIMENT

"I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in."

-Virginia Woolf-

Aquaman

"At length adowne theyr country streme to open sea they came..."

[damming the creek]

First, that whole first day, the necessary, temporary diversion. The first real work he's ever done and the real work hasn't even begun. The stream, when they finally let it loose, soothes him. He feels weak, like a man, as the rush of it above his waist slowly mounts toward the hard blue lip of cement. Democracy of cold water, he thinks. At twelve, it takes so little to shrink him to his knees. Later, he will remember the chill and stupor but not (never) letting go.

Only someone with / a pathological fear / of drowning / could have invented / this art / of swimming.

[disappearing ink]

Odd the unsettling this small incident caused. His right palm ribboned by shale, he autographs the current until the cold caps his fountain of a pen. (These facts rock to impact the mind like stones cratering a shallow river bottom.) The future is rarely as cloudy as the present. His favorite color was red. Now it is blue. It's unsettling that one day he will be reassured by this memory. Reassuring that once he was unsettled.

[Aqua World]

And it *was* his whole world. That summer he began to like where his body was headed, and when he caught with his summer friend (the boy with cones for breasts that he kissed once on a dare, then kissed again) a really good one, courtesy of the wave machine, he spilled himself over every pinched flash of skin. But this was later. White water under white-black skies.

[tricks a watery eye can perform]

Cleft chin, big lungs, braces...there are many ways one of us might feel special. *Small fish flashing in a wave.* To his mother when he was three: Mommy, there is fire in that water! I see the fire but no smoke. (This was, of course, repeated all summer to anyone who would listen, as he listened from his bed.) Overhead, he watched as, one-by-spontaneous-unpredictable-spinning-one, fan blades flashed like thought (Can every eye do this?) and were gone.

[strabismic]

An island has a fountain which begets a river that runs, at once, down to the mint-green sea. Simple geography. But this fountain was once a girl, obsession of a man on the mainland who was once a hunter, but is now another river. *Don't you just love the transformative violence of love.* Not even an ocean can restrain his flowing onwards and intact to mingle on the island with the river begotten by the fountain that was once a girl (also, perhaps, a hunter) running naked on the island. Later, despite the fact that a cup lost in the river which was once a man pops up unscathed in the waters that were once a girl and that sacrifices on the mainland ruddy, invariably, the fountain,

Strabo, whose eye wouldn't even river at the blockbuster remake of Hero and Leander, doesn't buy it. That the river which was once a man could keep himself and his obsession together through so long a transit without mixing just a little with the brine is preposterous, unless there were some pit or something that he fell into just before he reached the sea, thereby tricking the common observer's tear-filled eye and channeling him under the water to his eternal target, which there is not.

[lobster]

Because he lingered too long on the surface, half of his young body pouches with water, and, still, the red sun perches in the sky. His skin, like ours, was made for deeper water. The air that reaches for him through the window accelerates with such velocity that it hurts, awakening the little bumps along his limbs, which, therefore, commit him even further to this strange transformation.

[latency]

Power second to nothing, when

with a little help it swells. His Roman father to no one, looking out into the sun entering the water off West Beach: "We've known for centuries that hydrogen is the most combustible common element there is. Just a little oxygen off the top and think of all that power you'd have."

What spied you then? and from what angle
as you sealed among the rocks, crabbing?

[mari potens]

Conventional beauty. You took no pleasure in the usual elements of sun and belly in such common amounts. Unconscionable youth! Raw chicken on a string to draw their blue bodies up, clinging, but the smell on your fingers drew up something else. *Rise up love, fair one, rise up & come away.* Or did the waters fall into absolute silence? The dream has been with you since you can remember, but until now you were never sure which role was yours to play: speck (feathery and small, with the plankton's indestructible fragility) pursued over sunbeams by... what? penetrating envelopment (something animal, dwarfing, and dark) wall-of-water, horizon-killer...? Incomprehensible, how much of history we owe to the farces of mistaken identity. He chooses you because he thinks you are someone else. Then you are neither the someone he sought, nor the someone he got. Not everyone given over to the void wishes to return.

[heavy water]

Should you choose to try acceptance, this first tenet is hardest not to resist: Because there is no such thing as a sufficient explanation, no one's ever the same, after. Sheol. Nonetheless, you must keep yourself together. You are metaphor and you have my sympathies, really. You've learned what separates action and being. It's painful because we take ourselves so seriously, and that is what keeps us from the world. Try as you might, you cannot now wring your wet hair dry. You're world now is larger, but nothing will come naturally anymore. In time, the Waters of Chaos will look just like Waves of Fate. In Time. For the moment, let your grief break water into blue sky.

[palimpsest]

My intention is to tell of a body changed, of water flowing (the warm way milk ran over his child's tongue, which he hated) into lungs, of wave crest, of orphan sentences riddling the wind. They warn of the banality of a body's transformations, obliquity of its motions. Getting on the bus for school, he watched the leaning poles of those others (weren't they his age?) bob for the orange trickle that ran seaward along the tracks only to pool under the bridge. He thought such hopelessness to be rare at such an age. Every other day, the older, country girls would call to him from the back. "Come here, man. We want to see if it grew any over the summer." Like many, for years salt was the only one of the four tastes he could really taste.

Welcome. Your feet, for once, will be on solid ground. He cannot seem to take this for granted. Likely, it's inner ear. He might make a strong swimmer one day, but his legs keep sinking. Tell him he's reached bottom. Praise him after every step and encourage him to do it again. Tell him the horizon he sees is out not up.

[Deucalion & Pyrrah]

Think of them sitting, calmly, in some tree, then sloshing hand-in-hand (mind-numbed by the ebbing thing, or did fresh thoughts race like mites over their skin?) through those polluted suburban streets, softly catching by their hair friends and family, enemies and old flames, bright faces just beneath the sluicing surface. Their peace looks out of place. Like waterlillies, according to Hood, who could be

funny. Bottles sent off sans their messages inside, which means they have only one message to deliver. Be-dimpled buoys and waving girls, tourists fronting calmness and certainty—But look how effortlessly they give way! It must be hard to remain contemplative with evidence of such unusual power over life and death. Basho relates he once arrived in time to toss to a toddler in the street a piece of bread, thereby staving off for days its starvation. But was it Issō or Wallace Stevens who said that if he could've dunked a basketball he would never have written a word?

[precedence]

Ankle-deep, squatting among the darting minnows, his cousin Jane, having caught herself again focused on her reflected nose and hand-me-down chin, notices nothing, so lets herself wonder (She swore she wouldn't) how long she must stay staring this way before she is transformed. And what would she become—one of the roots gripping the riverbank or a sliver of the slate her brothers skip (endlessly) across the water? Then, briefly, another thought enters. Unnoticed as she is, she might become something altogether deeper than roots or rock, something buried, forgotten, or, better, buried so as never to be known, something unnamed, some thing (at last) unnamable.

[dry run]

Between the supports of the piers where the small deaths assemble, over the groins whose ends crescent the episodic moon, under the breakers—Poof—with a roiling cloud of sand. This is child's play. Liquid. He turns back before the questions in his mind surface and

break. He cannot forget yet what the solid stars
skeleton.

[intersection]

One memory which might prove significant: His father flinging (Could it be from the very spot where, tired of casting for the center, he dropped his line over the guardrail and caught, instantly, his catch-of-the-day sunfish, such a matter-of-fact success he tried for hours to keep it alive in his tub?) himself to swim once the T of the two rivers, near at the moment, their normal limits. Of course, he'd been drinking. The singing head floated above the current, as mother and son quivered from the bridge. Protocol. They need not have. The courtesy the brown gods showed one another at their meeting extended to their charges. Most rivers are old fathers. Rarely do they seek new definitions. Only rarely do we need the wishes we are granted.

[snake]

Had he been quicker, smarter, bigger, had he been paying more attention, he might be dead. Didn't even see it until it was past him, fording the current he'd been too afraid to test himself against. Someone saw it from the other side. A woman, picnicking, warned him too late. He was treading water off the giant brown and shining dinner rolls that masqueraded as warm rocks near the bank. It was green, in its element, and well on its way to the other side. *Snake*, she shouted. *Look out*. He never even looked it in the eye.

[memo]

Of the various advantages drawn from the ability to extract breathable oxygen from seawater, we have concluded that the greatest might be ease of travel. But research shows signs of only two trips of any substantial duration. One was a honeymoon of sorts, though he seems to have explored little of either place. He noted one morning that the weather was sunnier than he'd expected, and that he felt by this betrayed. Local weather reports tend to confirm this impression, but he was in love so everything said or written at this time must be judged skeptically, or not at all. (I use the term 'ability' not 'power' because it seems, merely, an alternative used seldom to advantage, lacking the consciousness of successful manipulation or the power of production in non-normative amounts.) It's always been a numbers game. Therefore, we introduce error and we do it badly. We do this to account for a case of such unusual proclivities (read: unusual never means unique). I have yet to detect a pattern to his patterns. This troubles me. Invariably, proclivities open up possibilities, but years of fieldwork have shown that every one of us still dies alone.

[document a]

Often, I suspect I mistake boredom for contentment. You please me, but I should indicate rather than just think that this is so. If I write, I should rely on figure, not rhetoric. If not metaphor, then simile. A good simile, after all, is easy, unlike metaphor, unlike argument, as any lover learns. You came upon me. You were a storm at sea. But you stayed, easy as simile.

-
- [b] *And, still, you float beside me. I am a continent.
Don't you get my drift?*
-

Water is best, said Thales, who, nevertheless, was one of the Seven. Detritus. He likes nothing more, these days, than a stroll among the chained storefronts of a dying tourist town, or to find, courtesy of the Parks Dept., a bench, thickly green against the salt and weather, and sit. Like those sharks that found themselves in his grandmother's Chesapeake and stayed, giving the yokels something to talk about on the hot drive back. Dr. Emerson says that to be alone ya got to leave yr buddies *and* yr studies. But he was a shark and a loon. Nothing except walking makes him feel more alone now than reading the reef of a dead mind.

[navigation]

Of this particular sensation, he thinks only an immigrant or the daughter of immigrants might understand his (quite elegant) incomprehension. Only someone with the memory of large city lights in the darkest part of her might breathe back a shimmering reply. Rapid fire! All these languages being spoken around him! Every shining one of them seems to know where he is going. To stargaze this way is to feel comforted by utter desolation. This, obviously, is why so many cultivate vegetables instead, or keep exotic birds. Pale flash his hands! But achieving these kinds of symphonic, cinematic effects requires, on

his part, patience and proper distances. Only then might they speak. Their tone is one of entitlement peculiar to those who have suffered terribly: *Rising is relative. How far you have risen! You will never rise.*

[out of water]

Witnessing her leaving, he was as one waking from a powerful if unremembered dream. No, not waking, and it was remembered: not dream, but event, and he was as one emerging from a moist and hidden place, one blinking at the shards of wet wood and scattered glass, the shattered things (myriad of suns, myriad of shards) who sees that the storm, a good distance from him now, is what (he is forced to admit) he would otherwise call a sight, even (to some he's sure)

quite beautiful.

