

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

---

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 1

---

October 2022

## Harpur Palate, Volume 2 Number 1, Summer 2002

Harpur Palate .  
*Binghamton University--SUNY*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

---

### Recommended Citation

., Harpur Palate (2022) "Harpur Palate, Volume 2 Number 1, Summer 2002," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol2/iss1/1>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact [ORB@binghamton.edu](mailto:ORB@binghamton.edu).





VOLUME 2 NUMBER 1  
Summer 2002

**Managing Editor**

Toiya Kristen Finley

**Assistant Managing Editors**

Dave Spector

Jian Sun

**Associate Editor**

Joe Bisz

**Assistant Associate Editors**

Michelle Dien

Lisa Greenwald

**Fiction Editor**

Toiya Kristen Finley

**Poetry Editors**

Catherine Dent

Anne Rashid

**Layout Editor**

Jennifer H. Kim

**Publicity Chairs**

Phillip Mandel

Leah Umansky

**Treasurer**

Ann Campbell

**Webmaster**

Alex Goodman

**Faculty Advisers**

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

Davis Schneiderman

**Fiction Board**

Rachel Bonsignore, Alicia Cascardi, Meagan Cass, Sarah Crevelling, George Ford, Camille Goodison, Michael Greenhut, Lisa Greenwald, Michael Grubb, Maria-Theresa Holub, Matthew Purdy, Vanessa Rizza, Dave Spector, Jian Sun, Jacob White, Silas Zabal

**Poetry Board**

Kelley Braheney, Ann Campbell, Michelle Dien, Norman Farwell, Elizabeth Kelley, Veda Khulpateea, Sharon Kowalsky, Tom O'Connor, Phil Mandel, Rachel Miller, Greg Razran, Tom Rehtin, Melissa Romano, Jessica Seay, Leah Umansky, Doris Umbers, Ryan Vaughan, Jonida Zeqo

**Layout**

Joe Bisz, Catherine Dent, Toiya Kristen Finley, Jennifer H. Kim, Rachel Miller, Neveen Mourad, Tom O'Connor, Tom Rehtin, Dave Spector, Ryan Vaughan

**Submissions**

We consider all genres of fiction from 250-8000 words and all forms of poetry. We are not interested in violence for violence's sake or the usage of four-letter words for shock value. To submit to *Harpur Palate*, please send an SASE, cover letter (including an email address you check regularly) and 1 story or 3-5 poems (no poems longer than 10 pages) addressed to the appropriate editor(s) to:

*Harpur Palate*

Dept. of English

Binghamton University

PO Box 6000

Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

**READING PERIODS:** January 1-March 15 (Summer); August 1-October 15 (Winter). Submissions received outside of reading periods will not be evaluated. For more information please visit: <http://harpurpalate.binghamton.edu>.

**Harpur Palate at Binghamton University** is published in the Summer and Winter by the Department of English at Binghamton University. © 2002 Dept. of English, Binghamton University. All rights reserved. "Rag Monster" and "Sea Anemones" Copyright © 2002 by Bruce Holland Rogers. All rights reserved. Printed by Montrose Publishing.

**Harpur Palate** is indexed by the American Humanities Index and Poem Finder.

**Subscription Info:** US: \$8.83/copy; \$16.66/year. Canada: \$9.33/copy, \$17.66/year. International: \$9.83/copy, \$18.16/year. Please send check or money order drawn on a US bank to the above address. Donations are welcome and gratefully received. Copies and subscriptions can also be purchased at Project Pulp: <http://blindsided.net/smallpress>.

Thanks to the Dean of Harpur College, the Graduate School, the English Department, GSO, GEO, and the SA for their support.

ISBN 0-9710066-5-2

ISSN 1532-9046

2 Harpur



Since this is our third issue, this is probably as good a time as any to explain where in the world the name *Harpur Palate* came from. There's really no great mystery. Really. In the fall of 2000, a group of grads and undergrads were trying to figure out what to call this thing. We did a free write and put the names we'd come up with on the board. "Palate" was one of those names. People liked "Palate," but it seemed like it was missing something. The very wise Marnie Hanson suggested we put "Harpur" (after the Harpur College of Arts & Sciences) in front of it. In the end, "Harpur Palate" beat out such names as "Aldebaran," "Mirrorball," and "Riboflavin." But that story's kinda boring, ain't it? Let's just say that the poems and stories that appear in *Harpur Palate at Binghamton University* are "to our taste." Keep sending us stuff. You never know what we'll eat.

So, what has society come to when girls swallow boys whole? Ponder this on your way to Oshagan, but before you leave for your trip, let the stars blow in, put on your Absence of Light costume, say a prayer to your child, and make sure your significant other stays away from kites. Oh, and one last thing—were those scraps you threw in the closet really just scraps? We (the editorial staff) have to admit that we failed to do some of these things, but we had a blast anyway. We hope you find them equally as delectable.

Congratulations to Paul Michel, winner of the Second Annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction for "Anonymity," and to Sara Johnson, who received an Honorable Mention for "Regeneration."

Once again I must thank the Graduate English Organization, the Graduate Student Organization, the Student Association, and Dean Mileur for all of their help, also Maria Mazziotti Gillan for her continued guidance. With this issue, Catherine Dent, one of our Poetry Editors, is bowing down gracefully. I swear this woman is one of the most organized human beings on the planet. Catherine, thanks for helping us keep the sanity, and I'm glad you'll be working with us in some capacity in the future. And where would this little rag be without our readers? The submissions for this issue tripled, and the readers worked as hard as ever.

Happy reading,  
Toiya Kristen Finley  
Managing Editor

## Contents

---

### Fiction

5	<b>Two Metamorphoses: Rag Monster and Sea Anemones</b>	Bruce Holland Rogers
15	<b>Anonymity</b>	Paul Michel
35	<b>Regeneration</b>	Sara Johnson
48	<b>So Deep Do They Dwell</b>	Justin Stanchfield
71	<b>Barney Hester</b>	Darrin Doyle
96	<b>Up, Up, and Away</b>	Shari Fineman

### Poetry

12	<b>A New Monster</b>	Mark Rudolph
14	<b>Nightly Prayer to the Unborn Child</b>	Luivette Resto
32	<b>New York</b>	Tony Medina
34	<b>Ward of the State</b>	Tony Medina
44	<b>My Students Say My Face No Longer Pleases</b>	William P. Robertson
45	<b>Low Clearance: Washington Heights</b>	Alison Hoffmann
68	<b>On the way to Oshagan</b>	Lory Bedikian
70	<b>All That Was Said About the Korean War</b>	Benjamin Vogt
95	<b>March 10th Spring</b>	Katherine McCord
105	<b>Stars</b>	Fredrick Zydek
107	<b>CONTRIBUTOR BIOS</b>	
110	<b>MILT KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY GUIDELINES</b>	

**Two Metamorphoses:  
Rag Monster**  
by Bruce Holland Rogers

Let's not bother with the details of how she started saving scraps of cloth. It might have been that she was poor and such scraps were the only thing at the orphanage that she could call her own. It might have been that she was wealthy and began saving scraps of cloth when, as a student at an elite private college, she had stained a favorite dress with Cabernet and had cut out squares of material before she threw the rest away. It doesn't matter exactly who she was or how she began.

What does matter is this: She loved quilts. She intended to make one.

She kept the fabric scraps in a closet. She added to the collection, scrounging and scrimping, perhaps, or perhaps buying whatever caught her eye.

She added more material. She considered how this color or pattern went with that one. She looked at finished quilts, perhaps in the homes of her friends or on the walls of museums. More and more of her thoughts were devoted to the quilts that she would make.

Always, just as she was about to start to pin one of her designs together, something came up. She had a romance, or a baby, or a divorce, or another baby, or a job, or a promotion, or a death in the family, or a drinking problem, or an auto accident, or a suicidal depression. Every time she was about to begin her first quilt, life intruded. Or if life didn't intrude, she would put her hand on the closet door and suddenly feel very tired, too tired to begin anything so involved as a quilt.

In the midst of this, she grew old. In the midst of growing

Bruce Holland Rogers

old, she died.

On the day that she died, the closet door opened. The heap of fabric fell into the hallway. The front door opened. The scraps got outside.

How? They might have crept or oozed or shuffled. No one saw the pile move. No one ever sees it move. But it does move. It appears in one place and then in another.

One day, the mound of rags is on the sidewalk outside of the Greyhound station. A man who has just gotten off the bus sees the heap, considers, then goes back inside the station to buy a ticket for the next city north.

Later, a mother watching her baby play in the park thinks she sees something in the bushes. She gets a closer look. It's just a heap of dirty, tattered rags. Even so, she scoops her child up and hurries away.

In the desert, an artist paints a landscape that has the rag monster in it. The monster is dark, indistinct, and could almost be another boulder. But it isn't. The painting doesn't sell. Even after the artist paints over the pile of rags to place a boulder there—definitely a boulder—people look at the painting and can sense that somewhere in it, something is terribly wrong.



## Sea Anemones by Bruce Holland Rogers

In a little church by the sea, long after the old gods had begun to sleep, there was a preacher of the Christian gospel who earnestly worried for the souls of his congregants. He wanted every one of them to one day arrive safe in the Father God's heaven, so he harangued and exhorted them about all the temptations that might lead them astray. He was particularly worried about the sorts of love and lust that Father God had condemned.

He had a strong voice and chose his words well. His predecessor, though no less earnest, had been a stoop-shouldered, colorless little man. For listeners in the last pews, this previous preacher's drone from the pulpit was sometimes lost in the sound of waves crashing against the rocky shore. Old people dozed. So did some who were not so old.

This current preacher, though, belted out his verses and his warnings loud enough to wake *any* sleeper. "Men," he cried, "can you *imagine* lying with another man, receiving him as you would have your wives receive you? Women, can you *imagine* kissing and embracing another woman as you would your husband?" There were other kinds of love prohibited by the Father God, but the preacher often dwelt on these particular sins, his voice thick with a disgust that his listeners could not help but feel themselves. No, they could not, dared not imagine the sort of passion that the Father God had prohibited. "Unnatural acts. Ungodly, and unnatural acts!"

These words, carried on a thunderous voice, vibrated in the ear of Cupid, who woke from that slumber that the old gods had been sleeping these many centuries. The son of Venus felt provoked by what he heard.

As Apollo learned long ago, it is dangerous to provoke

Bruce Holland Rogers

Cupid. The sun god, boasting about the sky python he had killed with an arrow, said that it was the shoulder that made the archer. He compared his massive arms to Cupid's and concluded that while Cupid might carry a bow, it was but a toy compared to the charioteer's. Cupid replied that a hunter is known by his prey, and that if he felled Apollo, didn't that make him the greater archer? He sent a golden arrow into Apollo's heart and a leaden one into the daughter of Peneus. Apollo could think of nothing else but this girl who suddenly despised all thoughts of men or marriage, and he never did win her.

Not only slander, but subtler things might provoke Cupid. He felt irked by his mother's constant demands. "Shoot Neptune, my son! Let's rouse the cool sea god to feverish passion. Oh, there's Ceres, trying to keep her tasty daughter a virgin forever. Put an arrow into Pluto, my boy, and show that even Mister Gloom can't resist us." She picked mortal targets for him, too, as if she forgot whose arrows these were. So one day when she embraced him fondly, as a mother will do, he let a golden arrow graze her breast. A mere scratch, he gave her. She did not even notice the injury, but she did notice the mortal Adonis, a hunter. They made an unlikely pair, for Venus thought that traipsing through the woods and stabbing animals was the sort of work best left to servants or cold-hearted Diana, who never cared how she looked before men, anyway, with her troupe of girls who admired the huntress for her skill and wit more than her beauty. But Venus! She would never have imagined herself doing anything of the sort.

That was a sight, then, the goddess of love in her filmy gowns getting twigs in her hair and dirt on her sandaled feet, following Adonis from one bloody scene to another.

So Cupid went to this church by the sea, offended. He would shoot where he pleased, and how dare any mortal express such disgust at some of the results? He sat in the rafters,

8 Harpur



rubbing centuries of sleep from his eyes, and listened. When the preacher said again, “Just *imagine...*,” Cupid smiled.

His arrows never were his only weapon, merely the most selective. Cupid’s quiver also held stoppered bottles, and one of these he uncorked to pour a golden mist over the congregation. For the first time, in all the times the preacher had said, “Just *imagine*,” they could. “Just *imagine*, men, accepting another man as your lover.” And the men imagined their hearts full of longing for another man. “Women, just *imagine* that you would have another woman standing in the place where God has given you your husbands.” And the women imagined their lips burning for another woman’s kiss.

As the mist was not selective, neither was its effect. The men felt the lure of no particular man; the women lusted for no particular woman. The embraces they imagined were general, universal, and joyous. Even the preacher felt the effect of the mist, though it reached him last. He paused, thinking a pleasant thought about his hand closing tenderly around...

But, no, he would fight this thought. This was wrong, and he would summon the will to be disgusted, though there was a fire in his blood now. The congregation sat stiff, in more ways than one, not daring to move, willing themselves to stop thinking what they could not cease to think.

These were pious people. They had been schooled all their lives to revile the sin of indiscriminate love. Their mortal souls were at stake.

Cupid didn’t care. He poured it on, unstopping another vial of his funky mist, and then another. What the congregation began to feel was beyond sin, as everything in that spare sanctuary seemed to undulate and wink and promise. The wood grain of the pulpit swirled and twined with breathtaking beauty. The virginal white walls seemed made for caressing. The hard pews pressed so lovingly against back and buttocks that one woman

Bruce Holland Rogers

groaned aloud with pleasure.

With that groan went the last of their resistance, except for one tiny gasp from the preacher and his one word, "No." Then they were all gazing in rapture at the room around them, at each other. They tasted the perfume of ordinary air, wanted to embrace the earth itself. They felt the tender embrace of their clothes for the first time, the erotic whisper of cloth against their skin.

They might have fallen upon one another, men on women on women on men on men, but the desire they felt was not merely for each other, but for everything. A breath coming in was a lover arriving. A breath going out was a lover's momentary, aching departure.

They spilled out of the church, wanting the rough or smooth bark of the trees, the bright love song of birds, the embrace of grass and sky and sand. They wanted everything all at once, and could not choose among their many lovers until someone, it may even have been the preacher himself, said, "The sea!"

The sea was a lover that would embrace each body everywhere at once. The sea was a lover vast enough to receive them. They ran, hearts pounding with lust and joy. Across the tide pools they ran, scattering seagulls that they loved, glimpsing starfish that they loved, thinking tenderly of the limpet's embrace of the thoroughly embraceable rocks, but not pausing for any of these. They ran, feet splashing into the sea.

Some fell and cut their hands and knees on the jagged barnacles that they loved. They got up. They kept going, wading out to let the sea embrace their knees, to soak through their clothes to their loins, to accept them up to their chests, their shoulders, their ears. They tasted the salt of this lover who could be, for a moment at least, all lovers. Their mouths filled with the sea's kisses.

Cupid would have let them drown.

Their splashing and tasting, the thrusting of their hips in the water, their answering undulations to the waves...all of this roused Neptune. Is it any wonder? Who would not be roused from sleep by that?

The sea god looked into their hearts and saw what they wanted. He touched them with his weedy fingers, and their feet held firm to the sea floor. They shrank beneath the waves, softening, yielding, their mouths puckering for a kiss. With another touch, Neptune removed from them any memory of what they had been before, male or female, and made each a bit of both.

They are there to this day, clinging to the bottom of the sea, loving the water, loving the rocks beneath them, loving the fish that they hug with their tentacles in an embrace that ends with digestion, for they kept the aching effects of Cupid's spell. No one but the archer himself can undo that.

Desire is always with them. It overcomes them on nights of the full moon when the water grows cloudy with their sperm and starry with their eggs.

HP

**A New Monster**  
by Mark Rudolph

My mother can't rise up,  
a deflated balloon of skin.  
Her plastic tether sucks  
oxygen from the air.  
Goggled eyes. Ochre nails.  
Frizzed hair.  
She is nothing like herself  
yet she fills the room with herself:  
her hospital bed,  
her toothless combs,  
her wash basin, her hydrocodone.  
Bleached and spittled,  
remote control in her fist,  
she giggles, and I wonder,  
where will she land today?  
as if today were a city  
sliding across a map of the world  
still greasy from her breakfast.

(It would be easy to lie to her,  
easy to ignore her: to drop  
the trapdoor and listen  
for a scrape, a rattle, a shriek.)

Her thank-yous, her help-mes  
her I-love-yous,  
her you-hate-mes skitter  
like rabid kittens at my ankles.  
Doctor bills expecting a piece  
of the host perch on the TV and



glare from their cellophane windows.

I feed them a pellicle of skin

thin as toilet tissue,

razored away, painless

as the drugs will allow.

I've become an expert

at tearing away the gauze

while holding back the urge

to prick the baby with the pin,

just to hear it scream.

(Skills like these are profitable.

Skills like these are marketable.

Skills like these are inhuman.)

I've been rebuilt

on the slabs of her pain

into something lead-shoed

and green-skinned

thundering through the house,

and now my howl can slice

through a villager's sleep

like a laser through steel

or a saw through bone.

**Nightly Prayer to the Unborn Child**  
by Luivette Resto

Sacrificial children only exist  
in fables or Bible stories.  
Do you forgive me  
or hate me for living without you?

What do you see from your new home?  
Do you live in Heaven or Hell?  
Dream of our fantastical life?  
Tickling each other  
until one of us laughs.

I feel the softness of your hair  
between my fingernails  
and the emptiness of each reason.

I remember  
hoping for a miscarriage,  
denying your sanctity  
so guilt would disappear.

Daily pangs fill my womb  
as penance of our severance.  
I curse myself for fucking,  
Fuck god for existing.

Celebrate you eternally.



WINNER  
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

**Anonymity**  
by Paul Michel

Why would one little man build such a big house? Everyone wonders: Emily the schoolteacher, who drives by each morning and watches the rising sun blink blood red in the wide bay windows. Her students, who can see the third-story turret from the knoll above the soccer field. Rick the grocer, who sells bait to the tourists fishing salmon in the steel-gray bay. (They ask, pointing, if somebody famous lives up there.) Ronny the mailman, who must putt-putt an extra half-mile in his tiny truck, on the smooth road that now winds up the hill to the shiny silver mailbox. Everyone wants to know.

At the end of the road stands a gate of twisted iron, from which a gravel driveway runs another half-mile to the mansion itself. Ronny sits at the gate, his motor running, thumbing through stacks of bills and catalogs, circulars addressed to “occupant,” and a few small boxes at Christmastime: “To: M. Meyers, Esq.” There is never a postcard to read on the sly. The man is simply a mystery.

He isn’t mean, or at least he doesn’t seem so. He’ll say hi in the post office, nod affably in checkout lines. He’ll toot and wave, one-fingered as Island custom dictates, from behind the wheel of his Mercedes. There is no telling his age. Reddish hair gone to gray, a wispy moustache set well above his mouth, heavy-lidded eyes. Soft clothes that fit well. He might be a weathered forty, a spry fifty, a well-pickled sixty. He speaks seldom. He licks his lips a lot.

Rumors abound.

Paul Michel

"He's a writer. A recluse. Like what's-his-name."

"A widower. There was an accident. He got money in a settlement."

"He's in mourning."

"He's crazy."

"He's a genius."

"He's dying."

"He's hiding."

"He's waiting for his bride."

This isn't the city, mind you. Not that the city is far; only ninety minutes by boat and car, minus the wait at the ferry line. You can see the skyscrapers from the dock on a day without fog. In the city a man can disappear; melt into the shadows, attract no attention, achieve a certain anonymity. This is the Island, where everybody's business is everybody's business. Ask the recent arrivals, with their SUVs and Eddie Bauer jackets, who want *acreage*, *acreage* and are able to pay for it. Everyone is so *nice*, they tell their mainland friends. Then ask them a few years later: Everyone is so *nosy*, they complain. It's like a goddamned soap opera. There's no *privacy*. They're right.

So what has he built here? And why?

"It has eight bedrooms."

"The bathtub is deep enough to swim in."

"There's an indoor gym."

"A tennis court."

"A banquet hall in the basement."

"A room just for watching the stars."

Not all of this is pure conjecture. The house took two years to complete. Workmen from the mainland drank at the Islander Cafe. They left, but their stories remained.

"He watched over them like a hawk."

"He never showed his face."

16 Harpur

Paul Michel

"He's a writer. A recluse. Like what's-his-name."

"A widower. There was an accident. He got money in a settlement."

"He's in mourning."

"He's crazy."

"He's a genius."

"He's dying."

"He's hiding."

"He's waiting for his bride."

This isn't the city, mind you. Not that the city is far; only ninety minutes by boat and car, minus the wait at the ferry line. You can see the skyscrapers from the dock on a day without fog. In the city a man can disappear; melt into the shadows, attract no attention, achieve a certain anonymity. This is the Island, where everybody's business is everybody's business. Ask the recent arrivals, with their SUVs and Eddie Bauer jackets, who want *acreage*, *acreage* and are able to pay for it. Everyone is so *nice*, they tell their mainland friends. Then ask them a few years later: Everyone is so *nosy*, they complain. It's like a goddamned soap opera. There's no *privacy*. They're right.

So what has he built here? And why?

"It has eight bedrooms."

"The bathtub is deep enough to swim in."

"There's an indoor gym."

"A tennis court."

"A banquet hall in the basement."

"A room just for watching the stars."

Not all of this is pure conjecture. The house took two years to complete. Workmen from the mainland drank at the Islander Cafe. They left, but their stories remained.

"He watched over them like a hawk."

"He never showed his face."

16 Harpur



"They were following a model—some other mansion someplace. Down to the last nail."

"They made it up as they went."

"Everything had to be perfect."

"He didn't seem to care."

Sometimes he takes the ferry off-Island. He tells Ronny the mailman how long he'll be away. He doesn't say where he's going. In his absence, reckless boys climb the iron fence, or scale the sheer rocks from the sheltered cove on the property's water side.

"All the blinds are drawn."

"We couldn't see a thing."



Milton Meyers grew up fast. He was speaking full sentences on his first birthday. Reading by three. Long division at five. He studied calculus on his own the August before eighth grade. The following summer he wrote a history of the world on seventeen yellow legal tablets. He entered high school as a junior. At sixteen, he had a full scholarship to an Ivy League college. He was brilliant and quick-tongued. He amazed his professors, aced his exams and dated the daughters of several senators who told him—the senators, that is—that he was bound to go far. The daughters grew to hate him, one by one. Oh yes, he was clever, and yes he was quirky and yes he could be funny, in a wicked sort of way. But he was a hard boy to trust. He told lies, broke hearts and started many a little war. At twenty-one he went to law school at the same college, successful and essentially friendless. For a while he tried to be nicer to people. It didn't feel genuine, and it seldom worked. So he decided just to be smarter, instead.

He returned to the Northwest with two diplomas in Latin

can bet on it.”

Meyers always returns on the last ferry, just after midnight. The tourists are long gone by then, back to the mainland or snug in the B&B's that have sprung up on the Island's west side, facing the straits and the white-capped mountains beyond. The Mercedes' high beams split the darkness as he winds up the new road, trailing a lurid glow of tail lights that flash, low to the ground, then fade and shrink to vanishing pinpoints, and finally blink out of view.



He fell in love. He was a senior associate when it happened, with seven years of briefs behind him but no hint of true advancement, no talk of truly joining the firm. They gave him raises, and a bigger office, and a desk of polished black mahogany that stretched out before him like a moat. But they did not ask him to join them.