[curiosities]

Feather-fish, the giant arm of a giant squid, or a tiny one alive, intact, that can live for over four hundred years without any sign of breakdown....Well, it paid pretty well, and he liked the solitude of perfection after the camaraderie of voyage. "It's nice to know there's room for an old-fashioned naturalist on this old ship." Water at its coldest. Water at its darkest. There is no God if he is not here. Descent, however, not for descent's sake but to bring something back would be pointless nowadays, except for the money.

[hapex legomenon]

Spledging along the chalky coast...But when nothing inland jumps, he swims on.

[more light! more light!]

But he can see! Bowl of blue. Neon fish among the ancient cities, antlers, strands of DNA. Drifting lamplight of jellyfish in his way. Upstart masses housing such brief windows of consciousness. Stoloniferous! No one sees as he does now. Here lie the old possibilities. In water, which blurs and clarifies. So close to life is life's absence. Cold soup. What's, for instance, poison but motion stopper, food getter. Pain is nearly always beside the point. Altogether uniqueless, as almost no one anymore will grant. One species of box has 4 brains, 24 eyes, and still it seeks bottom to sleep in peace like the others the night away. Because it knows. Better.

Weight the body. Say a few words. Words like water drops, paragraphs like pools. Really, he thinks, this is all anyone wants: closure encapsulated: last utterances floating forever in perfect bubbles above their floating heads. The sea is nothing like us, but it knows, deep down, what we want: end without conclusion, eternal returns. *Mistress, Maker, take from me this impulse first. Swift-swell my soul beyond the clockwork of perception.* (Yet still allow it to retain its insoluble self?) Animal drift of the eternal present—He envies the shark's vestal vision. Well, why not someone just like him? A marvel. Comic.

[witch's kitchen]

Sole bruise of smooth rock. He mourns the loss of verb in his dreams. An age away tonight, his sweet self on a slab, in a shack, off Tygert Creek. Wooden cup, lighter and cooler than he would have thought, in his mouth. Wine in the wood. Old juice. Old water. The stink of it gone, but with something of Life's fever and itch. *Where am I coming from? Where am I going?* Splash of something outside, small in the water. His answer.

"Bananas plucked for breakfast off Montserrat, then scream along with me for guava ice cream! Cheng I Sao né Shih Young, how far is it from here to your flowerboat in the South China Sea? (My joss was with me the day we met.) Sure thing, but only if I could get back north along the Stream to meet for supper Lady Burke, maglios, gray-eyed Grace O'Malley of Hen's Castle, Ireland's pride, where I took my rest, then trusted the birds and whales to bring me home fresh to Alfheld, Wisna, Webiorg, and Olaf's queen."

[counterweight]

Early on there was the obligatory impulse to dip his arms like oars for our sake in the water and return. He held his breath. It passed. He stopped in for a drink. Siduri, bartender who dwells without clientele somewhere along the hard edge of the sea: "He ordered eels and asked if I knew what that meant. He was still human. Heroes have heads like hippos and strong tails to swish away minor nibbles, by which they can't be bothered anyway. He had a migrating heart. 'Balance,' he said. Had he been her, he would have done exactly what

she did. After the lamp goes out, what answer to life is there but a swan dive into unseen waters, which he demonstrated from the bar stool before he left. Hero was *her* name. He wrote his for me in water sweated by his glass."

Incorruptible, this victim's wisdom. His chief advantage. That, and the aquiline features which prove irresistible to the right company. He likes a busy port, and turns to one when he misses the human music. Rumble. Rattle. Hum. Ships have no business being in the water, as any seasoned sailor will tell you. Only those flat, floating barges seem to acknowledge their lack of power and control. Such a dying enterprise. But misplaced sentiment keeps lots of things going. Early morning. Dirty rag of fog on the water, dirty lap of water against the pilings, pilings of wood and wrack along the shore. Brutal, almost quiet, except for the gulls and scuttle. Smokestack on the water. Stylus. Like one of those fat fuckers his father used to pay bills. The little boat everyone pulls for pulls it safely through the channel. Picture. Perfect.

[sonar]

"Don't worry. I'll breathe for you, the way it's done in the movies when they show this kind of love. It might be that those messages from the table, sights and sounds in the cloud-blue eyes of the near dead, are really vestiges of lost beginnings. Ping. If hell is a place of unquenching fire (admittedly a late and clumsy addition), fanned by the earthly air we breathe, where, then, is heaven? O *wine-dark sponge!* Can't you see, darling, the shapes my slow heart beats as it warms the

water around you? Cuneiform, since writing is a dance, but without the clear evidence of strain. Most anything can be called beautiful if it is viewed through the proper lens. Negative experiences, incidentally, are just as or more common these days than the bright escorting light leading one gently up to some family reunion in the sky. They get less press because only the brave can admit what lousy lives they lead. Look up now at the soft, haloed faces straining above their treading arms and legs. Trick of water under light from the hard and heavy moon. This is denied me.

"Everyone wants to have sex once in the ocean. And most of us, if we have the money, do. Though it's well-documented that, from below, two humans coupling in the shoal mimic, exactly, the appearance and movements of young seals, great whites, when they realize they've been had, usually let go. So it can't be the fear of getting caught. It must be that nothing means as much underwater. Given that everything is equally vulnerable to swallowing by the great mouth of the sea, well, why not screw your blue head off? Is there a term for that precise moment when one must decide to give in to the building pressure and resurface or not? There must be but, probably, they are Greek. 'I love you,' I said to my one true friend, 'though I find the moments of your life not worth the effort of breathing and all of their productions equally worthless.' Where should we stop for supper?

[underworld]

"Blood-taste of any summer evening. Sponge,
O Salty Salve, think of the wounds you must

daily dress and soothe. Numbness might be my favorite of your gifts. Floatation: sensation that the idea of Time is being painlessly removed. But I dove down to wait with the others (encrusted, intact), souls like dubbloons up to their necks in sand. Not a bad spot to see some eternity. Let me fall silent here 1,000...10,000...100,000 years wrapped in the suture of the sea (space-age patterns trafficking above me) then rise, unchanged, to clear waters, well-rested and hungry. The exotic results from such slight contextual changes, so do not tell me what I must not do. In matters of defiance, the human mind has always been wisest and supreme. Clinically insane, according to the scientists, who seek nothing if not ultimatums."

And might it be real, a real place he might one day reach by diving, delving, not just an idea percolating somewhere beneath the mantle of his mind, a trick to punish and push? Like the Hell claimed by televangelists—off camera, in the center. Well, they were right about the heat anyway. He can feel it in the exhalations bubbling up from the trenches. But might the advent of eternity feel in the end a lot like non-existence, the way, lately, his skin feels to him bone-dry in the deepest water?

[toys in the tub]

Salmon strait-jacketed in the shoals off Vancouver Island. The matriarchal pods of killer whales always put on a pleasant show. He likes to come here when thoughts won't stop coming. Danger: The tall fins are mature males who do not govern themselves. Beau-

tiful, really, these distinct dialects of clicks and whistles...And they know when to keep quiet—They split up so each of them must make the kill alone. This allows for individual variability and limits guilt. It's hard to feel sympathy when the fish are so predictable, but they keep on coming, which might suggest a virtue. According to most models, it's likely that our planetary successors will not resemble us in any way and will evolve from what is now the most unpromising of species, which rules out killer whales and salmon. It's probably here already, biding its time. Hard not to be concerned by this, which means *it* won't be. It will not speak of love or propagate for any reason but pleasure. It will not war over mistakes or, worse, try for a lifetime to correct what it has gotten wrong. It will consume without thinking of its own insignificance, because there is no use in being afraid of what you are. (Have you noticed how quickly your fingerprints vanish in the heavy varnish of the sea?) After they've eaten their fill, these silly whales resume their chatter in the shallows, dragging their 3-ton bodies over pebbles. For pleasure. **F**

Fifth Annual Prose Contest Winners

Prose
(Judged by Chris Abani)

First Place: Eena Eena Eena
by Sarah Blackman

“Eena Eena Eena” is a lyrically structured narrative full of wonderfully textured images and sounds. The story resonates with emotional weight, because there is something at stake in this world. Call it the loss of innocence—or the awakening of some other human emotional state that emerges after innocence has already been lost. So the story is about motion, movement, and Blackman captures and distills this essence with grace and the utmost control.

Second Place: yellow Grass, yellow Leaves
by Scott McMurtrey

“Yellow Grass, Yellow Leaves” has this elegiac quality that immediately sucks the reader into this meditative world of past and present narration. Meditative in that story is layered with emotional complexities that slowly emerge as the story moves back and forth through time and space, and it is this very movement—the oscillation between the boy’s life and the man’s life—that proves to be the real punch in the heart. But the narrative isn’t quiet; the subject matter is gritty and the story moves, structurally, with vigor and intention. By the end we fully understand what afflicts this man, this life, and the story is memorable for its emotional impact, among other virtues.

Third Place: The Blue Dress
by Claire Ortalda

“The Blue Dress” is clever, sexy, and sardonic. Some would call it a “theory” piece or an idea-driven story, but the drama itself is grounded in narrative. Dramatizing the paradox of selfhood is ambitious undertaking, and yet Ms. Ortalda is able to do so because the dramatic situation she creates, in many ways, encompasses the human condition as so many of us see it—fragile, unstable, and full of mystery.

—First Place Story—

Eena Eena Eena

*Miss Lucy had a steamboat.
The steamboat had a bell (ding ding).
Miss Lucy went to heaven,
the steamboat went to*

WHEN SHE'S IN A GOOD MOOD SHE HUMS while she cooks and we eat peppery fried chicken, mounds of mashed potatoes, peas that pop between your teeth like heat. When she's in a bad mood we have soup. The worst mood and there is nothing at all while she does sit-ups in the basement, crying.

Dad looks down from the top of the stairs, but all he can see is a wall. She is around the corner.

I am a bull. I snap my sharp tail through the air. I bunch all my muscles and crack deep in my eyes, teeter on the tips of my toes before falling forward and running running running like thunder on my hooves. Dad's leg is the red cape, even though it's blue jeans, and he does not get out of the way. His pants are woven, crossing and crossing as I get closer, and under them steel standing straight up and down and watching. It is too late for him. I am all snorting nostrils and huge humped shoulder and I smash into him; gore him with my glittering horns. He bleeds and Spanish women throw flowers through the hot air.

Hush Hush Hush says Dad, bending over me like a single horn curving against the sky. He says it like that, in threes. It reminds me of the mice. The blind ones who walk in circles and never get anywhere. I asked her if they were stupid, to walk like that, to lose their tails. She said the book didn't say. She said they were just blind.

He can't even see her because of the way the stairs run into the wall. He could see the picture on the wall if he wanted to, but he's not looking. It's of a house with a yard and a fence. There's snow on the ground and a snowstorm still going in the air so everything is white sky and white ground and the white roof of the house. You wouldn't know it was a house at all if it weren't for the windows. You wouldn't know it was a fence if it weren't for the house. I always look.