Her name was Martha. She was a new associate; not a raw neophyte but a “lateral hire” with three years' experience, lured away from a small, cross-town firm that couldn't afford to keep her. She too had attended law school back east; not Milton's alma mater, but a rival cluster of ivy-covered monoliths. This association gave them something in common from the start. He remembered the old slogans and fight songs; she had some new ones that made him laugh and lick his lips more quickly. He invited her to his office, and joked with her across the shiny black expanse. Then he took her to lunch, and lectured her across white linen tablecloths. There was much speculation in the office about whether, when and how he would seek to shrink this distance even further.

“You ever seen him like this?”

“Never.”

Paul Michel

"Turns out he's human after all."

"The jury's still out on that."

"Give the guy a break. He's head over heels."

"But what on earth does she *see* in him?"

"Love works in mysterious ways."

She was indeed brilliant. Her diplomas said *summa*, she had published in the journals, she had taken to the law like a fish to the sea. The partners gave Milton her drafts to review. He sometimes sent them back without a mark, so flawless were her arguments and their presentations. Her stint with the firm was a mere three months, after which she would return to school. Milton courted her feverishly. By the second month, there was no longer speculation about their intimacy. They arrived at the office together. They left it late at night. The partners smiled indulgently. Milton licked his lips more and more often.

The partners had assigned to Milton the W\_\_\_\_\_ case. It was certainly the biggest, not to mention the most difficult, matter that the firm had ever undertaken—a dispute over the estate of the legendary Max W\_\_\_\_\_ himself, builder of ships and the rail lines that served them from B.C. to Baja, father of a fortune so vast that his sons could not stand to share it. Each man, made in his father's image, demanded complete control. Each claimed ascendancy according to some doctrine or document or twist of law or language they held as dear as life itself, and their case had lurched and lingered in the courts since Milton's law school days. The firm represented the youngest son. He harbored what appeared to be both the weakest claim and the most ambition. Trial, at last, was approaching. A miracle was in order.

Milton worked around the clock. Martha worked with him. Case books piled up on the floor of his office, splayed open to this point or that precedent, each a potential new thread in a



web that the two of them wove while the city slept outside their high-rise windows. After the janitors had come and gone, after the clubs had closed and the streets had emptied, after the opposition in their neighboring high-rise offices had run out of energy and ideas and any sense of their ultimate vulnerability, Milton and Martha worked on. They created and disregarded theory after theory, papers flying, arms flailing, keyboards clacking as new arguments were crafted, dissected and demolished by their tireless, surgical intellects.

Often, when they were caught up in the throes of some new, delicious argument, persuasion would turn to passion in an eye-wink. Milton would mount Martha atop the desk, her gray skirt around her waist, her buttocks screeching against the slick mahogany, the tails of his monogrammed shirt flapping loose behind him as he drove home his point with grunts and shouts that echoed through the empty paneled halls. Afterwards, while he paced and pulled on his moustache, and she wiped the stains from the shiny black wood with her rumpled white underwear, they would discover that they had made progress. A new brick could be added to the impenetrable, cock-eyed wall of logic they were building between their client and the facts. Milton would lick his lips with vigor, and they would get back to work.



He has been gone four days, over a weekend in late October. He left early Thursday morning. Rick the grocer was at the ferry, meeting the delivery trucks for fresh bread and produce. Later he will remember that the little man sat in his Mercedes alone, drinking coffee from a porcelain mug; that he had his window open and the radio on, to a classical music station from the mainland. Rachmaninoff. When Island people spy on

Paul Michel

Milton, they notice everything.

Emily sees Milton in the ferry line too, when he returns on Sunday night. She has been visiting her mother in Tacoma, and has barely made the last boat home. Only a dozen cars sit in line at the slip. The outside air is damp and cold. Emily waits in her car, grading papers under the dim dome light. She recognizes the Mercedes, three cars ahead. Milton is in the driver's seat. She knows his small, oval head, the motion of his hand reaching for his moustache. There is another shape beside him, in the passenger seat. Their profiles, in silhouette, turn toward each other, then away. The head on the right leans back, as if in laughter. Emily smiles—it is a woman.



*"Did you see them upstairs on the crossing?"*

*"They must have stayed in the car. I went up for coffee. I always do. I get claustrophobic down on the deck, with all the fumes and..."*

*"You're sure you never saw them?"*

*"Not until I drove off behind them at the dock."*

*"Okay, Emily. Let's take a break."*



They won the W\_\_\_\_\_ case. Not at trial. There was never a need for a trial. Milton and Martha wrote a brief for a motion to dismiss all of their opponents' claims, and the novelty of their argument sliced through the other sons' positions like a scythe through straw. A settlement quickly followed. Young W\_\_\_\_\_ got his inheritance, and the firm got a contingency fee that dwarfed their last three years' revenue combined. Milton received a bonus check large enough to keep him in monogrammed shirts for life. He hardly gave it a thought. For

22 Harpur

along with the check came an invitation to a dinner at the managing partner's mansion, on a hill overlooking the bay and the mountains out beyond the islands. Though the invitation didn't say so, word spread quickly through the office that this was to be more than a victory celebration. There was an announcement to be made. Milton licked his lips.



Emily keeps her distance, a half-dozen car lengths behind. What's gotten into her? Her way home lies south along the shore, not this way, the way she drives to school, past the road leading up to big house and its blood red windows. She thinks up excuses—she's going into class, to finish grading papers. She left something—didn't she?—in the teacher's lounge. Ridiculous. It's almost one o'clock in the morning. She was nearly too tired to drive to the ferry. But her eyes are open now, and her pulse is pounding, as she follows Meyers home.



The dinner party was small. Just the five partners. No wives. Milton. Martha. There had been a couple of cancellations: two other associates and a clerk who'd worked on the case but had not, at the last minute, been able to make it. Milton thought that a poor choice, on their parts. Who could say what other opportunities for advancement might be found at such an intimate gathering? Besides the obvious, of course. He bought a new suit for the occasion. He wondered if there would be pictures. He didn't want to forget a single detail.

The meal was catered. Superbly. The wines were provided by the host, whose cellar was legendary. Crystal glittered. Champagne bubbled. The room smelled of rich sauces, of ripe cheeses, of vintage Bordeaux, and, mostly, of victory. It wafted



Paul Michel

and swirled like incense, thickening the air. Milton could taste it. He licked his lips, sipped his wine and stroked the fine hairs of his moustache. Martha sat beside him. When he reached her hand under the table their eyes met, and he smiled. How wonderful, on top of everything, that she should be present to share the evening with him. Later, they would celebrate again. Alone.

They ate at a round table, beneath an enormous chandelier of real wax candles, their flames winking through cut glass orbs. There were candles on the table, too, and settings of delicate china. The cutlery was solid silver; the napkins silk. Around them in the shadows sat similar tables, their white cloths bare and ghostly in the darkness—a full banquet hall, right in the man's house, with a corner stage and room for dancing. This was the world that Milton had awaited; the life for which he had prepared himself. He had come far, indeed. He wished that all the chandeliers might glow, and all the tables be filled with well wishers. Ah well. This would come in time.



*"It was silly of me. I was nothing but a voyeur. He had a woman with him, and I guess I just wanted to get a better glimpse of her."*

*"Did you?"*

*"No. I never had the nerve to get close enough."*

*"What happened then?"*

*"Nothing, really. They just drove inland until they got to the new road, then they turned up to his place."*

*"Did you follow them?"*

*"Of course not."*

*"But you returned on Tuesday?"*

*"That was different. I often drive a little ways up the new road*

*on my way to school. Especially this time of year."*

*"Why is that?"*

*"It's October. That's the best time to hunt for mushrooms."*

*"You went back alone?"*

*"No. Rick and Ronny came too. We hunt together, every fall."*

*"Do you always go to the Meyers' property?"*

*"Not always. We have lots of places that we go. They change from year to year."*

*"You pick these mushrooms to eat?"*

*"Sometimes. Chanterelles, especially. But we gather all different kinds—agaricus, lactarius, boletus. Inky caps and fairy rings. I take them into class and try to teach the kids which ones they can eat, which ones to avoid..."*

*"You're something of an expert?"*

*"No. You can look them up in field guides. It usually isn't hard..."*

*"Yes. Well. Let's move on, then."*



A spoon rings on crystal. Talk falters, throats are cleared, hands are folded. A waiter moves quietly from guest to guest, for the glasses must be full.

"Ladies—I should say 'lady,' and gentlemen. Thank you for joining me tonight in my humble home for our little celebration. Of course we regret that Mr. W\_\_\_\_\_ himself could not be with us..."

"The founder of our feast!"

There is laughter and scattered applause.

"Well put. But Max had an urgent matter to attend to elsewhere, and..."

"In the Grand Caymans!"

More laughter. Another spoon striking glass.

Paul Michel

“In any event, we toast him in his absence. To his success, his good health, his victory and...”

“Our fees!”

Raucous laughter. The waiter makes his rounds.



The gate was open. They had not talked about driving so far, but the picking was good. Their muslin sacks bulged. In a separate bag, Emily had a special find: a dozen pure, smooth, white buttons all ready for a team of perched, grinning leprechauns. *Amanita Virosa*. The Destroying Angel. She would take special care with these when she addressed the class; allowing them to look but not to touch, imprinting the innocent, snowy shapes in their minds: Never, never, never...

They drove, they parked, they gathered, they drove again, up the two miles to the gravel drive. They were hoping, quite simply, to see the woman. Emily had told them about the car on the ferry. The men were desperate for details: Was she old? Was she pretty? Did they touch? Sit close? Emily laughed and shook her head. She'd barely had a glimpse, she insisted. Long hair, narrow shoulders, a female face in profile. Maybe he reached for her, once, as they bounced off the ramp onto the Island. Emily hadn't been close enough to be sure.

The iron gate stood open. They had never seen it open before. The gravel drive ahead of them. One after another, without a word, shushing and shaking like ten-year-olds, they slipped inside.



“But we are not here simply to celebrate. As most of you know, I had an ulterior motive in bringing this little group together. Tonight we salute something more than our luck, our



skill or even our accomplishment. Tonight we toast our future.”

A smattering of applause. A pause for effect. The speech continues, long winded, pompous, self-important. Only Milton pays close attention.

“The firm needs new blood...change is what keeps us vital...our careers winding down, even as we reap the rewards of our decades of hard work...torches to pass...build on our good name...dedication...brilliance...perseverance...courage...the future...It gives me great pleasure...”

At last, Milton begins to rise, hunched forward, pushing off the linen with his fingertips. Tears blur his vision. There is a hollow pounding in his chest. He has prepared some words. He licks his lips as the speaker concludes:

“...a place in the firm...a warm and heart-felt welcome...one of us...hope she’ll accept...”

“Martha...”

“Martha...”

“Martha...”



Gravel crunches underfoot. Emily and the men whisper and giggle. They feel stupid, but they can’t help themselves. Mushrooms are forgotten; they pass splendid specimens under the trees without notice. The house draws nearer. Victorian, gabled, turreted, adorned. Out of place, on this island of stark, cedar simplicity. Grass grows tall on the sloping yard. There are no flowers, no hedges, no notion of lawn or garden. The structure sprouts from the rock like a toadstool. Were it picked up and moved, the landscape would barely blink goodbye. The sky is empty. The only sound is the whispering of the surf, far below.

Paul Michel



Milton left the firm. The parting was amicable. How could he stay? How could he ever again face the partners, or they face him, and not see a man half-risen at a round table, vainly awaiting the accolades of his peers, and a lovely woman beside him torn between joy and shame and pity? Pity. Yes, that was the crux of it. How could they not pity him, recalling how he'd sat and wept silently, tasting his own salt tears with every flip of his lizardly tongue? How could he face them and not recall how they'd faltered in the candlelight, downing glasses, checking watches, hurrying the unfortunate evening to a merciful close?

He set up his practice alone. The partners sent him business, for a while—hopeless cases and twisted dilemmas, matters more of craft and cunning than of presence or charm. He did well on his own. His fees were high, his hours long, his vices few. His reputation grew, not hugely, but enough to keep him in steady work. Years passed. Gradually, he severed ties with the firm. He wrote Martha only once, after a few weeks, only to say that he wouldn't be writing again. She didn't reply.



The Mercedes is parked outside the house. The door to the house is ajar. The curtains are drawn. A lone crow passes overhead, wheels in the wind and returns to settle in a hemlock high above them. Emily calls out—*hello*—in the chill air. There is no reply.



*"What did you see?"*

*"Not much at first. The rooms were very dark, with the blinds drawn and no lights."*

*"But you saw something?"*

*"Our eyes adjusted. It was just—you know, a house. Chairs. Coffee tables. A couch of some kind. Rooms off a hallway—we didn't go that way. A kitchen off the other direction. And a door open with stairs going down."*

*"Did anything seem unusual?"*

*"The place was huge. And nothing seemed very, you know, lived in. Like nobody ever sat in the chairs or walked on the rugs or put anything on the tables. I don't know what it reminded me of."*

*"Of a museum?"*

*"Yeah. That's it. A museum."*

*"Anything else?"*

*"There was an awful smell."*



More years passed. Two decades during which Milton prospered, and Martha advanced in the firm and made a name for herself as a bankruptcy lawyer. Milton read her name sometimes in the Bar News. He clipped the articles and pasted them in a scrapbook he kept in his office safe. He clipped and pasted too the notices he read, months and years apart, of the retirement of the partners, one through five, the oldest through the youngest, each described in the news with the left-handed praise lawyers use when discussing their own. The firm had prospered in their wake. There were fifteen partners now, including Martha. But the original five eventually passed the torch and retired to their beach houses, golf courses and mountain cabins to reap the rewards of their life-long practices. Milton read the stories carefully, smoothing the hairs of his graying moustache,



Paul Michel

snipping and gluing, locking the scrapbook away each night with his ledgers and coupons and petty cash and a Rand McNally atlas, its pages dog-eared, with marks in red.



A single bulb burns above the staircase. Ronny calls again, his voice ringing off the polished floors and furniture. Emily tries to joke; something about a bachelor pad. The men don't laugh. She swallows, and her throat seems full of sand. They push the door open wide and descend the stairs in single follow, Rick in the lead.



*"And then what did you see?"*

*Silence.*

*"Take your time."*



How many of the partners remembered the victory of the W\_\_\_\_\_ case? The turn of fortune it had represented? It's hard to say. So much had happened since, and old memories sometimes will fail. Certainly they did not dwell on it; did not allow it to stand between them and the world that remained within their shrinking grasps. A simpler world, day by day. If the phone rang, they hastened to pick it up. If the doorbell rang, they answered it.



*"Try to tell us, Emily."*

*"I don't want to."*

*"I understand. But remembering will help you to forget."*





A round table. Seven places set, in the middle of a large, shadowy room. Overhead a chandelier. (Electric bulbs. Nothing is perfect.) Five men sit strapped into chairs. Two are bloated, two are green; one is but bones in a Brooks Brothers' suit. A woman, slumped forward, her head oddly angled, her face frozen in protest. Milton sprawled on the floor, his chair pulled back. Flat champagne in the glasses. Food congealing on the plates. A centerpiece of smooth, snow-white mushrooms; plump, perfect buttons in a blue-green bowl.



What is that house up there? Why is it all boarded and overgrown? Its windows are broken; its paint peels in patches. It looks out of place.

"We really don't know." Rick shrugs from behind his smooth oak counter top.

Once out of earshot, the tourists shake their heads.

"He knows damn well," they agree.

A single crow passes overhead, wheels on the wind and circles back above the hill and its smooth, winding road. It flaps once, and flies like an arrow out over the steel-gray bay.

HP

**New York**  
by Tony Medina

where the sky  
is dark with pain  
where rain is glass  
metal and brick  
where the subways  
are crammed with flesh  
where the skyline  
is smoke trailing  
up from an ashtray  
of twin cigars  
stamped out by rage  
New York  
where the air floats  
like flakes of tar  
where Sodom meets Gomorrah  
as Times Square caves  
into the pit of the World Trade  
Center in a pornographic orgy  
of blood and scorn  
where buildings are leveled  
by planes and the sun  
cannot compete  
or complain  
with the uncompromising  
flame of terror  
New York  
is an incinerator  
of greed  
a melting pot  
of hysteria

and lies  
in your face  
with mud in your eye  
down your throat  
with a blanket full  
of hives  
New York is smothering  
New York is hovering  
hunched over  
wheezing with asthma  
Alzheimer's and dysentery  
New York New York  
my home sweet home  
with its cracked face  
and false teeth  
with its steel plate head  
and belly like a grave

## Ward of the State

by Tony Medina

Your father is running the streets  
Your mother is hiding in abandoned buildings  
The two of them are mainlining their way out of your life  
The world is a room the color of a filing cabinet  
Strange hands have dragged you kicking & screaming  
From your mother's womb  
Her hands will not hold you  
Her eyes will turn away  
Strange hands will have to do for now,  
Placing you in an incubator or state-issued basinet  
Your chest is caved in  
You weigh less than a cup of snot & tears  
Your lungs are a pack of Pall Malls strung together  
With shoe strings and Crazy Glue,  
Thick rubbery phlegm clogging your bronchioles  
Soon you will be alone in that room  
Until the nurse comes and calls for help  
Until the authorities come to take you away  
Your first few days will be spent atop a judge's bench  
Staring at a yellow bulb drowning in a gray ceiling

Your father is running the streets  
Your mother is hiding in abandoned buildings  
The two of them don't mean to but are  
Mainlining their way out of your life  
The world is a room the color of a filing cabinet  
You weigh less than a broom  
Strange hands will hold you,  
Welcome you to your life



HONORABLE MENTION  
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

**Regeneration**  
by Sara Johnson

“This is the first blue moon on Halloween since 1952,” Lewis says to me, stepping off the sidewalk. Ninja fighters and space invaders crash by, their orange, plastic pumpkin pails knocking violently from side to side.

“It’s an infestation,” he sighs, watching the kids fight each other to climb the steps of a huge house. He tips his head back and points his ketchup bottle to the sky. “Hey, Theo, check out Orion’s belt.”

Lewis likes the sky. He likes that if he stands still long enough he’ll be under a new galaxy. He has that kind of patience for the sky, but not for anything organic. He works in an observatory at MIT, recording numbers that correlate to space.

The street is littered with chunks of charred pumpkin. “I can’t believe it’s only 7:00 and they’re smashing pumpkins. We used to wait to do that until at least 9:00 or 10:00.”

“Kids today.” Lewis sighs again. He is a massive hot dog, arms forced out to the sides by foam, his face framed in red felt.

“It’s a statement about processed meat, about factory workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” he shouted in defense of his rented hot-dog from his room. I know he really just wants to say things like, “Wanna touch my hot dog” and “How’d you like to go home with a big wiener.” He practiced different combinations of these in the bathroom mirror before we left.

In high school girls hated us; guys beat us up. In college there were fewer football players to shove us against lockers, a vast improvement, but we were still invisible. After graduation,

Sara Johnson

we moved to Boston and gave up on people entirely to cultivate our CD collections like shiny, plastic gardens. On weeknights we play Trivial Pursuit. On weekends we go to Roy's Bar, a small music club around the corner where obscure, small label bands play. I like to think the band members were like us in high school, hated, skinny, weird. The girls at Roy's were the first women to ever pay us any attention. For some reason they find the very clunky glasses and thrift store clothes that got us beat up in high school, sexy.

We know all the music labels our favorite bands are signed to, that President Kennedy kept a pet rabbit named Zsa Zsa, which two U.S. cities have giant pandas (Atlanta and San Diego) and until recently nothing about girls. But we're starting to figure it out. We are late bloomers, goofy geniuses. Princes of Dork. The girls seem to like it. Hey, whatever works.

We arrive at Hillary's party early. We met her at Roy's during a concert, but she is not us. She has always been beautiful, always known what to do with it.

"Do you want to do a lap around the block? We're pretty early."

"So?" He looks at me blankly.

"Hey, guys!" Hillary opens the door, her chest threatening to pop out of tightly wrapped green Saran wrap. Tiny. White. Miniskirt. Lewis's mouth drops open. He had sex with her last summer and can't seem to understand that it will never happen again.

"Fabulous costume . . . you must be a green M&M. Did you know that the Rolling Stones insisted their dressing room be stocked strictly with brown M&M's. If only they had known about the green ones."

We are full of facts. He reaches out to hug her, desperately hoping. We are full of fear.

She puts her hands out to stop him, "Don't. I'm starting to

unravel.”

“Damn shame, Hillary, damn shame,” I push past Lewis. I kiss her on the cheek, casually holding her by the hip. I can do these things because I never slept with her. Lewis doesn’t understand, she likes everyone . . . once.

Hillary looks at me, one hand still on the door and one hand on her plastic waist. “Are you a Goth boy?”

“Nope.”

“You’re a mime?”

“My face is painted black not white.”

She crunches up her perfect nose and tugs at the Saran wrap.

“Chimney Sweep!”

“No, no. I am the absence of light.”

“Oh, Theo, you’re so strange,” she rolls her eyes and waves us into her house carefully, stepping away from Lewis as he mopes by her. The party is already packed. Even this early people are fighting to talk over each other.

The kitchen counters are lined with jars of candy corn, black and orange jellybeans, and plastic spider rings. A sign scrawled in magic marker reads, “Guess how many and win a prize!!!” Cardboard cutouts of pumpkins and witches on broomsticks, the kind that haunt third grade classrooms, are stuck to the walls with scotch tape. Orange and black streamers twist down from the ceiling towards a punch bowl on the table.

In the laundry room people are bobbing for apples. Weak with laughter, they smear makeup and face paint away from their eyes. Madonna is picking her fake eyelashes out of the sloshing water.

“This reminds me of a church party,” I say thinking about how when we were kids, the youth group spent weeks planning our annual haunted house.

A shark attack victim complete with cut up wetsuit and half a surf board overhears me. “It won’t feel like church when you



Sara Johnson

start drinking that.” He points to a black plastic cauldron in the middle of the table.

“Did you know sharks actually prefer to eat what they can swallow whole?” Lewis says to the victim.

“It’s just a costume,” the guy staggers off towards the smokers’ porch.

We make a beeline for the green punch with its floating eyeballs.

“Taste like shit,” we simultaneously agree.

An hour later Lewis is dancing, or more like jerking from left to right. He’s knocked down most of the party streamers with his hotdog bun. He’s normally a bad drunk, but tonight he’s a real mess. Having exhausted the game of head butting people, he’s wrapping himself in green Saran wrap.

“Anyone want some of Hillary’s leftovers, preserved for freshness, a 6 foot hotdog for you.”

I can’t watch anymore. I head for the porch. As the heavy cloud burns my eyes. I am convinced smoke will somehow clear my head which is full of cold spaghetti and peeled grapes. I have haunted house brains.

“He must be a chimney sweep.”

“No, I’d say a black hole.”

“I think he’s a newly paved road in Alabama.”

A water nymph, a very sexy mobster, gun tucked into skirt waistband, and a lamp with pink ruffled lampshade on her head appear in the cloud of blue smoke.

“Maybe he’s nighttime,” the lamp says. It occurs to me suddenly there are very few men at the party and everyone is completely trashed. I smile at them, liking my odds.

“No, ladies. Not even close. I am the absence of light. I will try to speak loudly since it is so very hard to see me.”





The sky is clicking by like the seconds hand on a watch. If Lewis was not inside knocking around lighting fixtures, he could have told us about the speed of planetary rotation and pointed out which stars were which. It's me and the lamp talking and talking. We like the same bands. We hate the same movies. Hair falling below the pink lampshade, long, curly, blond. I have to concentrate on not reaching out to wrap a coil around my finger, concentrate on what she's saying so I can say the right things back. I voted for Nader, she voted for Gore. We like the beach and mountains equally. She frequently bites her thin upper lip. We deduce we have been to 6 of the same concerts at the club around the corner. We are sure we look familiar to each other. She is afraid of death. I am afraid of cockroaches. Brown eyes like melted fudge. Too much green punch and the magnetic urge to lean closer and closer. North to South and South to North. She is dressed as a lamp and I am the absence of light for God's sake.