I go to the cupboard for the graham crackers. Some of them I eat. The others I build into a box to keep things in even though I know it will fall apart by morning and crumbs will get into the carpet and for god's sake do I want us to be overrun by vermin, driven into the streets by plague? We don't have a fence; when it snows there is nothing to stop the yard from

becoming the road.

When I lie all the way flat on the carpet—stretched out with my shirt pulled up and my belly and my arms and the side of my face all feeling the same cat tongue scratching—when I lie all the way flat and press down with my whole body, I can stand up again and see how the carpet has smashed down under me. I can see exactly where I end.

*Hello Operator,
please give me number nine.
And if you disconnect me,
I'll chop off your*

I KNOW I AM SMART BECAUSE I'M IN THE BLUEBIRD group in my class. Everyone else is still a Robin, except for Susan Knox, whose a Bluebird too. We don't have bluebirds here. Dad says we do but they're so blue they melt into the sky and we can't see them. I don't believe him. Robins are brown and red but they don't melt into the ground. I see them all the time in the yard with their fat breasts and the worms cut and dangling in their bills. Robins have sharp eyes and claws on the tips of each of their toes. They jump about like they've got everything planned out. If they could talk they'd say 'just so, just so,' and I'd throw rocks at their heads.

Miss Fish gave me a star in reading and penmanship and math, but she said I needed to work on my citizenship. She told me after class and I was late getting home and had to run the last part to make sure everything was on time afterwards. It's because I use all the blue crayons, she said. I never let the other kids have them and then I don't even draw pictures but just scribble scribble scribble 'til the whole page is blue, she said. It was selfish, is what she said, and I stood there and sucked on the tip of my braid until it was spiky and slick and thought about touching her arm with it. The hair would have left a trail behind it. A thin wet trail like a slug.

I didn't tell her why I needed all the blue. When you tell people you are giving them a present they never see it right. Miss Fish needs a home. Her nails are bitten short and sometimes the edges of them bleed. Miss Fish has two crooked teeth on the bottom and bad breath. When she checks my math papers she always smiles and looks right at me so I look right back and see her crooked teeth and never say anything about them even though they are yellow on the sides. There are five different kinds of blue in the big crayon box and I use them all.

When the sun is on the ocean and you are underneath you have to look up and let the bubbles out of your nose one by one so you can see where your air meets everybody else's. I went to the beach once so I know. I also know that sand hurts when you fall on it, even though it looks soft and that when you bring it in the house you can't get it out again and it

grits in your sandwiches for days but you can't complain because it was *your* bathing suit after all. I also know how to close my eyes and turn invisible and then fly around like a bat getting tangled up in people's hair.

When I came home she said that she was bad in citizenship too. Our whole family on her side were loners, is what she said. I pictured them chopping wood in a clearing with their backs to each other and their axes pumping over their shoulders and down thunk to the block. I pictured them standing out in the snow with their hands on the fence.

She said I got it from her like I got my hair and my beautiful fingers. She has beautiful fingers. They are long and white and can play the piano, pressing down each key and lifting up. I have useful fingers. I dig with them. I roll sticks around. I stroke slugs down their cold spotted backs, watch them shrink away from my beautiful beautiful finger that can press down on them until they press down on themselves and then lift up, soaring away into the air until it is too far for them to see. Until everything is free again and clear.

*Behind the 'fridgerator
there was a piece of glass
Miss Lucy sat upon it
and broke her big fat*

SOMETIMES IT RAINS. Not enough to make puddles or sting your skin when the drops bounce off, but half-way there. Enough to make the world damp and pulpy. When it rains like that I go out into the back yard and take off my shoes and take off my socks and put my socks in my shoes and put them both under the rain-spout, just in case there's a flood.

When it rains like that the slugs come out. They slide up onto the wood of the fence. They curve over the tops of the stones. They glue themselves to the rose stems and the tomato plants and slick long x's over the top of the brick pile that is going to be a fish pond where the fish will circle and make faces and I will tickle them until they giggle bubbles. Dad says.

Tiny yellow slugs cling to the grass, big tiger slugs ooze over the patio. When you touch a slug's eye he pulls it all the way back into his skull but you can't learn how. When you touch a slug's back he flinches away from your finger and around your finger at the same time.

There are things I can do. Prick the tips of my fingers on the holly bush. Mash holly berries under my thumb. Scrub my hair over my eyes until I am wild. Tip back back back so I am face-to-face with the sky. Stomp in the mud and watch it burp up between my toes. Sing to the slugs.

All my songs I sing to the slugs, and they sing back slug songs because that is what they have. They have to because I am their queen. I am Slugeena and I stomp in the mud and tear up the grass and snort air out of my

nostrils like it was for throwing. I build a stack of bricks higher and higher and higher until there are no more bricks.

Come on, you slugs, I say to the slugs. Let's see you climb that!

Eeena, Eeena, Eeena, sing the slugs and I press them with my fingers until they burst and leak because they will not even try. Then I knock the bricks down, crying.

She comes out onto the back porch. Jesus, she says. Jesus, you are filthy.

She stands there and I am filthy. I look her shoes which are white shoes. Come Here, she says. Come Here she says. Come Here COME HERE COME HERE.

I wipe my hand on the front of my dress and smear slugs into the cloth. Snot drips over my lip, I let it, pick a scab on my elbow until it bleeds. I scrub a slug into my hair. I watch her eyes until she leaves.

Eeena, Eeena, Eeena, sing the slugs.

*Ask me no more questions
I'll tell you no more lies
The boy's are in the bathroom
zipping up their*

THERE ARE TWO DOORS IN THE ROOM WHERE I SLEEP. Both of them are always shut at night because dark is good for sleeping but sometimes when the hall door is shut the closet door comes open and there are white rats in there with red eyes as big as bars of soap. I've seen them.

The hallway is long, furred with carpet, sharp at the end like a tooth. Their door is just a door.

I open it and she is reading a book that is too much for me even though I know most of the words and I am a Bluebird and I peck her. I open the door and the light is off and there is breathing breathing breathing that is almost more than the windows can hold. If it broke the windows outside would be a jungle where tigers stood with the bamboo shading their eyes like stripes. You would never see them, only hear the of brush their tails sweeping the paths behind you. If you were quiet for a long time you might hear them roaring, far away, like their throats were all wrapped up in damp dishtowels.

I open the door and the light is low and stretching. Pecks are like kisses and the hairs of her arms smell like sleep all the way into morning. Or I open the door.

The door looks like a door, open or closed. I open the door and it is quieter than breathing. Dad says get the hell out from the dark where I can't see his face.

When there are no rats I am in my own bed. I can see a tree out the

window, and I know which one it is. In the day time I climb the tree and its bark is a peeling scrape on the inside of my arms when I let go to see what falling is like.

At night the tree is blacker than the sky behind it. It cannot fade into the sky because the sky is the blackest thing there is. I know the tree will never be anything but a tree. The sky could be anything. Who cares.

At night I count the tree. One tree. One tree. I pull the blankets up to my neck so nothing will not get me and I listen to the inside of my ears. It sounds like roaring. It sounds like a tiger who is roaring in the jungle because the dishtowels will not let him up.

Behind my eyes there are things that look like branches but aren't because they are different every time.

She's gotta learn, she says in a voice like lipstick and I hear it even though the covers are up and the doors are shut.

She's gotta learn to learn to learn. Everyone could tumble down the stairs at once. That could happen, us with ours parts mixed up at the bottom: tumble bumble bump.

The slugs would know me anyways.

*Flies are in the meadow
the bees are in the park
Miss Lucy and her boyfriend
are kissing in the d-a-r-k, d-a-r-k
DARK DARK DARK*

ONCE UPON A TIME A LITTLE GIRL was a dirty little girl because she couldn't get clean. She didn't want to, so she ran instead. She could run fast. She could run fastest of anyone, even the wind, because she was a queen and she was mighty.

This little girl, who was really a queen but no one can tell without a crown, ran so fast that she went right off the edge of the world, schloomp, like that. Then she was falling and falling and falling but she didn't mind really because it was so black that no one could see her. She had a dirty face and dirty hands and the insides of her elbows were dirty and so were the bottoms of her feet. She fit right in.

She thought when she landed she would break into these tiny little pieces that no one would ever be able to put back together. She thought she would lie in a heap until the wind blew her crazy, all over the place, parts of her whirling in tiny tornadoes that caught up leaves and bark and grasshoppers and blew them around too. Sometimes, at night, someone would think about her, listen for her, not hear anything, and sigh. It wouldn't matter though. Even in pieces, she would still be queen. Even in pieces, she was still mighty. But she hadn't landed yet.

First she fell straight, like a metal rod, with her head the right way and her arms crossed over her chest. Then she fell sideways, rocking like feathers but faster. Then she got bored and fell like a sackful of mud. Finally, she pulled her legs up to her chest, locked her arms around them and got very quiet, very small. She fell like a ball or an orange. She fell like an acorn, or a robin's egg. She fell like a snail shell with its snail inside—sealed, heavy, turning. **F**

—Second Place Story—

yellow grass,yellow leaves

MORRISON WAS TWELVE-YEARS OLD when he watched them kill his dog in the middle of the woods. A shotgun blast like a war boom. He shivered as the boom echoed, weaving in and out of the forest like it was looking for him. He watched them kill his dog, but it was the look on their faces that he couldn't get over. They pulled the trigger and looked at each other and smiled like it was only a joke or a dare. But they had no idea that Morrison had followed them into the woods. Morrison watched, hidden behind a gray tree with bark peeling away like banana peels. His entire body leaned hard against the tree and he tore a piece of bark off with his teeth but the bark tasted like his muddy hands. So he held his arms around the tree and cried. The blast was still in the air and the smoke ballet circled up from the tip of the shotgun and over their faces and Morrison couldn't understand why they were still smiling. Caleb flipped the shotgun to his shoulder and they kicked dirt over Morrison's dog and then put a broken log over her to hide any evidence.

Morrison had heard her barking and saw them playing with her across the field and something bothered him about it because usually they just kicked her and pissed on her and gave her chicken bones so she'd keep coming back. For the past three years he could only watch them from around the corner of the house or the shed or from behind one of the trucks. But they weren't kicking her this time and they stroked her short black hair and then ran with her into the woods like it was a game. Caleb had the shotgun and Justin eagerly kept up, laughing. Morrison followed them this time, so scared, and he kept out of sight, but he was close enough to see Caleb pull the trigger, close enough to feel ashamed for doing nothing to stop them. Close enough to memorize the looks on their faces. But he was only twelve-years old and he could only hide and hold on to the tree and make himself as small as he'd ever been. He cried when he felt the boom. But they didn't know he had been watching them from the beginning and they didn't know that this time, this time Morrison brought his shotgun, too.

He wiped his tears and felt his muddy hands smear mud across his face, like war paint. And he felt like a warrior.

HE HUDDLES WITH A GROUP OF LITTLE BOYS and little girls in a stone room in the middle of this desert city, huddles so close to them that for a moment he thinks they're safe. He is trapped with them in this little room, trapped

by thuds and flinging shrapnel and machine gun tats and burning earth. Temperatures above one-hundred-seventeen degrees but they are huddled together like it must be so cold. He sits there, a grown man with a group of children, waiting for a pause in the action. The children don't know that, he thinks to himself. Surely they don't know what's happening. But then he thinks they are too calm, yes, too calm for little children. He wonders if he is the one who doesn't understand what's happening around him.

A minute is all he needs, just enough to get across the street. He doesn't know what to do with the children, though. He doesn't know how to tell them to follow him across the street where it will be safe. He doesn't even know if they would go with him if they did understand. The stone room keeps shaking. There are no doors left, no glass in the windows, and the dust-smoke is crawling along the floor real slow as it comes through the doorway, almost like it's looking for him.

MORRISON WAS FOURTEEN-YEARS OLD when he first saw their faces in a dream. He was living with only his mom then, but it was like he was living alone. It was a different little house than he had grown up in and his mom would be gone for days at a time, he didn't know where, and when she was home it was no different. But he wasn't mad at her. He thought he understood how hard everything was for her and he thought that all he wanted was for her to be happy. Morrison would spend the nights when she was gone on the flat metal rooftop with an old sleeping bag his grandpa had given him and a thermos of orange juice vodka he learned to mix from a TV show. Nights were quiet and warm in that little neighborhood. Morrison spent the nights on the edge of the roof with a sketchbook and a flashlight and a *National Geographic* so he could look at the places in the magazine and copy them into his sketchbook. He copied them because they were the places his dad told him about. When he was younger he and his dad would see some of those wonderful places on TV. His dad had been to all of the places they saw, all of the most beautiful places in the world.

Five little children in his dream, girls and boys, he didn't know who they were but the thing he remembered was that they had the faces of Caleb and Justin. Five little Caleb and Justin faces. When he woke up he knew right away it had only been a dream. There was water like a river and all the faces were on the other side, so clear and so much like real people, but no one noticed him. He knew that his dad had been to this place because his dad had been to the most beautiful places in the world and this river was so beautiful. He didn't want to remember the way their faces were. He didn't want to remember anything.

But the thing about him was that he never forgot.

THIS DESERT WAR. THERE'S NO EFFORT REQUIRED to remember one-hundred

seventeen degrees. The skin remembers for you, biologically imprinted forever. Desert sun and its intense light and almost unbearable heat reflecting off anything that had shape. The grass here is yellow, made of sand. The trees are sun burnt yellow. Yellow leaves, yellow grass, yellow walls, yellow buildings as white as the sun. The streets in the city are hottest, ten thousand degree mini-suns exploding from the ground up on crowded corners, but these mini-suns are brighter than the real sun because when they explode it's blinding. The smell of rocks burning yellow and the smell of flesh burning from the only thing hotter than the sky; in this city a Humvee burns hotter than the sky. Earth blowing into his mouth as he crawls on the ground toward cover, anything, anything that can make it quiet. Opened or closed, his eyes can only feel the heat from the sun. Just crawl a little farther. Almost there. Back to the burning vehicle because the only cover in this desert war is under there. Hurry, he tells himself, but don't worry too much, the burning flesh is not yours, you're okay, keep going. He doesn't know, though, if it is his flesh or not. He can only smell it and the smell is close. He imagines what burning skin would look like, a marshmallow getting darker and darker, maybe; just don't let it catch fire, right. Don't let it burn too long. Crawling on the ground, pulling himself inch by inch. No time to think about anything but getting to cover.

He remembers the color of his mom's face when his dad left and didn't come home ever again, and sometimes in the sun and the yellow sand and during the middle of the day when the groups of little boys and little girls run behind his Humvee wanting candy he remembers the children and their faces from the dream he had when he was fourteen. Five little faces on the other side of the river. It still bothers him that those faces didn't notice him.

HIS DAD NEVER CAME HOME AGAIN but the stories were always there, clear and always magnificent.

CALEB AND JUSTIN WALKED AWAY from the dog while smoke still swirled in the air and Morrison lowered himself to the ground real quiet like his dad once showed him. They were coming towards him on their way back home and then Caleb gave Justin the shotgun and Justin held it above his head like Victory! They looked as though they wanted to be adults so bad and they both laughed. Morrison laid on the ground real quiet and used a log to steady the gun and the mud was soaking through his denim pants and the cotton sweatshirt that his mother gave him two birthdays before. She had given him a size-large because she said he would grow into it someday, and Morrison remembered how excited he was imagining that someday he would be so big. What he remembered most, though, was how for a moment Caleb and Justin were nervous that maybe someday he'd be bigger than

them. But the sweatshirt was still too big now and Morrison hadn't had the courage to do anything when they walked his dog into the woods and shot her. They didn't know that he was watching them and that he had felt the boom and saw the smiles on their faces. And they didn't know his dad had taught him how to be real quiet in the woods. In the woods, his dad always said, you must be invisible. In the woods, his dad continued, you must disappear.

They were getting closer and Caleb was grinning like always. All Morrison really wanted was for Caleb and Justin to turn around and go take the broken log off his dog to prove that it was all just a prank. Because he was willing to forgive them, he was willing to forgive Caleb if Caleb could simply show that the dog was still alive. The smile on Caleb's face assured him it wasn't a prank and Morrison felt something begin to spin in his stomach, an unknown thing turning over slowly and wanting to come up. He remembered his dad had told him that someday he'd do something to make everyone proud and that it would be big, something that everyone would remember forever. They walked closer and Morrison steadied his shotgun as quiet as he could. Caleb heard a click, and Morrison flinched with the boom.

HIS FRIEND BAKER JUST DIED, though he wondered if they were really friends. Baker was younger, by six or seven years, and really didn't talk much. Morrison remembers when they first met and Baker said he was from Hephzibah, Georgia and that he didn't think it was really that hot in the desert.

TAT. TAT. TAT. BURNING FLESH and screeching lungs and sound moving in slow motion. He hears the machine gun fire coming from somewhere behind and knows there must be four or five guns, each one flicking hot metal from one of the rooftops or windows. Tat. Tat. Tat. Slow motion. He had been thrown from the top of the Humvee by the explosion. Lying on his back he knew he was alive, but he didn't know if the little boys and little girls running in a circle around him were real or not. Eventually they stopped and crossed the street and when he gained enough strength he turned over and looked across the street. The group of little boys and little girls were huddled in a doorway sucking hard candies and holding each other's hands, whispering in each other's ears, eyes wide and shirts open and their little feet bare and callused.

"If I ask you not to, would that make a difference? They'll just send you over there."

"Maybe they won't. I don't know for sure."

"But what if I asked you not to?"

"I guess I feel like maybe this is something I have to do."

"But they'll send you over first thing, I know it. Why wouldn't they?"

"We don't know that for sure. Maybe they'll send us to Germany."

"But what if I didn't want you to? Would that make a difference to you?"

"I don't know what to say to that."

"Just say you won't join. That's all I want to hear."

"I think this is something I have to do. I don't know, it's just that my dad—"

"It's not about your dad. Listen to me. —Are you listening?"

THE FACES WERE ON THE OTHER SIDE of the river and they didn't notice him but he could tell it was all a dream because in his dreams everything was perfect. His dreams were not his mom and her yellow dress and the time she cried when his dad didn't like the fried steak so he spit on the steak and stared at her until she walked away. No, his dreams were the places where his dad had been, the places with the tallest buildings and the calmest oceans and the longest rivers. And all of those places were on TV and they watched them every night like they were at those places together and then later, after his dad left and never came home, he would draw the places in his sketchbook and then dream about what it was like to be grown-up. The river in his dream was perfect, just like ones his dad had been to. But he didn't like that the faces didn't see him. He wondered if they would have still shot his dog if they had known he followed them.

EVERYONE KNEW BAKER KEPT TRACK of each time a convoy he was in was attacked. He said each time he survived one it was good luck because he could have died, right. Genius. No one wanted to ride with him at first because who wants to ride with a guy whose convoy is attacked every other time. But everyone else started keeping track too and by the time Baker had survived his nineteenth attack everyone wanted to ride with him because his story was becoming legendary. Metalhead Baker. Everyone wanted to ride with Baker at least once so they started drawing straws. When they'd draw short and couldn't ride with him they settled for imitating everything he did. They started eating the same chow as he did. Smoked the same cigarettes. Slept when he did, shit when he did, spit when he did. They even wrote letters to his girlfriend. It's easy to be superstitious in a desert.

Morrison drew the straw to ride with Baker but he had never really cared one way or another. He sat next to Baker and tried to act like he didn't care. He smiled, though, thinking about what Baker's girlfriend must think about all the fan mail. Baker looked at him and took a quick suck on his cigarette and said, "Get laid last night?"

Morrison looked away.

"Guess not," Baker laughed.

Morrison double checked his magazines.

"Say, how long you been here?" Baker asked. "Six, seven months?"

"Same as you," Morrison said. "Thirteen months. Just the same as you."

"Same as me?" Baker smirked and leaned his head back against the rig and the cigarette hung to his chin. "It ain't the same as me. Guarantee you that." He was almost grinning when he looked over at Morrison. "Fuckers always think it's just the same as me."

MO, WE SHOULD GET MARRIED, don't you think? a girl named Betsy Leigh once asked him after he graduated high school. Fact is, I'm havin' your baby, she told him. But he knew she wasn't. He thought it was funny when she said that to him because Betsy Leigh liked to sleep around and try to get pregnant so she could get married. She liked to get drunk so boys would sleep with her. She must have suspected he had taken advantage of her when he drove her home from a party a couple months before when she was too drunk to remember anything. He should have seen something coming because for the past month she kept calling him, saying she always liked him best. We need to hang out more, she would say, I always liked you best anyway. But he never touched her, or any other girl for that matter. He never wanted to fall in love, especially with a girl like Betsy Leigh. He thought falling in love wouldn't be fair to his mother somehow. When he even thought about touching a girl he couldn't help but think about how he only saw his mother happy four times. Four times, ever. Somehow it wouldn't be fair to her. He never wanted to fall in love.

KATHERINE SOMETIMES LAUGHED at him because he was so serious.

"You're cute," she told him when they had first met. "I've noticed that you're a pretty serious guy. You don't act like an idiot like most of the other guys, do you."

He worked at the hardware store since graduating high school. She came in a few times for sandpaper or something and she liked him from the start, she told him later.

"Are you making fun of me?" he asked.

"You are serious, aren't you. Come on now, why would I be making fun of you?"

"Did you need something?" He acted like he was concentrating on straightening the tool belts.

"Not really."

"Then how can I help you?"

"If you smile I'll give you my number."