"Hey, we should hang out sometime. Maybe go up to Roy's together. I heard that Lambchop was going to be playing there next week. Can I get your e-mail address?" E-mail is easier than calling. I am reaching into my back pocket for my pen when she says,

"Not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I can't afford to."

"I'm on discount," I lean in closer to her, "Blue Light special." I am killing me tonight.

"I have mishaps."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, after being dumped, I have accidents."

"What are you talking about?" I push the pen back into my

Sara Johnson

pocket.

“Well, after my first love dumped me on New Year’s, I went to a hotel party and drank lemon martinis, lots of lemon martinis. I ended up talking to some guy on the balcony. I had been drinking all the drinks left on tables and on the bathroom counter, so it didn’t bother me that he was unconscious.”

“That’s not good.” I shift uncomfortably.

“Not good at all. I explained to a random, passed out guy that my ex was going to certainly call me the next morning. I decided I couldn’t wait until morning, so rather than go back through the crowded hotel room, I thought it would be easier to climb down the balcony to get to a pay phone. Long story short, I broke my ankle, tore a ligament in my knee and shattered my wrist. I heard the ex thought I jumped on purpose and I swore I would never love again. You know the whole routine.”

“Sure.” But I didn’t. Since our recent entrance into the women business, Lewis and I had dated lots of girls, even figured out what to do in bed. I developed a terrible appetite my personality couldn’t keep up with, but never really wanted anyone in particular. She doesn’t seem to be as drunk as I would have to be to be saying all of this.

“So after Ex #1 was Ex #2. A year later I got dumped again, this time on St. Patrick’s Day. I was determined not to drink a drop, not to do anything pathetic to put me in the emergency room.

“About an hour after being dumped, I decided I needed immediate clarification on ex #2’s comment about me ‘being out of tune with myself.’ And since of course we were still ‘friends’ . . .”

“Of course,” I am running an emergency credential check on her. Everything was going so well. No one wants to know you are fucked up, about the times you were weak. She is crazy to

tell me, even with that lip biting thing I am starting to like, she puts me off. I want to leave, but I have to consider that our friends are mutual. People I really like, really like her. Maybe she is just drunk.

"So I decided it was a good idea to drive over to my 'friend's' house, one whole hour after we broke up. Creeping along in pre-St. Patrick's parade traffic, I decided to listen to a mix tape he made me. I guess I thought it would provide clarity. I was fishing it out of my glove compartment and I didn't see this St. Patrick's Day float in front of me with these huge boards hanging off the back and I drove right into it."

"That should be illegal," I say, thinking of all the times I have seen flat bed trucks loaded with long objects protruding off the back like giant lances pointed right at windshield level. She is a Leo. I am a Taurus. We fear the same hazards.

"I know, right? Anyway I'm not going that fast, but the boards come through the windshield on the passenger side. The glass goes everywhere and I end up with these."

She pulls up her sleeve and shows me the pink scars that cross her bicep. Nice arms. Just below her shoulder, I see a tattoo of a purple starfish.

"Did you know that a starfish can cast off one of its arms and it will grow an entirely new starfish?"

"Yes, I did," she rolls her sleeve back down. "So there's my damage."

"Um. . . What does this have to do with me?"

"Because if we go out and I fall in love with you. . ."

"How do you know that would happen?" I interrupt pushing the pen deep inside my pocket.

"Because, I always fall in love then get dumped on a holiday. It's my fate or something. We'll go out a few times and I'll get attached. Eventually we'll break up and before I know it, I will have hacked my pinky off chopping onions because I'm think-



Sara Johnson

ing about you. Or maybe one day I am crying and because I am rubbing my eyes too much, I develop some kind of infection and lose an eye. Or maybe I will be distracted one day thinking about you, and I walk into the street and get hit by a car. It's all very possible."

Except for the falling in love part. Too strange, too weird, too much too soon. She is completely insane. I look around for Lewis, a way out. I see his hotdog still bobbing through the fogged window. I look down at my blackened hands, the black pigment absorbing all light. Hillary is outside, topless, making out with a guy from a band I have seen play at Roy's. A roach can live 9 days without its head. A hamster on a wheel can run about 8 miles a night. In Kentucky 50% of first time marriages are teenagers. Hitler was claustrophobic. A can of Spam is opened every 4 seconds. The world teeming under the clicking sky is weird.

I look back at her clear brown eyes and understand immediately. She considers every infinite possibility, views everything in networks and correlations. She sees the invisible lines between the stars that make them constellations. She's just one of those people.

"Maybe with me you'll regenerate," I say leaning my arm against the pillar holding the roof up, holding me up over her. "Maybe this time you'll grow an extra kidney, or your hair will double in length."

First she looks confused, then seems to consider this seriously. She doesn't move away from my lean. She bites the lip I think I love.

"Maybe I'll build you up," I whisper.

I lean in to kiss her, clumsily grabbing her once shattered wrist. Unfortunately, I miss, catching half her lips. I accidentally knock off her lampshade. It plummets over the railing like she did one New Year's Eve. I expect her to look over the rail

42 Harpur



after it, but she doesn't move. With half my lips on half of her lips, we stand touching, not really kissing. Suddenly I realize how strange this must seem to her. She pulls away. I am in high school again.

"I-I'm really sorry. . ." I say. I am 15 again. All the women in the world are like Hillary, and they hate me. I look over the railing but can't see her lampshade. Suddenly I feel very sober. Looking back at her, I'm ready for the way girls have always looked at me.

Her eyes are narrowed, her bottom lip pushed out. I feel sick.

"I would fall in love with you. So you can't have my e-mail. It was nice meeting you, Absence of Light."

And she and her beautiful lampshade are gone.



"Did you know it takes 71 pounds of pressure to rip off the human ear," Lewis says, kicking a piece of blackened pumpkin through the damp street.

"Really. So, if your ear gets ripped off what do you do?"

"Oh, you can either have the original frozen and reattached or have a new one regenerated."

"How do you regenerate an ear?"

"There's a company here in Cambridge doing it: livers for alcoholics, lungs for smokers, ears for artists." He stops behind a parked car, leans awkwardly, bound by the hotdog suit, and vomits.

I wait patiently and think about a lab full of ears, upper lips, chunks of livers, and lungs growing in agar.

"But," he spits, "it will still be years before they can grow you a new dick."

"That's too bad." She never told me her name.

Sara Johnson

We keep walking, Lewis kicks at rejected Bit-O-Honey candies and boxes of raisins strewn across the street. A rough river of dried leaves flows an inch above the sidewalk as the wind picks up.

“Hey, did you notice Hillary watching at me?”

It never stops with him. “Um. . . don’t know. I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“I think I’m starting to get through to her. We had this kind of weird, good moment in the kitchen. It wasn’t what she said, it was what she didn’t say. Like there was something between us even if it didn’t make any sense. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Lewis has to duck to fit in the door. He collapses on the couch, his arms and legs forced awkward distances from their mates by thick foam.

“Dude, please take off that thing. It’s starting to scare me.”

“I feel at home in it,” he rambles. “It’s like my second skin. I am the sausage filling protected in its casing.”

“Lewis, I’m serious. Don’t sleep in that thing.” But he is already gone.

After scrubbing off the black paint, my face is raw red. Climbing into bed, the exhaustion hits me. Everything is bothering me: the waistband on my boxers, the sound of the dusty heater humming, the smell of my pillowcases. The sheets feel cold and damp. A draft is whistling through the window over my head. On the inside of my eyelids, I watch the floating dots. I’ll get her number from Hillary. I am drawing lines between the dots in my eyes, trying desperately to form constellations.

HP

**My Students Say My Face  
No Longer Pleases**

by William P. Robertson

My students say my face no longer pleases.

Hair fine as dandelion fuzz fringes

a creased, vein-bulging brow.

A scar erupts from overgrown eyebrows,

and moles pepper my temples.

Gray eyes are imprisoned by wrinkles.

Sideburns grow wild as unpruned brambles,

while blonde and gray chin stubble

appears an hour after shaving.

Only the mouth remains youthful.

Sharp white teeth clean in a hard jaw

ready to chew up my detractors.

**Low Clearance: Washington Heights**  
by Alison Hoffmann

*My uncle meets Joseph Ceravolo on the express bus.*

JC: Isn't it illegal to wear that.

U: What a police badge not if you're a cop.

JC: But you're not I'm guessing.

U: What's it to you.

JC: Are you an artist.

U: Sort of I frame prints.

JC: Blue irises. The late red sun. Caribou...

U: Yeah. They come they want to buy prints buy me sandwiches.

JC: Just a second.

U: I notice you're not Hispanic.

JC: I thought you were going to ask me for money.

U: Because of my badge.

JC: No the pants. They go on on on.

U: I never have to unbutton them.

JC: Where were you born.

U: Even after a big meal.

JC: Listen artist I'll tell you a story. A group of boys are waiting to go in a yellow bus. A Negro is shining the top of a used car.

U: I notice you're not black.

JC: The wind bangs the car but I sing out loud: O stars!



- U: I have a police hat too women love it. The ones who don't want artists want cops.
- JC: O stars! what I miss most is
- U: My mother is dying she is in Connecticut.
- JC: The complicated ah me or ma.
- U: She was fine in New York but my sister took her now she is dying.
- JC: Oh the sky is so cold.
- U: This is my stop.
- JC: What kind of a face do I have while leaving.
- U: Goodbye.
- JC: Goodbye, blue irises.

## So Deep Do They Dwell

by Justin Stanchfield

They buried Machado without ceremony, wrapping his body in a tattered piece of sailcloth and tossing him overboard. Cristóbal stared in mute fascination at the bundle bobbing off Alcyon's stern, refusing to sink, buoyed by the thin film of sargasso. At last a gray shape rose from the depths, prodding the bundle with its leathery snout, playing with it, testing it like a cork on a fishing net. The shark dived and returned, struck at Machado's corpse and took him down. There was no blood. No blood at all. Cristóbal chided himself for being a fool. The dead don't bleed, he told himself, praying the saints it was true. "Sailor?"

Cristóbal spun. A thickset man, arms knotted like rope, stood behind him. "I am sorry, Señor Aguirre. I..." His voice faltered. "I was tending to Machado's funeral."

"You have other duties, yes?" the First Mate asked.

"Sí." Cristóbal retreated toward the quarterdeck and retrieved his bucket. Eleven days becalmed, the wind itself mired, it seemed, in the stinking black weeds around the sloop. Eleven endless days. He had scrubbed the deck till it shone. He would scrub it again. Anything to be busy. Anything to keep his mind from straying.

He lowered the bucket to the sea with a long rope and brought it back full, sloshing over the wooden brim. He flicked away the bigger pieces of the slimy weed, then picked up his brush, the cloth strands wrapped around a broken piece of plank, frayed and filthy. Hands and knees, he scrubbed, broad circles left to right, until the bucket was empty. He ignored the hot sun on his back. Ignored the ache in his knees and the ache in his belly. Ignored the reek of the slaves rising up through the

iron grates. At seventeen years of age, Cristóbal was becoming expert at ignoring. He picked up the bucket and lowered it again into the sea.

Behind him, someone spat.

"You missed a spot."

Slowly, Cristóbal turned. A wad of phlegm gleamed on his deck. It stretched over the boards, slick and shining. He glared at the mizzen mast. Santos and old One-eyed Miguel, the sail-makers, leaned against the pine shaft, laughing, braying like mules.

The bucket was solid in his hand. It called out to be thrown, to bounce against Santos' turnip-shaped skull. His fingers tightened around the rope bail, flexing, ready to hurl it, water and all, at his tormentors. From the quarterdeck he felt eyes watching the drama unfold, inquisitive and bored. Captain Garcia, wrapped in a coat gaudy as any peacock, and dour Don Carlos, stared at him. Cristóbal withered under their scrutiny.

Without a word, he stepped to the gob, brackish water sloshing against his legs, and cleaned the spot. He stood and tried to walk away. A heavy hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

"We need a coil of rope." Santos grinned, his teeth gapped and yellow. "Go below and fetch it."