EVERYONE REMEMBERED ALRIGHT. They took Morrison away from his mom, sent him off to a boys program way away in the city. Said he needed help. But Morrison knew it was his mom who needed help. The little town he grew up in blamed everything on his mom. They never officially said anything to her, but it wasn't secret what everyone thought. No boy raised properly would do a thing like that, they all said. She couldn't even keep her husband happy. Ain't none of us haven't been wronged but you don't see us shootin' folks.

After a year at the program, Morrison went back to live with his mom, but she wasn't the same. Worse, even than before. He wondered why they didn't move, didn't get away from all the talking and all the looks. They never moved, but he realized that she was gone most of the time anyway. Not physically, but in another world, he supposed. Morrison knew he should have hated the situation, how everyone talked about his mom and how she couldn't take it anymore, but he liked being left alone. Even the kids at school left him alone, now.

Morrison wondered if his dad would have been proud of him.

THEY MET OVER A YEAR AGO. Morrison never told Baker that for nineteen years he lived in Georgia also, in Hephzibah. Morrison wondered if Baker knew anything about his father.

EVERYTHING STILL BURNING, but the slow motion stops for a minute, long enough for him to see that Baker is on fire in the front seat. He pulls Baker underneath the Humvee and hurries to splash him with yellow sand and rolls him back and forth, but that is all he can do, nothing else. Baker's sun burnt body is yellow like the desert.

The wind blowing in a circle and his ears numb and up ahead he can see another Humvee torn in two. He is pinned under his own and he tries to radio Lieutenant Gerold. *Does anyone copy!* The little boys and little girls huddled across the street watch him. They found a nook in the side of the building and they sit there and watch him like the entire war was just a fire drill. Hard candies and peace, he thought. The radio isn't working and the Humvee is still on fire. The smell of flesh in the air isn't going away.

SEVEN-YEARS OLD AND HE WOKE UP ON HIS OWN. Day shining through his window and the house quiet like a Sunday morning, but it wasn't Sunday. It was Tuesday because on Tuesdays he wore his red shirt and his red shirt was sitting on the end of the bed. Seven-years old and it didn't seem odd to him that this was the first school morning she did not come in and wake him. Seven-years old and he walked into the kitchen wearing his red shirt and blue jeans like he was a grown-up and he thought he finally could be

a grown-up because he was allowed now to get his own bowl and pour his own cereal and milk. Mom! Corn Flakes every morning, but he knew a box of Frosted Flakes sat in the back of the pantry. Frosted Flakes were for special days when he was well behaved. Mom! This morning he had dressed himself and got his own bowl. Mom! He wanted Frosted Flakes, that didn't seem like too much to ask for. He walked through the living room, down the hallway, white socks sliding across hardwood flooring like an ice-skater. Mom! Into her bedroom, empty. Back down the hallway to the closed bathroom door. Mom? He leaned his little ear against the door. Mom, *are you in there?* Yes, Morrison, get ready for school, okay. Seven-years old and too young to comprehend the ache in her voice. *I'm already dressed.* Good, go ahead and get some cereal, okay." *Can I have Frosted Flakes?* Yes, that's okay. *Is Daddy in there too?* Go eat, okay. Mom, *I have to go to the bathroom.* Not now, honey. *Real bad,* Mom. Not now, Morrison. Just hold it, okay. *But Mom!* Just go out back then, sweetie, behind the garage.

Seven and eight-year olds gathered at the bus stop across the street and he hurried to finish his cereal. The school bus was coming and he wanted to say good-bye to his mom but she was still in the bathroom and he was scared because he didn't want to miss the bus. He wanted his mom to say good-bye and hug him like she always did. He banged on the door with his little hands and started to cry that the bus was coming and kept asking why didn't she come out and give him a hug. She opened the door just a little, enough to put her hand through and touch him and hold his hand for just a moment. And he peeked inside to say good-bye and he saw the color on her face, almost real red like the color is, crying so hard she had no sound left. He started to cry and she couldn't cry any harder than she already was. She opened the door to grab him in her arms and hold him hold him hold him forever. He looked around the bathroom and back to his mom and he wiped his nose and eyes. *Where's Daddy?*

LIKE MUFFLED WHISTLES. TAT. TAT. TAT. Coming from somewhere he can't see. Even as he repositions himself underneath the burning Humvee to get a better look he still thinks about how hot the sun was. Burning everywhere. Earth and metal and flesh still lingering in the air. He looks down the street and empties his weapon towards the sounds but he can't reload because his extra clips had melted together.

"You were the first person I ever touched."

"You mean like this?" Katherine laughed and moved her lips across his neck and her hand across his chest.

"You were the first person I ever touched," he told her again, looking into her eyes.

"I know," she said. "You don't have to tell me."

"I just wanted you to know. I want you to know because sometimes I don't always say things that maybe I should, and well, I guess I just wanted to make sure you knew. So you know how special you are, I guess."

"You're being silly." She grabbed his nose and squeezed it like he was a clown.

"Maybe, but you shouldn't laugh at me when I'm trying to be serious." He grabbed her hand and pretended to bite her finger.

"Oh, that's your idea of being serious?"

"I never joke about being serious. That's the one thing I don't joke about."

He was stretched out on the couch, shirtless and looking up at the ceiling, watching the fan, trying to follow a single blade spinning around. She lay next to him and the fan blew soft air on her back, exciting her and her skin. He followed the shape of her body with the tips of his fingers.

"Did I ever tell you my dad once went to the Temple of Heaven?" he asked. "Ever heard of it? It's in China. A beautiful building. I've seen pictures. It's circular and the roof is made with blue tiles that look like the sky. So peaceful. And the sky is always clear above it, there are never clouds, at least in all the pictures I've seen. Ancient Chinese believed heaven was round and the earth was square. That's why they made the building circular. To be more like heaven, I guess. What do you think about that? You should see it. I imagine there are some days you can't tell the difference between the roof and the sky."

"Will you take me there?" she asked.

He closed his eyes and wondered if she wanted to go with him anywhere or if she just said she would. Everything stuffed in one suitcase or a backpack and gone, just like that. Did she understand? Gone, no coming back to this place. What's for us here? It's all out there, not here, don't you see it? Can you see those things, he asked her in his mind. They would take only the images and sketches of all the places his dad told him stories about, thinking maybe he'll find his dad on the steps of some great monument for a great hero in a city that he has only seen in his dreams. But she always said things that he liked to hear and sometimes he thought maybe she didn't want anything for herself. He turned his face toward her cheek.

"Can I touch you again?" he smiled and looked at her and turned the rest of his body toward her.

"No. Answer me first."

"Answer what?"

"Will you take me there?"

"To China?"

"Yes. To China."

"Do you really want to go?"

"I said yes. I want to."

"I mean, is that where you want to go?"

"Sure, I'd go anywhere," she said. "Or if you wanted we could just stay here."

"I know, but where do you want to go?"

Pieces of the room moved toward him and he could feel the pointy corners of the walls pushing into his body and against his skull. He tried to wiggle loose and he wondered if she felt it also. But her face was the same and she was smiling just how he liked her to smile and he relaxed and felt so comfortable. He took all of her into his arms and held her.

The room was echoing the rain that had begun to fall against the metal roof. He closed his eyes again and tried to listen to the rain but he knew the rain wasn't real. It couldn't be real, because it never rained in the most beautiful places in the world.

PERCHED ON THE EDGE OF THE ROOFTOP with a thermos of orange juice vodka and a flashlight he had just turned off. Being alone gave him a chance to think about stuff, and he felt like he was old enough to think about stuff. Fourteen-years old is old enough to do a lot of stuff. He looked at the faces from his side of the river, a small river like a creek, a river creek, and the faces were in-focus and he noticed everything in his dream. He noticed everything about the five faces on the other side of the river and he never forgot that the faces were Caleb's and Justin's. Five faces, no smiles, kids getting older just like him. But all with faces of Caleb and Justin. Three girls, two boys, all blonde hair, just like him. Sun-bleached blonde and long. The girls' hair pulled back in twists. The boys' falling across their faces. White skin, almost invisible, like what he imagined angels looked like. They talked with each other but never looked across the river. They never noticed him watching them.

"I KNOW WHO YOU ARE," Baker said, the Humvee crunching rock and sand as they turned north from camp. "You hear me?" Morrison touched the passenger side window and wondered why Humvee windows were made to not roll down. Right then he wished he wasn't riding with Baker.

"Yeah, you heard me," Baker chuckled quietly, almost nervously, but kept his eyes on the road. "I know you from Hephzibah. Known it this whole time. Bet you surprised, huh? Bet you didn't know I know you."

Morrison wondered how high Baker's tally had reached. No way one person could survive that many attacks, right? Impossible. He wondered if any of this was true, whether any of his life was real. Or this desert war. It can't be real. None of this is happening. From Hephzibah, too? Impos-

sible. None of this is real. Thinks he knows me? Mother fucker mother fucker doesn't know who the fuck I am.

"I know about what you done to them two boys." Baker kept his eyes on the convoy. "Met you and said 'Goddamn it's a small world.' Bet that's what you saying right now. Bet right now it's feeling like a small world, ain't it?"

Morrison scanned the desert horizon to his right then locked his view onto the desert city coming up in front of the convoy. His heart sped up at the thought that this war wasn't real, that the yellow landscape didn't exist now or ever. But the inside of his chest pulsed louder and moved with more clarity than he'd ever felt before, and he supposed that such clarity could only happen in the most real of worlds.

MAYBE THE FACES IN THE DREAM MEANT NOTHING. Maybe he thought too much about things. Maybe it wasn't even a dream and he had made it all up as a coping device. That's what a magazine said, at least. A coping device. Maybe it wasn't Caleb and Justin.

He met with a doctor throughout high school. Three times a year. Follow-up type meetings, to make sure he was doing okay, but all they really cared about was whether he'd do it again. Morrison told the doctor about the faces in his dream and the doctor said not to look into it too much. It's only natural that you see them, the doctor said. He asked the doctor if there was a way to forget about stuff. Some sort of scientific way, maybe; or just a pill.

Morrison tried to convince himself that the faces in his dream meant nothing. It couldn't be Caleb and Justin anyway, he'd say to himself. Maybe I can just not think about the faces ever again.

HE LOOKS AT THE LITTLE BOYS AND LITTLE GIRLS huddled in a little ball in the doorway across the street. Little faces like the faces in his dream, but these little boys and little girls don't look away. They look at him. He thinks they are trying to say something to him but he can't hear because they're too far away.

It's too hot and he takes his helmet off and places it in the dust. He takes his flak vest off and throws it aside. He kicks the radio out of the way and grabs handfuls of sand and rock and pulls himself across the street to where the little boys and little girls are motioning for him. He blinks and the children surround him with their giggles and candy. They roll him onto his back and he looks up and they all look alike, like five twins. He tries to sit up but they laugh and motion for him to relax, just relax. They lift him and carry him into a stone room with no doors. He touches a little girl's face as they set him down but she doesn't smile like he hopes she would.

He tries to sit up again but they motion for him to relax, just relax. They huddle so close to him that he knows they are all safe. Light blows in through one of the windows, across their faces, bleaching their skin and hair yellow. So bright they're almost invisible.