"Get it yourself."

The sail maker's grip tightened, thumb jammed against his collar bone. Cristóbal felt himself lifted, swung like a side of mutton against the mast. Santos' grin vanished.

"I told you go below and fetch a coil of rope."

Cristóbal glared at the larger man. "Go to the devil."

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" Aguirre stood behind them, arms crossed, face impassive. Only the scar running jagged down his cheek betrayed his anger, pulsing white against brown skin.

"This rat," Santos shook Cristóbal for emphasis, "refuses to



Justin Stanchfield

do what I tell him. I asked him to bring us some rope, and he walked away.”

“Is this true?”

“Señor...” Cristóbal’s voice faltered.

“Do as he says. Bring him the rope.” Aguirre turned to leave, then paused. “And you will stand watch tonight? Is that clear?”

“Yes, Señor.” Shaking with fury, Cristóbal put down his bucket and walked to the hatch. A hot, rancid wave of air washed over him, sickness and shit and clinging death. He descended the steep stairs into the throat of hell.

The hold was a simmering kettle, damp and unforgiving, steaming every ounce of moisture from the bodies chained to the narrow racks. It was tight below decks, and dark after the harsh sunlight above. Cristóbal thanked the saints for the dimness. It hid the faces, black against black, hid the hatred burning in those dark eyes. The slaves were silent now, too parched to spit at him as they once had, or to jabber curses as he shuffled past. Even the gauntlet of legs striking out at him as he passed was gone, the bravest and the boldest of the Africans too sick now to bother with such a wasted gesture. Strength was something to be hoarded, not squandered on deck rats like himself. He hurried past them, bent double under the open beams.

Clouds of flies pelted his face, striking and lighting, buzzing furiously round his face. Cristóbal swatted at them, batting them away, crushing them like peppercorns against his palm. He found the rope more by touch than sight, the hemp bristling against his skin, then started back toward the stairwell. The thin shaft of light seemed a thousand leagues away, like sunlight poking down from rain-fat clouds. He picked up his pace, anxious to be away from the reek and disease sealed deep in the belly of the sloop, closed forever from the light of day.

Bony fingers closed around his ankle, frail things, a bird’s



talons. Cristóbal jumped at the touch, striking the deck above his head. Something croaked from the lowest rack, a high, tortured voice, speaking wretched Portuguese.

“Agua, agrada?”

It was the boy they had bought from the Arab traders, the little translator they had made such a pet of during the long march to the sea. The boy who had smiled so happily at the antics of the crew, laughing at the shell games Bonitez, the cook, played with him during the sweltering evenings. Now he was chained like the rest, a lamb waiting for slaughter.

“Water, please?” he repeated.

“No...” Cristóbal broke away, hurrying backwards toward the ladder. “I’m sorry. There is none to spare.” He took the steps two at a time, banging his shins against the rough planks. He tripped at the top, sprawled across the same wood he had spent so long scrubbing. He scurried away, the boy’s pitiful voice worming through his brain like maggots. Not even the blistering sunlight streaming between the sails could burn that from his soul.



Night.

Stars littered the sky like sparks from a blacksmith’s forge. Once, when he was much younger and not yet put to sea, Cristóbal had seen the great cathedral in Seville, candles burning row upon uneven row, flickering in the shadows. It had left him dizzy, as if sky and earth were overturned. This was a thousand times worse. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, cursing the day that had brought him to the crow’s-nest. The leather belt held him upright, chaffing his waist, binding him to the smooth mast at his back.

Around him only darkness. Black water, calm beyond

Justin Stanchfield

belief, rose and fell in lazy undulations. A wall of mist was slowly advancing from the south, a shelf of gray sliding over the endless sea. Tiny sounds marred the stillness, small noises. Lapping water and the snores of the sleeping crew. Rope creaking through wooden blocks and the slaves rattling coughs. Alcyon was large for a sloop, but crowded, too much cargo lashed above deck, too many slaves chained below. Once she may have been a proud ship, dancing the waves, sleek as any porpoise. Now she wallowed, lumbering like a hag, overburdened and becalmed, a dried-out husk on a dead-calm sea.

The mist gathered around them. It washed over the hull in pale, sluggish waves, an eerie thing drowning the dark waters. A crescent moon staggered skyward, painting the fog in washed-out tones of silver and charcoal. It was easy to see shapes within it, the lonesome dead haunting the chill morning. Cristóbal forced himself to think of other things, more pleasant obsessions. He thought of the shepherd girls in his village, of bright eyes darting his way on crisp autumn evenings. Thought of the fabled whores in Havana and how he would squander every peso on them if ever they made port. Thought of silk-skinned legs and rounded breasts so full they spilled over the tops of every dress. He felt himself stiffen, hand straying to his crotch, lost in his own desperate need.

Without warning, the sweet image was blotted out, smothered by the memory of an old black woman dying on the sand a thousand leagues in their wake. She seemed brittle, a thing made of sticks and mud instead of flesh, a wattle-and-daub woman shriveled in the hot African sun. Flat breasts, sucked dry of life, flopped like empty wineskins against skeletal ribs. Ancient eyes so brown they seemed black, implored, begging for one small taste of mercy.

Cristóbal recoiled from the picture, gagging at the thought of her body sprawled on the dirty beach, fresh red blood staining

52 Harpur

her matted hair. Sickened, he stared down at the quarterdeck.

A figure stood beside the aft rail, tall and still, facing the sea. A long coat covered him shoulder to calf, blue velvet, sleek as a raven's wing. Don Carlos might have been a ghost, a phantom seldom seen by the light of day, a rumor whispered among the uneasy crew. Bonitez murmured, whenever Aguirre was out of earshot, that the don's cabin was a temple to the dark one, that he kept a crucifix upended above his narrow cot and spent his days intoning the liturgy backwards. He said the Captain joined him, in every sense of the word, sealing themselves behind the thick oaken doors, forbidding even Aguirre from entry. Santos called them fools, said Don Carlos de la Hoya was just another drunken duke cast out of Court, banished to thrive or die on foreign shores. Cristóbal no longer cared. He felt like an intruder, an insect snared, waiting for the spider to arrive. He watched the pacing man, praying silently he wouldn't be noticed.

Time passed, the mist drifting silently, giving the illusion of motion. Dawn widened on the eastern horizon, a pale line still hours away. Cristóbal clung to the crow's-nest, exhausted and cold, shivering like a sick dog. Don Carlos continued to pace, staring sullenly across the rippling fog, hand above his eyes as if he could see deeper into the dark than mere mortals. Once, as the moon crossed the furled sails, he heard the man cry out, shouting in anger at figures unseen. If madness had a name, surely the man in the long dark coat knew it well.

A soft rhythm caught his ear, swooshing through the cool air. Black wings swung past the moon, eclipsing it, sliding over the stars in a tightening spiral. Glossy feathers sculled the night, dark as soot, dark as heart-blood. Cristóbal stared as the vulture circled low over the topmasts. He heard voices moaning on the breeze, distant and empty. A long line of shadows marched through the fog, stretching out behind the ship single



Justin Stanchfield

file. The line swayed, winding serpentine above the weed-choked waters, a festival of the damned. Closer they drew, faceless things, lost in the hush of the waves. Some wore rags and some wore silks, and some were bound in tattered sailcloth. Machado walked with them, moving on stiff legs raw from the great fish's bite.

A weight settled on the line above Cristóbal's head, drawing the rope taut. He turned, twisting against the belt holding him to the mast. The great black bird craned toward him, razor jaws spread in a leering grin. Leathery legs swayed on the rope, talons flexing against the strands, kneading the hairy fibers. He could smell its fetid breath, urea and blood and rotting meat. The bird leaned closer, watching him, tasting him with eyes so brown they seemed black. The old woman's eyes looked down at him, terrible in their silence.

Cristóbal screamed.

"Sing out!" Don Carlos stood at the base of the mast, looking up. "What did you see?"

Other figures joined him, jostling round the base of the thick pole thirty feet below him, confused, frightened out of sleep. Aguirre was among them, naked to the waist. He put his hand to his mouth and shouted upwards. "What did you see?"

Cristóbal tried to speak, but his mouth was too dry. He forced himself to swallow. The bird was gone, vanished like the parade of the dead. Vanished like the fog drawing away in a great circle from the unmoving sloop. "Nothing. I am sorry, I thought I saw something, but I was wrong."

They muttered below him, cursing the fool in the rigging, and wandered back to their blankets, angry that what little sleep they had was stolen by a stupid boy. Already the sky was lightening, pale pink like the flesh around a virgin's nipple.

Cristóbal stood shaking in the crow's-nest, strapped to the mast, his own urine soaking his legs, sticky and warm. The crew left



him alone, alone until daybreak when they would settle the debt he had borrowed tonight. The last to leave was Don Carlos, a grim figure staring upwards, silent as the dead.



Bright sunlight burned the dawn to cinders, wicking away every trace of dew from the deck and sails. The air was still, heavy, an oppressive shroud laced with charcoal smoke and the reek of salt-pork long past its prime. Cristóbal stood in line, tin-plate in hand. A thin slab of parboiled meat landed on it, the edges curled and green. He sat down as far apart from the rest of the crew as he could manage, and took a bite of the tough, briny fare, so salty it made his lips sting. He shut his sleep-starved eyes against the sun and chewed.

A heavy foot sent his plate skittering across the deck. Cristóbal fell backwards, surprised. Santos stood above him, smirking. "Next time you have a bad dream and decide to pee your britches, keep it to yourself."

Aguirre watched from the mizzen. The first mate ducked under a guy-wire and sauntered closer. "Mr. Santos? Gather a crew and count the slaves. I want the dead overboard before the first bell rings."

"Me? I'm a sailmaker."

Aguirre's lips curled in a tight smile. "A sailmaker, eh? Well, now you're a grave digger, too." He turned his back and walked away. Santos glared at him, jaws clenching in and out. He nudged Cristóbal with a foot.

"You heard him. Let's go."

"No. I stood watch all night. Find someone else."

Santos grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. "Don't you ever talk back to me, you little piece of whore shit." He shoved him toward the open hatch. "Get below and

Justin Stanchfield

start looking for dead ones. I'll find help to bring them up."

Cristóbal's face reddened. He wanted to throw himself at the larger man, wanted to send him tumbling over the rail into the sodden weeds below. His fists clenched together so tightly his fingers became numb. Santos jabbed him with a knuckle to the center of his chest.

"I said go!"

The hold was crowded as before, dank and narrow.

Cristóbal descended the steps, hand over his mouth to avoid the stench. He saw another figure coming toward him. Bonitez staggered out of the shadows, pulled off-kilter by the weight of the water bucket in his hand. A simple wooden cup was chained to the bail. It banged back and forth against the cook's bony knees. "You looking for dead ones?" he asked Cristóbal.

"Yes."

"Port side, top shelf." Bonitez nodded over his shoulder. A greasy shock of black hair flipped across his forehead. He brushed it aside. "A woman, the one with the scar on her neck. Might be more."

Anxious to be done, Cristóbal pushed through the cluttered compartment. He found the dead woman and pulled her stiff figure off the narrow rack. Like most of the slave women, she was unchained. Her body thumped against the filth-covered deck, a hollow sound. Cristóbal grabbed her by an ankle, touching her as if she were a leper, and dragged the emaciated corpse toward the ladder. He passed Santos and several others, crowding past them. One of the men missed his footing and stepped hard on the woman's bloated stomach. A blast of foul gas whooshed out her gaping mouth. Cristóbal fought down the urge to wretch and hauled her topside. She landed in the calm water face down, tangled in sargasso, bobbing like driftwood. Cristóbal turned away, sickened by the sight. He heard more bodies thumping up the steps.

Santos pulled the body of a tall man to the rail and heaved him over. He and the others returned a moment later with two more dead slaves. Cristóbal recognized one of them, the little translator boy. Despite himself, he walked to starboard and stared down at the pathetic body.

Wide eyes, white rimmed and glassy, stared up at him. The boy's dark lips twitched, unable to speak, begging. Cristóbal stepped back in shock. "This one is alive!"