"Katherine? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Go ahead."

"I was saying we'll be home before Labor Day. Did you hear that? They said we'll be home by Labor Day."

"Don't tease me like that."

"I'm serious. They told us yesterday."

"I'm serious, too. You're going to make me cry."

"Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say I'd be home before Christmas for sure? And now by Labor Day – can you believe it?"

"You also said they wouldn't send you over there."

"Don't think like that."

"I know, but I don't want to get too excited."

"It's okay to be excited. We're all excited. I was thinking about surprising you, but I couldn't keep it a secret."

"I'm glad you told me."

"They said we'll get a month off, maybe more. Recovery time."

"I can't think that far ahead. You realize that, don't you? I can't think past today. I'm going crazy."

"Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"I just can't stop crying."

"What if we took a long vacation? We'll go on that trip we always talked about."

"What trip?"

"To China."

"China? I don't want to think about any trips right now. I'm going crazy."

"Wait for me to get home before you start going crazy."

"It's too late—listen to me, I can't stop crying."

"Don't worry, okay. Just a couple more weeks and I'll be home and you can cry all you want."

"Just let me cry right now, -while you're on the phone." **F**

—Third Place Story—

The Blue Dress

I hate the sound of tearing. It sends shivers of horror down my back, as if I am remembering something impossible, some thought I flinch from, the tearing of my mother's flesh as I was born. Tearing, birth, new identity, horror. And Malcolm had grasped the flowered dress at the bodice and ripped downward with that violent softness of sound that sundered threads make. Destruction, cruelty, release. I could hardly stay upright in my chair.

I hated him for it. He saw me hating him and smiled. He is one of those teachers who think it's good for you to be stripped of everything that defines you.

And no, this was not a class in dressmaking. Malcolm's action was not one of disdain for the Queen Elizabeth school of haute couture. This was a class in Transpersonal Psychology called "The You." Yes, yes, I can almost see your smirk. Anyone who would willingly sign up for a course called "The You". . . .

The intent of it, I learned gradually, over alternate Wednesday evenings shifting in a metal chair in the basement of the All Is One Unitarian Fellowship building, is to strip one of the "facade" that obscures your "you-ness."

It worked in my case. I have lost myself. I have lost myself forever though I continue to futilely search in the streets of the city. I walk and walk.

You get rid, Malcolm instructed us. Let me give you an example. He was very flamboyant, Malcolm. Elbows bent close to the waist, hands upraised, palms out, like a chorus girl, quick tosses of the head, bright squirrel-like eyes glimmering.

If you want to get rid of clothes, say, you go to your closet, you remove everything you wear all the time and look great in, you bundle the rest up in garbage bags and, without looking back, you take it to the Salvation Army. Voila! Clean, zen-like closet that expresses "you." If you notice that everything left is black, then, at least now you know, you are a person of black.

Works in the kitchen. If you haven't used that glass, dish, baking pan, pot in the last year, out it goes. Keep what you use. What you use is who "you" are.

I did not like thinking of myself as an entity contained within quotation marks. As if there were a you with and a you without. The you without, certainly, would be the most elemental, more you than the quotation you,

which was, after all, almost by definition, a contrivance, a facade. Or was it the other way around?

Oh, Malcolm could get you thinking this way. I think I hated him. I know he knew it. I imagine he went home after class – though, in some ways I could not imagine him existing outside it, he himself seemed such a contrivance of his own making – congratulating himself that in, at least one case, he had succeeded.

For I do believe that the intent of the “You” class was the destruction of personality. Malcolm would say, for therapeutic ends. No birth without blood. Without tearing.

I almost threw up as Malcolm held up the dress to show the violence of the sundered edges.

I would read later that the police visited Malcolm, that they noted in their report that the fact that he couldn’t stop smiling, when apprised of my disappearance, was suspicious. I’m glad. I’m glad his best student caused him so much trouble that “The You” course was dropped forever from the Deer Park Institute curriculum.

But I couldn’t be found. I had shed the facades covering my you-ness and when one does that, one can live among people one knows and never be seen. I had done that.

My parents were narcissists, you see. Malcolm had gotten that out of me, in class session, or rather he had pried from me my sad, whining litany of childhood woes and labeled them such.

They were like spiders, he said, while the other class members (all women... hmm) nodded with slightly squinted eyes as if comparing my database of abuse to their own. My parents, he said, went to a lot of trouble to make a nice, elaborate, comfy web but then they trapped me in it, like a fly, and proceeded to suck my blood. I could never get free, I could never live independently, I was forced to look to them for everything, and I was being slowly drained.

It was true! That’s exactly how I felt. But I protested, of course, noting that I was self-supporting, had always been self-supporting after college, I lived with a boyfriend, gave dinner parties, hardly ever saw my parents except on holidays and birthdays. His description may have been apt for when I was in junior high school, for instance, when my parents had woken up to such alarming tendencies as puberty and a desire for independence, but I had always resisted their smothering. In fact, the favorite family story was the one where, as a three year old, my parents had taken me to an Italian restaurant and I had insisted on feeding myself. “Myself, myself!” I yelled and, to shut me up, they had handed me a fork. Indeed, it seemed I did well with the instrument for the mound of spaghetti disappeared. However, when they lifted me from the child seat, the whole slithering mass of noodles slid to the floor. It had all gone down my neckline. Still,

the story was told with much humor in my family and I was known, affectionately, as "Myself."

Not, said Malcolm.

He wagged a finger in my face. You are not you at all. You don't have the slightest idea who you are.

He spent the rest of the sessions stripping me of my pretensions. My boyfriend noticed something wrong. We would go out to dinner and I could not speak. One converses, I was learning, out of the various facades that cover the you. Without the facades, one is reduced to silence. And so I was.

I saw, too, how you-ness (or lack of it? Malcolm was getting me confused) defines your yearnings. It seemed, as I sat limply at Le Tri-Couleur with Jim, my boyfriend, making pink paste designs on toast with the pate but never really eating, that if one has stripped oneself of the facades that (Malcolm had convinced me) consist almost entirely of acts designed to persuade others to think well of us, then there really wasn't much left. There should be, he exhorted, swooping around the room between the thin rows of folding chairs and putting his face close to one then another of ours. There should be things we do out of pure you-ness. But most of us don't because: 1) we're too busy serving the facades, and 2) we don't know who this you is.

Right. I was exhausted.

Jim took me home and cuddled me but he did not make love to me. I think one has to make love to some sort of entity and there was nothing left.

It was symptomatic of the children of narcissists, Malcolm declared, to be all facade and no you.

Case in point.

All the women nodded sagely. I felt a thin, tearing scream build up inside me but to let it out, of course, would be an expression of you-ness. And I did not.

Evidently, Jim finally hired a private detective. He had walked the streets of the city constantly, looking into women's faces. He had called my parents repeatedly, and even gone up there once, as if he didn't trust them to tell him whether I was really hiding there or not. Of course, he had canvassed everyone at work, all my friends, even some he had never met, but located through my address book.

There was the fact that I had left my driver's license behind, indeed my whole purse. Of course! Any decent book on symbolism will note that a purse stands for something of value, that the driver's license is a symbol of identity. What need, then, would I have for them?

Some con with hacker-level computer skills had gotten years off his federal prison sentence by coming up with a program that would cross-check

social security numbers against death records. Of course, whole books had been written on how to go to the library or the graveyard or the hall of records, find the name of someone who had died, apply for a social security card in that name and voila! new identity.

Jim found this out and urged a friend in law enforcement to enter my age, 34, and scan the system for any new applications for social security cards by "dead people." Unfortunately, the program spewed forth thousands of names. He could not have guessed that fraud had undone so many.

I think that's what broke him, the knowledge that so many people had so easily doffed the robe of identity. Also—besides the ghoulishness of it, as if they'd donned the yellowed skin of a corpse—the willful coldness of it. That someone could walk away and abandon all association, leaving loved ones to worry and wonder. That *I* could. Whatever facade covering his you-ness that nursed love inside him broke that day, as his friend scrolled down the impossible list on his computer screen. I had committed an act of violence against him, he saw that now.

Unless I was dead.

It was to this broken Jim that sightings were reported. I had been spotted in Paris, sitting at a cafe in an elegantly simple blue dress, legs crossed, one stylish pump bobbing. I was stirring coffee. My hair was a little shorter, just sweeping my shoulders, and very stylish with a kind of fringe of slanting bangs.

Or a skeletonized body had been found sprawled at the bottom of an embankment as if thrown from car. Did I own a pair of jeans and a white, long-sleeved t-shirt? Didn't all women?

Dental records would prove the skeleton theory wrong, but the sightings were more elusive. Though he told friends he could not take me back if I were ever found, still, he booked a flight to Paris and walked the streets. I walked the streets, too.

Ah, the tissues of identity are more delicate than we think. Just step out of the rounds of your every day life and you are no longer defined by your actions of yesterday. All these things that say who we are: dress, hairstyle, mannerism, what we say to the guy selling newspapers on the corner or if we are coolly silent—all these things are sifted by our observers and an identity is made up and reflected back to us, and we then reinforce this identity by acting the same way again. Yes, we are this slightly pudgy friendly type who talks too much, or we are the shy nerd with the angry glitter in the sidelong glance.

But remove familiar associations, change hair, style, clothing, setting . . . and who are you? You are free to make a new identity.

I watched a lot of films. Films are all about identity and facade: the story line, the actual fact of actor/character; the veneer of celluloid. Layers of tissue. They fascinate me and, tellingly, they are shown in the dark.

And I walked. I am most me when I walk alone, thinking.

Jim would, after all, find my body. It's ironic that this is true.

I have often thought that murder must be the most intimate of acts. I don't mean murder by poisoning or shooting. I mean murder by stabbing or strangulation. The murderer must get very close to the victim. The victim's breath puffs on his face. His breath puffs on the victim's. They grapple in a kind of embrace. Their blood may co-mingle. They look into each other's eyes. They are alone, very alone.

People talk about the light going out in someone's eyes when they die. What a fascinating image, as if there is a candle burning inside. Is that the you? Actually, I have seen this phenomenon myself, when, sadly, I had to put my big dog to sleep. And yes, a dullness suffused the eyeball and his light no longer existed. And I didn't know what that meant.

I had time to wonder—because time became elastic—as I grappled with "my" murderer (and even had time to think about the endearing possessiveness of that "my") if perhaps the facades and the candle light inside and the you-ness are somehow all co-mingled confusingly and if, Malcolm aside, that is not okay. Why isn't that okay? Do we have to be of one piece? Yes, yes, authenticity and all that (and what could be more authentic than this terror of knife and grunt?) But, really, wasn't life before the blue dress and the walking the streets and the dark films, wasn't life a kind of rolling cinemascope of remembered roles and confusion and laughing and touching someone else and letting them define you and you defined them a little bit and we stumbled together as we ran hand in hand together in the meadow and wasn't the sky bright blue, like a child's story book, you said, and yes, that memory of the child's story book and all those admonitions of how children should behave and the not behaving and the spaghetti sliding down the inside of the front of my death and something feels cool and wet like that now.