Santos shrugged. "He won't be for long."

"You can't toss him over."

"Why? You want to donate your water to a dying negro, suit yourself. Me, I'll drink mine and feed this one to the fishes." Santos bent toward the rail-thin body. The boy flinched and tried to roll, but was too weak. Cristóbal kicked Santos's wrist away.

"I said no."

Santos straightened. "So, now you are giving me orders? I'll break you in half."

"You can't throw this boy overboard. He is not dead." Cristóbal stood his ground, refusing, for once, to back up. "I'll tell the Captain what you are doing."

"Good. You run tell the Captain. Tell Don Carlos, too, you little motherless bastard." Santos crossed his thick, hairy arms. "I'll wait right here."

A crowd gathered, bored men hoping for a fight. Cristóbal pushed through them. He met Aguirre coming the other way, Don Carlos and the Captain in his wake. His mouth went dry. "Señor, pardon..."

Aguirre scowled. "What trouble have you caused this time?"

"I..." Cristóbal swallowed, fighting for words. "Santos wants to toss a live slave over. You can't let him do this." He stared down at his feet. "It is the boy, the one you bought from the Arabs, padrone."



Justin Stanchfield

A soft splash split the humid morning. Cristóbal spun. Don Carlos and Captain Garcia shoved him out of the way and walked to the railing. They leaned out over the sea. Cristóbal rushed to join them, just in time to see sleek, gray jaws close around the boys legs, dragging him under. Garcia turned to him, face impassive as a ballast stone. "Looks dead to me."

Santos began to laugh. Furious, Cristóbal lunged at him, head down, charging like a bull. The sailmaker grabbed him, swung him in a wide arc, and slammed him against the quarter-deck. Stunned, Cristóbal fell and lay gasping, his air gone, spots dancing in front of his eyes. Aguirre leaned over him.

"How stupid are you boy?"

Another shape crossed in front of him, blocking the sky. Don Carlos knelt down, close enough that Cristóbal could feel his breath warm on his face. "I know you. You were in the rigging last night, yes? What did you see?" the Don whispered. "When you cried out, what did you see?"

Cristóbal managed to sit up, desperate to pull away from the gaunt, glowering man. "I saw nothing..."

"Speak up."

Cristóbal's heart pounded inside bruised ribs. "I saw..." He shut his eyes tightly. The vulture with the old woman's eyes stared back at him. He shivered. The crew had gathered around, crowding to hear. "I saw nothing, padrone. A trick of the moonlight, that's all."

"Little fool." Aguirre pulled him to his feet. "Take him below. Maybe a few days sleeping with the cargo will teach him what happens to stupid boys who pick fights."

Rough arms grabbed him, dragging him down the steps. Still smarting from the pain and the indignation, Cristóbal felt the manacle snap around his left ankle. The men shoved him down, bent double, and stuffed him into the same narrow rack where the starving black boy had been chained, the plank not



yet cold.



Cristóbal dreamt of water, cool and sweet, flowing from a mountain spring. He dreamt of soft breezes that smelled of pine and distant rain. But mostly, he dreamt of that terrible beach. Over and over he watched the scene, saw himself as a hummingbird would have seen him, flitting from view to view in fevered jumps. Saw himself and the others herding the slaves along the banks of the sluggish river, the jungle sweating around them while mosquitoes buzzed round their faces, so thick you swallowed half a dozen with every breath.

He thrashed on the rack, trapped in the endless dream, the shackle chaffing him to the bone. Cristóbal saw figures in his delirium, shadows moving through the hold, slaves marching to the sea. Saw the Arab's haggle with Don Carlos. Saw the brackish bay open in front of them, Alcyon at anchor, waiting their return. "Leave me alone," he called out, his throat dry as dust. The figures marched past, uninterested in him. Only once did they turn, just long enough to laugh, then moved on, the dream returning in hazy waves. Again he stood on the stinking, muddy beach.

A storm had passed in the night, littering the saltpans with dead fish and branches snapped from nearby trees. Flies swarmed in the searing African air. Cristóbal stood with his crewmates, mute and exhausted, while Don Carlos made a final inspection of his purchases before loading them into the long boat. Events played out, unbreakable. He saw the don cull a short black man, bearded and angry, out of line, smiling perhaps for the first time since they had left Spain. Even the Arab traders shook their heads in dismay as the heavy pistol raised to the captive's ear.

"Sometimes," Don Carlos said, loud enough for all to hear. "The best lessons are those learned the fastest." Fire jumped in the pan, barrel jumping as the charge went off, a puff of white smoke belching out. The slave crumpled to the sand and lay twitching, eyes rolled back in his head. Don Carlos handed the empty pistol to a nearby crewman for reloading, and moved down the line. He stooped down and lifted a green branch, long as his forearm, swinging it like a king's scepter. He paused in front of a withered old man, his shoulders bent low by the tortuous march, and tapped him with the stick. "This one. He won't survive the passage."

The crewman raised the pistol, but Don Carlos stopped his hand. "No," he said, taking the weapon. "He is not worth the powder. Use your knife."

Cristóbal had turned away, avoiding the horrible cries of the slaughtered. One after another the don selected the sick and the old. One of the Arabs rushed forward, jabbering broken Portuguese, offering to buy back the culls. The Spaniard ignored him and moved down the line. Satisfied at last, he nodded toward the longboat.

Relieved, Cristóbal helped put the remaining slaves into the low-sided boat. Tepid seawater sloshed against his shins as they pushed the boat into deeper water. He started to step aboard, picking up an oar as he did.

"Wait."

Everyone turned.

"That one." Don Carlos pointed with his stick. "The old woman at the stern. She is not worth taking." He pointed at Cristóbal. "You, take care of her."

"Señor, I have no knife," he lied.

"Then use what is in your hand."

The oar was heavy, the wood dry and split, in need of oiling. "But, Señor..." Cristóbal's voice faltered, his stomach twisting

in knots. Others led the old woman ashore and shoved her to her knees on the wet sand. "I can't..."

The bastard smiled again. "Oh, I think you can."

Ashamed and angry, furious at a universe so arrogant it allowed men like the don to live, Cristóbal raised the oar above his head. The old woman looked up at him, understanding at the last what was coming. Her eyes implored what her throat could not. Cristóbal shut his own eyes and swung. The wood hit her hard, not on the head, but on the shoulder. She cried out in pain and toppled forward, curled into a ball, clutching her broken collarbone.

"Finish it, you idiot."

Cristóbal swung the oar again. It shattered against her skull. She stiffened like a fish struck with a stick, but still she breathed. Tears streamed openly down his face as he struck again and again with the broken shaft, striking until at last the shriveled body lay still. In his dream he felt the oar hard in his fists, felt the force of his blows passing through his wrists. In his dream he saw the old woman turn, her skull crushed and dented, lifeless eyes watching him, blood oozing from her broken nose as the shadow of dark wings slid silently across the wet sand.

Something touched his arm.

Cristóbal bolted awake, screaming in terror. Bonitez slapped his hand over his mouth, silencing him. "Shut up, you fool. They'll find me down here." The cook handed the wooden cup to Cristóbal. "Drink this, and for the love of the virgin, be quiet."

"Gracias." He drank greedily. "Thank you."

The cook snorted. "Don't thank me yet. Better I should let you die."

"What's wrong."

Bonitez looked over his shoulder, making sure he was unno-



Justin Stanchfield

ticed. "Last night, One-eyed Miguel died. He had no blood. None at all. The night before it was Tio and Ramirez." He gave Cristóbal another cup, half-filled. "Soon, there will be no one left to die. I have to go."

"Wait.... please. Don't leave me down here. I'm rotting."

"Rotting?" The cook snorted. "We all are. All day and all night, the Captain argues with Don Carlos while Aguirre stands by and does nothing. We should abandon this ship while we still can."

Slaves tried to grab the bucket as Bonitez hurried down the corridor. Cristóbal watched him go. Far in the distance, he swore he heard wings swooshing above the empty sails, while watery voices laughed beneath the ship. Something brushed against the thick hull, scraping, dead fingers scratching at the planks.



On the fourth day they relented and brought Cristóbal above deck. He stood squinting, hand over his eyes, legs covered in his own filth while the sores around his ankle wept. The sky was pale and formless, dull white clouds stretching from horizon to horizon like a sack over their heads. The sails still hung slack, the lanteen drooping against the ropes, the mainsails faded and gray.

Aguirre slid the mop bucket across the deck with his foot, seawater sloshing out. He tossed a rag at Cristóbal. "Clean yourself. You're the new cook."

"Bonitez?"

"Dead, like the others." Aguirre stepped away. Cristóbal dipped the rag in the bucket and tried to scrub the grime from his face and body. He counted the men around him as he did, struggling to keep track of who remained and who was gone.

62 Harpur



The deck felt empty, stripped to the bone. He staggered forward to check the larder, putting thoughts off Bonitez's death from his mind. The food in the wooden casks was nearly gone, worm filled crumbs littering the bottom of the barrels. He tipped the nearest water barrel. It was light, no more than a few gallons left. In the dimness of the little pantry he cupped his hand and drank until his stomach hurt. He pulled out one of the hard, moldy biscuits, tapped the grubs out against the wall and stuffed it in his mouth. It hurt his teeth to chew. All he heard were the sounds of his own jaws, grinding the hard-tack. It was the sound of tree limbs on a windy night, slapping against a wall. The sound of dead fingers peeling back the wood, splinter by splinter, from a starving ship's hull. A cobbler's stool sat in the corner of the tiny room. Cristóbal slumped to it, still weak with fever, and began to cry. The floor was wet, seawater beginning to seep through a thousand tiny holes.

A pistol shot cracked the silence. He rushed back outside.

The door to the quarterdeck swung, creaking on its hinges as Alcyon rocked in the sluggish waters. Don Carlos stepped out, swaying, his hair tousled. A deep cut sliced beneath his right eye, blood staining his once immaculate collar. Sulphur-laced smoke drifted out the cabin door. The don spotted Aguirre.

"It was self-defense. The fool came at me with a knife."

Aguirre stared, dumbfounded. "The Captain? He is dead?"

"I am captain, now. Yes, I think that's right." Don Carlos brandished the empty weapon. "I am Captain, now." He pointed at Santos. "You there... you have another body to throw over."

Santos stared around him, mouth gaping, looking for support among those who remained. None moved. The sailmaker raised his arms, palms up. "Señor? Am I simply to throw Captain Garcia over like one of the slaves?"

"Yes. He was a murderer, he deserves nothing more." Don Carlos was more confident now, strutting back and forth in front of the cabin door, throwing his arms about.

"And then what?" Aguirre challenged.

The Don stopped, turned, and nodded. "Ah yes. Then we shall load the longboat and leave. If the wind won't take us from this cursed place, then the oars will. Make ready the boat. Do you hear me? Make ready the boat."

Cristóbal stumbled toward the crowd, desperately hoping he was locked in yet another nightmare and this too would fade away. Aguirre was coming from the opposite direction, his face livid. Cristóbal stepped in front of him.

"Señor, what are we to do?"

The first mate glanced over his shoulder at the don. "Pray, if you remember how." He shoved past, bellowing as he did.

"You heard the man. Make ready the longboat, and God have mercy on us all."



They emptied the last of the water into a single cask, pouring the precious liquid from barrel after barrel, desperate to catch every drop. Even so, the barrel remained little more than half way to the top, a few days ration at most. Cristóbal counted twelve men, thirteen including himself. Unless land was closer than he expected, the longboat would soon suffer the same fate as Alcyon. He turned toward the hold, the hatch wide open.

"What about them?"

"The negroes?" Santos cleared his throat and spit. "Let them die."

"No." Aguirre rocked a final barrel on its rim. A few gallons sloshed in the bottom. "We leave this for them."

"Why?" Santos reached for the barrel. "It's all the same in



the end for them.”

Aguirre shoved the sailmaker’s hand away. “I said no.”