And he will find me because I will write his name down next to me here on the sidewalk in my blood and he has an unusual name: James Urho Lakmandian. I don't know if those last three letters can be read, though. Jim, you were right to love the not-me. I was wrong to abandon her. I have sinned, sinned.

Oh my lovely doggie. I remember how you lay on your side on the cold metal table at the vet's. Why are animals so much more self-possessed than humans? Oh, I love you, my sweet black-lipped dog. I love my Jim.

They will find me in a blue dress. I love this blue dress. It is very "me." **F**

Fifth Annual Poetry Contest Winners

Poetry (Judged by Campbell McGrath)

**First Place: [I am Thinking of Columbus—
of Newly Caulked, Dry-Docked Ships.]
from “The Sea-Monkey Dreams”
by John Pursley**

“A credo offered by one of many characters in this compelling historical tapestry bids us to ‘Stay quiet & forget’—and thank goodness this poet failed to heed that advice. This is one of the most humanistically detailed historical poems I’ve ever read, and the formal balance of these prose-like couplets complements its vivid and evocative mise-en-scene. While these lines compose an entirely satisfying reading experience in their own right, a subtitle indicates that they are an excerpt from a larger work—and if so, I say bring on the rest of ‘The Sea-Monkey Dreams.’”

**Second Place: The First Kill
by Michael Meyerhofer**

“The thorny, rough-hewn language of this poem is a perfect counterpoint to its vividly-evoked landscape, and its complex wisdom into the interwoven natures of life and death. As in the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa, this child narrator glimpses a world of mortality he cannot fully understand, but knows to be essential. The image of the dead deer’s head weathering to bone will stay with me a long time.”

**Third Place: History
by Janine Joseph**

“From the towelets that smell like ‘mandarin oranges’ to ‘the midnight coast/ of California,’ this poet knows how to employ sensory images to connect the reader to the poem. A vividly rendered journey through skies darkened by no less a force than time itself.”

—First Place Poem—

[I am Thinking of Columbus—of Newly Caulked,
Dry-Docked Ships ...]

from "The Sea-Monkey Dreams"

I am thinking of Columbus—of newly caulked, dry-docked ships
Waiting for the one-ton, wine barrels to be wheeled into the hulls

Of each vessel—& the men *therein*, carving their initials & the sea
Monsters that will, *eventually*, destroy them, gnawing the leathered

Rations of salt-pork, & as much fresh fruit as they can find: 1492,
The year & not the number, I am thinking Genoa & Christopher,

The Saint & the boy who bears his name. I am thinking of God's
Good nature & the relative humility of the West, in a time of war

And enterprise. The rise of Islam at the expense of Christendom.
The futile attempts to recover the Holy Sepulchre. The Ottoman

Empire, now knocking on the doors of Vienna. On the top-deck
Of the largest ship, two men are throwing dice, playing the bones

Back & forth between their hands. Another man stands amongst
The riggings, casting his nose into the air, *like a dog*, domesticated

To know his master's scent. A day behind. This is the curtain call
Of men made to look the part of sailors, hauling rocks for ballast

And trade cargo that would appease the Grand Khan: glass beads
And decorative bells, fashioned for the feet of falcons, harriers &

Sparrow-hawks upholding an air between God & man—the spirit
Of the divine, a turbulence of wind. Through the streets of Palos,

The late Pedro Vasques de la Frontera is dancing like a mad-man
And roaring at anyone who will listen, something about an island

In the western Azores; islands—which he, *himself*, had discovered
Some forty years prior—adrift in the Sargasso; islands, untouched

By man, full of innumerable riches . . . And, beyond that, another,
Larger & more beautiful, lost, to so much fog—an impenetrable fog.

It is a question of vanity—a question of faith. The long goodbye
That brought these men, & the women beside them, the children

Of Luis de Torres—a converted Jew & interpreter of the fleet—
And the children of Diego de Harana—a cousin of the Admiral's

Cordovan mistress & marshal of the *Santa Maria*—chasing a dog,
Or being chased; it is difficult to tell. There are fires by the water,

Fires & abandoned bedrolls where the men assembled. The night
Becoming day, & still no word. The whole town surfacing, to see

The men away—in the plaza & on the shores, where the Atlantic
Leans into the Golfo de Cádiz, & then lulls, like hoof-hammered

Steel, *rolling out*, the story of itself, burnished between two worlds.

Because he could no longer touch her face, & because she spoke
Only to her father, who did not know, slowly & from the corner

Of her mouth, Juan Quintero—boatswain of the *Pinta*—scraped
Salt from the halyards & lifts, buntlines & bow-,—then clewlines,

Sheet & tack, bright fractals of mineral amassed at sea, on the air,
And in the bodies of these men, & clawed his skin, as if he could

Loose the memory (of her body) by drawing water from his own.
Because—in the eyes of sailors & in the running-riggings of each

Vessel, the belaying pins & pulleys—salt is an irritant, & because
It needed to be done. Because, even in Palos, she was too young

And *too exhausted* with her father's health, to do anything but stay

Quiet & forget. *Stay quiet & forget*, she must have thought, mining

The motions (of his body) like a schoolboy, learning the letters of
His own name, in the Latin—or Greek?—a language, not entirely

Unlike her own, magnified by a clarity born out of failure, a hand
On a slumped shoulder, that says, *I'm sorry to have to tell you this . . .*

That says, *Your father . . .* but it is not her father she thinks of now,
Or the cold hand that brushed her knees to touch her inner thigh

Beneath the dress of its ordinary life, or the horses, in the stables
Where they met & continued to meet, congregating around what-

Ever light the moon managed & the dark slab of near-emulsified
Foods, Juan would lug from the market, which filled their trough

And kept them warm—though at times, their nostrils, flared like
Serpentine dragons, would produce so much *steam*, their muzzles

Seemed masked by all that smoke, & she'd been afraid they'd die,
If not from cold, from their own asphyxiation, & it seemed unfair

One should die twice. *Stay quiet & forget*—she must have thought,
Holding to her father's hand, as he pulled her through the streets

Of men & women, children, chickens & dogs—*stay quiet & forget.*

—Second Place Poem—

The First Kill

When grandfather shot his first buck
of the season, a great leg-tangled
nine-point raised on wheat-fetch and fields
of rain-slogged cornwaste, he sawed off
its sorry head and nailed it as-is
above the garage door, so that for months
afterward, Sunday visits meant braving
flesh-flies, down-shed tatters of hide
and sinew frozen stiff in winter's papyrus,
droppings stewed in snowmelt until
sagegrass sprung from driveway gravel,
and that breeze-blasted deer skull
loomed clean as a footprint overhead.

I was nine. In church, flushed priests
said Christ turned Jew-water into wine
and hailed rotten Lazarus from the grave,
even as sag-breasted schoolmarms
chalked out the cell walls of plants and
taught us how the universe was stretching
like a lie from its bedrock of nothing,
hinged like the bones of dinosaurs
and the skulls of schoolboys on matter,
sunlight, this many calories and hormones
kicking growth from a mother-seed
that once roamed wild through still fields,
awaiting the doom of its own birth.

—Third Place Poem—

History

At the end of the cabin, the stewardess
was emptying the dinner cart;
four broiled chicken trays
stacked like old stories in her arms.
From the aisle, I watched my father play
Connect Four by himself,
arrange the red and
black dots into five quarters,
four dimes, three nickels
for both of my brothers and me.
Jan, airsick, was asleep
against the window, dreaming of
nothing that I knew at eight.
My mother was in the lavatory,
rubbing his vomit from her hands
with a towelette that smelled of
mandarin oranges.

The Bermuda Triangle, I am sure,
is right below us, so I unbuckle
my lap belt, cross into the next wave of seats
where Johann is sliding his window shade up.
We search for the Amelia Earhart
from our mother's lessons, the Amelia Earhart
with a headlamp on in this sixteen-hour dark.
He tells me the ocean is a hole,
and I can't tell him we're telling the wrong stories
of ghosts disappearing in the wrong planes.
It's only Hawaii down there, the midnight coast
of California, and only the stewardess
will answer the call light we're pushing
on and off and on, steady as seconds.

—Contributor's Notes—

David Aronson lives and works in the Philadelphia area where he once owned and operated an art school. His quirky art combines traditional media such as oil, watercolor, ink, graphite, and colored pencil with digital media and digital collage. He has created CD covers, music posters, and tour t-shirts. His commissions include: MTV2, *Fuse*, *BigNews*, and the *New York Journal of Art and Literature*. <http://www.alchemicalwedding.com>

Giselda Beaudin received her BA in Comparative Literature from Brown University and her MA in English and Creative Writing from Binghamton University, where she served as a fiction editor for *Harpur Palate*. She has recently had work published in *Ellipsis*.

Sarah Blackman is an MFA student at the University of Alabama where she has served as the fiction editor of the *Black Warrior Review*. Her poetry and fiction has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in the *Best New American Voices, 2006*, *The Laurel Review*, *Oxford-American Magazine* and *The Gettysburg Review*.

Jon Boilard was born and raised in Western New England. He has been living and writing in the San Francisco area since 1986. His stories have been published extensively in literary journals in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia. One was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, another won the Sean O'Faolain Award and several others have earned individual small press honors. Jon was recently invited to read his work at the Frank O'Connor Short Story Festival in Cork, Ireland.

Rose Bunch is a native of Arkansas who has just completed an MFA at the University of Montana in Fiction. Her nonfiction essay "Ghosts" was awarded an honorable mention from *The Atlantic Monthly* for their 2005 Student Nonfiction Contest. Furthermore, her work received third place in this year's Playboy's College Fiction Contest. She will be joining the University of Missouri's doctoral program in creative writing next fall.

Peter Desy retired early from the English Department at Ohio University. Now the migraines have abated. He has poems in or forthcoming from *Green Mountains Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Connecticut Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Poetry East*, other journals, as well as a poetry collection *Driving from Columbus* and two chapbooks.

K.E. Duffin's book of poems, *King Vulture*, was published by The University of Arkansas Press in 2005. Her work has appeared in *Agni*, *Chelsea*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The New Orleans*

Review, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattapallax*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Verse*, and many other journals. Her poems have also been featured on *Poetry Daily* and *Verse Daily*. A painter and printmaker, Duffin lives in Somerville, MA.

Lynnell Edwards' first volume of poetry is *The Farmer's Daughter* (Red Hen Press, 2003). Her work has most recently appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, *Poems and Plays*, and others. She is a regular reviewer for *Rain Taxi*, *Pleiades*, and *The Georgia Review*. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky where she teaches at the University of Louisville.

Matthew Gavin Frank has published in *The New Republic*, *Tampa Review*, *Epoch*, *Crazyhorse*, *Indiana Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Willow Springs*, *Bellingham Review*, *Pleiades*, *The Florida Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Gastronomica*, and others. He received the 2005 Summer Fellowship from the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing and a 2006 Artist's Grant from the Vermont Studio Center. He recently completed *Barolo*, a memoir concerning his illegal work in the Italian wine industry. He teaches at Arizona State University and edits for *Hayden's Ferry Review*.

Timothy Green recently moved from upstate New York to Los Angeles, where he works as Associate Editor of the poetry journal *Rattle*, and is a Master's in Professional Writing candidate at USC. Poems are forthcoming in *Diner*, *Gargoyle*, *Florida Review*, *Hazmat Review*, *Nimrod*, and others, and in the current issues of *Crab Creek Review*, *Cranky*, *Euphony*, *Portland Review*, and *Slipstream*. His first book-length collection, *The Dream Token*, is seeking a publisher.

Janine Joseph was born in the Philippines, and now lives in both California and New York, where she is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at New York University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Susquehanna Review*, *Mosaic*, *Oberon*, and *Homage to Vallejo*, an anthology by Greenhouse Review Press.

Robert Krut's poetry has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, and appeared in journals like *Blackbird*, *Barrow Street*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *The Mid-American Review*. Currently, he teaches at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Philip Levine is the author of sixteen books of poetry, most recently *Breath* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). His other poetry collections include *The Mercy* (1999); *The Simple Truth* (1994), which won the Pulitzer Prize; *What Work Is* (1991), which won the National Book Award; *New Selected Poems* (1991); *Ashes: Poems New and Old* (1979), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the first American Book Award for Poetry; 7

Years From Somewhere (1979), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award; and *The Names of the Lost* (1975), which won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. He has also published a collection of essays, *The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography* (1994), edited *The Essential Keats* (1987), and co-edited and translated two books: *Off the Map: Selected Poems of Gloria Fuertes* (with Ada Long, 1984) and *Tarumba: The Selected Poems of Jaime Sabines* (with Ernesto Trejo, 1979). He has received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize from Poetry, the Frank O'Hara Prize, and two Guggenheim Foundation fellowships. For two years he served as chair of the Literature Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts, and he was elected a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets in 2000. He lives in New York City and Fresno, California, and teaches at New York University.

Rachel May grew up in Massachusetts and New York, attended Davidson College for her undergraduate degree and earned her MFA at The University of Montana in Missoula. Her fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has recently appeared in *Harpur Palate* and *Night Train*; she has been recognized in The Writers at Work Fellowship Contest, *Inkwell's* Fiction Contest and others. She currently lives in Missoula and teaches at the University, hoping to keep her growing menagerie fed.

Michael Meyerhofer's book, *Leaving Iowa*, won the Liam Rector First Book Award and is forthcoming from Briery Creek Press. His chapbook, *Cardboard Urn*, won the Copperdome Poetry Contest from Southeast Missouri State University. His work has appeared in *North American Review*, *MARGIE*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *Diagram*, and others.

Campbell McGrath's most recent book is *Pax Atomica* (Ecco Press, 2004). He teaches at Florida International University, and lives with his family in Miami Beach.

Scott McMurtrey spent his childhood watching ballgames with his dad from the cheap seats at the Astrodome. At eighteen he left home to explore the world. When he found what he was looking for, he married her. Currently, they live in Pullman, WA, where Scott is working on a collection of short stories.

Kat Meads is the author of *The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan*, *Sleep, Born Southern and Restless, Not Waving* and other books of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. She has received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a California Artist Fellowship, a Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown residency, the *Chelsea* award for fiction and the *New Letters* award for essay. She lives in California.

John A. Nieves was born in Manhattan in 1977. He has an M.A. in creative writing from the University of South Florida. His poems have appeared in journals such as *California Quarterly*, *Chrysanthemum*, *Lilliput Review*, *Red Owl*, *Sunscripts* and *Cartographica*. He has also co-written a chapter for a forthcoming Palgrave MacMillan creative writing textbook. He was the recipient of the 2005 Estelle J. Zbar Poetry Award and winner of the 2005 Charles Conway Memorial Writers' Scholarship.

Leonard Orr is Professor of English at Washington State University, Tri-Cities. He has published many books of criticism. His poetry collection, *Daytime Moon*, was published in 2005 (FootHills Press), and he was a runner-up for the 2005 T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize. His poetry has been published in more than sixty journals including *Black Warrior Review*, *Poetry International*, *Poetry East*, *Pontoon*, *Poetry Midwest*, and *Rosebud*.

A former reporter and editor, with an M.A. and M.F.A. in the Novel from San Francisco State University, **Claire Ortalda** has been published in numerous literary journals. Her short story, "A Village Dog," was winner of the 2004 Georgia State University Fiction Prize. Another, "Littlejack," was a 2006 Hackney Literary Award winner and will be published this fall in the Canadian magazine *Transition*. A poem, "Iowa," was nominated for a Pushcart.

Aimee Parkison's writing has appeared, or is forthcoming, in the following magazines: *North American Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Other Voices*, *Santa Monica Review*, *the Seattle Review*, *River City*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*. Parkison received her MFA from Cornell University. She teaches creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and has won a Christopher Isherwood Fellowship, a Puffin Foundation grant, a Writers at Work fellowship, and a Kurt Vonnegut Fiction Prize. Her story collection, *Woman with Dark Horses*, was published by Starcherone Press. Parkison is currently working on her first novel.

John Pursley III teaches creative writing and twentieth century American literature at the University of Alabama, where he is a poetry editor for *Black Warrior Review*. His recent work appears in *Backwards City Review* and *Poetry*. *When, by the Titanic*, winner of the 2006 Portlandia Chapbook Contest, is forthcoming in fall 2006.

Doug Ramspeck directs the Writing Center and teaches creative writing and composition at The Ohio State University at Lima. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in a wide variety of literary journals, including *Confrontation*, *Connecticut Review*, *Rosebud*, *Lake Effect*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Permafrost*, and *Rhino*. He lives in Lima with his wife, Beth, and their fifteen-year-old daughter, Lee.

Steven Rood is a trial lawyer in Oakland, CA. He was a finalist in the 2003 National Poetry Series and in the 2006 May Swenson Poetry Award, Utah State University.

Kathleen Rooney is the author of *Reading With Oprah* (University of Arkansas Press, 2005), and her poetry has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Florida Review*, *Phoebe* and *Passages North*.

Originally from Seattle, **Lisa Roullard** now resides in Boise, Idaho. Her poetry has appeared in *New Orleans Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and other magazines. Her poem "Magic Class, Fauntleroy YMCA" was selected to be part of Boise's Poetry in Motion program.

Mark Sanders is a professor of English at Lewis-Clark State College. His creative prose has appeared in such journals as *Glimmer Train*, *River Teeth*, *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. Recent poems are forthcoming or have appeared in *Dalhousie Review*, *River City*, *Poetry East*, and *Prairie Schooner*. His second full-length collection of poetry, *Here in the Big Empty*, is forthcoming from Backwaters Press.

Tony Schaffer is from several states, mostly around the Midwest. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and is currently pursuing an MFA at Emerson College. He lives in Brookline, MA.

David Schloss is a Professor of English at Miami University. His books and chapbooks include: *The Beloved* (Ashland, 1973); *Legends* (Windmill, 1976); *Sex Lives of the Poor and Obscure* (Carnegie Mellon, 2001); *Greates Hits* (Pudding House, 2004); *Behind the Eyes* (Dos Madres, 2005); and *Group Portrait From Hell* (Carnegie Mellon, forthcoming, 2006). His poems have appeared in *Poetry* magazine, anthologies, and scores of other literary journals and anthologies, plus essays on contemporary poetry and film. He lives in Cincinnati with his wife, Kay Sloan, a writer, and their daughter, Signe.

Eric Shade's first book of stories, *EYESORES*, won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. The story "Yolky at the Warhol Museum" is in fact a broad expansion of the collection's final story, a three page epilogue called "Souvenirs". Shade is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Houston, where he was awarded a James Michener Fellowship. His work has been published in a variety of journals and has been nominated for the Puchcart Prize. His novel manuscript, *Let's All Criticize Turk Fournier*, is currently seeking a home.

Roger Sheffer teaches writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. His poetry has appeared most recently in *Puerto del Sol*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Seneca Review*.

Lauren Goodwin Slaughter's work has appeared in journals such as *Hayden's Ferry*, *Cimarron Review*, and *The Journal*. She holds an M.F.A. from the University of Alabama, and currently lives in Missoula, Montana where she continues to work as an editor for the online journal, *Diagram*.

Mike Smith's poems have appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Hotel Amerika*, the *North American Review*, and the *Notre Dame Review*. Poems are forthcoming in *Gulf Stream*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Zone 3*. His chapbook, *Anagrams of America*, is on-line as Issue 30 of *Mudlark: Electronic Journal of Poetry and Poetics*. Another chapbook, *Small Industry*, was published by the S.C. Poetry Initiative. His collection, *How to Make a Mummy*, is forthcoming from CustomWords.

David Troupes is about to return to his native New England after two years in Scotland and one in northern England, during which time he was awarded a writer's bursary by the Scottish Arts Council and earned an MSc from the University of Edinburgh. He enjoyed his eight months as a mail carrier. His poetry has appeared in several American and British publications.

Sandy Tseng was the winner of the Richard Peterson Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Folio*, and *Guernica Magazine*. She received her MFA from the University of Pittsburgh and currently teaches writing at Duquesne University. She is completing her first book, *Ocean Perimeter*.

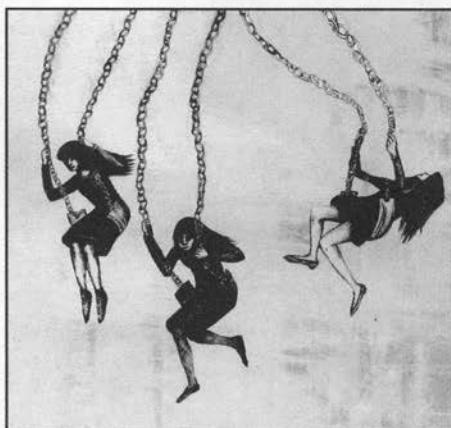
Benjamin Vogt is pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and has an MFA from The Ohio State University. Poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Diagram*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Verse Daily*. A chapbook of poems, *Indelible Marks*, is available from *Pudding House*.

Urban Waite is earning an MFA in creative writing from Emerson. Originally from Seattle, he is the former nonfiction editor of *The Bellingham Review*, where he graduated from Western Washington University with an MA in English. His most recent work can be found in the current issue of *Redivider*. *North Dakota Quarterly* will publish his next essay in the fall/winter. He is currently at work on a collection of related essays.

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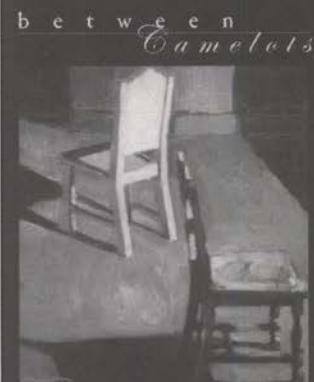
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