A shadow slid over the deck, long, graceful wings, every feather picked out in detail against the sun-parched wood. Cristóbal stared upward. No trace of the bird was to be seen. Nothing but a blached sky, blue-white like a day old corpse. He crossed himself. “None of us are going to live. She will see us all dead and drowned. Every one of us, she will drink our blood dry.”

“Shut up!” Santos grabbed him around the throat and shook him. “Do you hear me? Shut up!” He shoved Cristóbal away. Aguirre stepped between them.

“Stop it, both of you. This solves nothing.” The First Mate stood, fists clenched, daring Santos to try him. “All right, lower the boat. I’ll get Don Carlos.” He nodded at Cristóbal. “You, go open the leg chains.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” Aguirre passed a heavy set of brass keys to Cristóbal. They jingled in his hand. “And be quick. We won’t wait.”

The hold wreaked of death, a moist, maggoty smell, soured meat and shit and wriggling things that never see the light of day. Warm seawater rolled around his knees. Already the sloop was listing to port. Soon, she would slide under the dark sargasso, lost forever. The flies were worse even than Cristóbal remembered. He gagged, bile rising in his throat, threatening to spill out. He unlocked the long chains running through the iron hoops securing the leg irons. Here and there a slave would look up at him, gaunt face wondering at the sudden change.

“Go. You’re free.” Cristóbal pointed at the hatch. “Free. Understand?” He pulled the chain through several hoops to prove his point. Still, none of them moved. Cristóbal suddenly realized he had no idea how many were alive or dead, or how

Justin Stanchfield

long it had been since any of them had seen food or water. Far in the distance a bird screamed, laughing. Feet scuffled above, lightning footsteps dancing on the wood. He pointed at the hatch, then bolted topside.

The longboat was gone. Aguirre lay on the deck, curled in a ball, bright blood gushing out a gash in his throat. A dark-handled blade stuck out of his shoulder. He clutched at it feebly, gurgling as his life spilled out. Cristóbal ran to the rail, leaned against it, staring at the boat inching away.

“Wait! Wait for me!”

Santos looked up once, then bent back to his oar. Don Carlos took no notice at all. Slowly the boat faded into the haze, a dark shape wavering in the heat, a long trail of open water closing slowly behind it.

He heard something, a soft, whispering rush of feathers. Cristóbal turned, knowing full well what he would find. The bird stood on Aguirre’s body, talons tipped crimson. The old woman’s eyes watched him, cool and detached. The bird opened its mouth, panting, hissed once, then spread its wings. Cristóbal felt the air rush around him, felt dark feathers brush his cheek. The vulture screamed once, then wheeled to the west, following the longboat’s wake.

A single figure crawled up from the hold, a spindly black man, impossibly thin, blind in the sunlit glare. Cristóbal helped him to the deck, led him to a safe place below the mainsail. The man stared at him, stared at the distant horizon far behind. Cristóbal pointed at the sails then shook his head. The black man seemed to understand. Together they wandered back to the rail. Even the patch of open water was gone now, the seaweed closing in once again.

A single cloud rose in the east, dull white, an indistinct column gathering just over the horizon. Cristóbal squinted, his vision blurred. The clouds didn’t drift, didn’t fade on the wind.

66 Harpur



It took him a long moment to realize they were sails he saw, tall masts hung with yards of flapping sailcloth. A ship. It veered toward Alcyon, listing gently to port. Cristóbal hadn't even noticed the wind beginning now to blow, thick with distant rain and the promise of land. He sank against the rail, laughing sourly at fate, too exhausted to even feel relief. The black man beside him pointed at the ship, the squat hull gradually growing more distinct against the haze.

"Sí. Yes, I think they see us." Cristóbal didn't care if his words weren't understood. He smiled and nodded, pointed at the sky and crossed himself. He closed his eyes, waiting for the ship to arrive, and let himself drift asleep, dreaming of green meadows and cool, gushing streams.

HP

**On the way to Oshagan**  
by Lory Bedikian

I stop the car, cross the dirt road  
to see what it is the old woman's  
selling. Hoping for a cold drink, an extra  
postcard to write this evening, I find  
her tucked behind a table, under a tarp  
with fly swatters swaying above her head.  
Stacks of Marlboro boxes, packs of gum  
are the only things I can recognize among  
the odd Russian, Armenian labels.  
She must not hear me, because she keeps  
rolling a square of newspaper into a cone  
and fills it with roasted sunflower seeds.  
I ask for one, saying "meg hahd hahjees,"  
fumbling to find a *dram* among my dollars.

Her eyes, the color of two almonds  
rise for only a moment before she asks  
me with a low, coarse, parrot-voice  
if I like America, if I'm married and where  
exactly is this place called "Glendale"?  
With an awkward smile I drop indifferent  
answers for her, like coins in the palm.  
Until this exchange I had convinced myself  
that I do not look like a tourist. After all, having  
an ancestral name, firm family tree, the language  
ironed to my tongue since the day I was born,  
how could I be just another *Amerigatzi*? I say  
this to myself, though I'm the one with the walking  
shoes, the camera and plaid-patterned pants.

She interrupts my thoughts with “Welcome to Armenia. Please take these seeds for free.”  
When I extend the money, I notice her face shrinks in the afternoon light. Back in Los Angeles I would have insisted to pay. But with this unexpected visit I simply remembered how I was raised, before the textbooks, the corporate cubicles, before I learned to get fashion magazine haircuts, attend culturally sponsored events. I hear my parents say love this seven-member family all your days and nights, learn to take every offering with grace, no matter the given size. I bowed my head, said thank you. She insisted it’s nothing and asked that I come back soon.

Forgetting why it was I stopped at all,  
I walk back across the dirt, cracking one open. Its shell tastes of the same salted seeds tucked by my grandmother into coat pockets before evening walks. Like a small communion, I contemplate the seed with my tongue and swallow. I almost turn to wave, but get back in the car. For miles around, there is nothing but land I follow on the map. There is nothing but this old woman and her convenience stand made of brick and wood on the edge of a beaten road.



## All That Was Said About the Korean War

by Benjamin Vogt

In the summers my grandparents would spray  
poison on the juniper in front of their house.

The tree would soak as the bagworms, grown on to  
branches like pine cones, dripped to the ground.

When I became too curious Grandma would  
yell to get out of the way, to move downwind

and avoid the mist. But from behind Grandpa  
I couldn't see a thing. His plaid shirt would

unfurl like loose sails around his gut, his heavy  
arms bent and recoiled in the action like palm trees

under the rush of low-flying jets. From deep  
in his shadow I could only sense the dying bugs,

the heavy-wet branches, the man with a  
cigarette that balanced from his mouth like flesh.

That sweet air cut through my lungs like chlorine,  
glued to my mind so that today, standing in the shower,

I understand there's nothing in the world to  
protect me from dying, and that each year

the juniper now harbors every invasion.

## Barney Hester

by Darrin Doyle

So what about this girl? The one who hyperextended that inhuman jawbone to vacuum up my best friend. It took me fifteen years of therapy and ten years (running) of prescription drugs to convince me that it isn't normal behavior for girls to swallow the boys who like them. Even after all that, I continue to see her cavernous maw in every footprint in the snow, every dark hole in the trunk of a tree. Whenever a baby screams for its bottle, I hear Barney.

Women in general continue to terrify me. For fifteen years the act of sex was ruined: her mouth was in a different place, the head wasn't at the top of my body, but the gesture was the same.

Her name was Tanya. This is a false name. I swore to that demon that I would never repeat her real name again, not to any living soul (although I suppose that the Hesters, should they ever read this, would be able to supply her name. No matter.). I will never break my promise. I urinated in my pants as I made that vow. Urinating in one's pants is funny, in theory and in movies. When it really happens, when the body and the mind shut down entirely, when you feel that you are imploding upon yourself—then it's not funny. The simple act of documenting this experience is enough to set in motion those terrible soundless fears, those fears that she will appear at my doorstep or my window, tapping to be let in. I can see her smiling out there. Her eyes are black. Her teeth are white.

Behind the Hesters' house stood on an expanse of wooded land, maybe ten acres. More undeveloped acreage—wooded, barren, grassy—on every side of their house, gave the area a lonely, forgotten feel. The birds and crickets were louder than

Darrin Doyle

the cars. Barney used to tell me that the woman down the street, their nearest neighbor at two hundred yards away, mowed her lawn topless. This just proves how isolated these people were, on the outskirts of Grand Rapids, Michigan, close to the Rockford border. The street had very few houses on it.

One time at the Hesters' I stayed later than I'd intended. It was autumn; the sun abandoned us very early. Nightfall had descended swiftly and painlessly. Barney and I lay on our bellies in the basement, engrossed in our hand-held Coleco electronic football game. Ozzy Osbourne, from Danny's room next door, sang "Fairies Wear Boots."

When 8 p. m. rolled around I told Barney I had to go home, so he waited until I wasn't ready, reared back and leveled me with a punch to the gut. I folded. Then he ran upstairs and told his mom that I'd spit on the carpet. I walked out of the house trying to hold back the tears. My stomach clenched and I was having difficulty breathing. I hopped on my Huffy and rode away.

Normally I made a point of riding as quickly as possible until I reached The Beltline, which was the main road. On that night I could barely pedal. Sitting upright was an enormous job. It was a long, dark, sloping road. Streetlights were scarce. Small mammals scurried into the shadows. I'm not sure if it frightened Barney, his older brother Danny or his younger sister Margaret. They never seemed scared of anything.

That bike ride physically altered me forever. For reasons I was never certain of, I lost my balance and fell over the handlebars, directly onto my face. That's why to this day I have a crooked nose and a crimped upper lip. My front teeth were loose, my mouth was filled with blood. I raised my head, spitting. I had fallen in front of somebody's house; as I looked up, a light in the living room extinguished. Reflecting now, for



what it's worth, I'm pretty sure it was Tanya's house.

She was the girl who lived down the road from Barney. Here are some things you should know:

- 1) Barney Hester, at the age of twelve, was swallowed by this girl. This was a girl he loved.
- 2) I witnessed the event.
- 3) I didn't try to stop it.
- 4) Barney did not struggle as his head disappeared into her mouth. His arms remained flat at his sides. He did, however, scream like an unfed infant.
- 5) I loved Barney Hester.
- 6) He tried to kill me.

After the punching incident and the ensuing bicycle mishap (which I also blamed on him) I vowed I would never talk to Barney again. As usual, I was weak. He lured me back with his seductive charm and promises of abandoned *Penthouses* buried in the weeds behind his house. He was a handsome boy. Even then, in the fifth grade, I knew this, and I realize now that this was part of his hold on me. He had that confidence, that swagger, which good-looking males inevitably adopt. The fifth-grade girls used whatever means necessary to steal personal effects of his—a cutout football he made for a school project, a broken shoelace, his trademark black combs (he had a bucketful in his room)—and sneak to the corner of the classroom to cover them with kisses. The other boys used to get pissed off at this behavior. Not from jealousy, mind you, but because they thought it was insulting to our gender. Barney didn't mind the attention. He smirked about it. Nothing you did to him seemed to faze him.

His big brother used to whollop the living crap out of him.

Darrin Doyle

Maybe that's why I cut Barney so much slack. Gangly red-haired Danny's evening ritual was to sit on Barney's chest and play the drums on his face. With drumsticks. He adored whipping Barney's naked butt with wet towels until the skin broke open. He gave Barney Indian burns for *not doing* his chores. He tied Barney up inside the abandoned doghouse for *doing* his chores. He made Barney eat moldy cheese for not doing *Danny's* chores. His parents turned a blind eye to this terrorism partly because his mother was blind, literally (since birth), and partly because his father weighed 500 pounds. Mr. Hester seemed almost too fat to move; chasing down and punishing Danny was more than he cared to attempt. Theirs was a grotesque family. Even his little sister, with her innocent-looking plaid Catholic-school skirt, was not exempt from bearing their unsavory gene; she is an albino.

I'll lay off Margaret now. She's the one who cooks my meals and sleeps beside me at night. I won't risk losing those things. We're married. And she has nothing to do with the Hesters—her family—any more. I love her. When I go inside her, I'm not afraid. I don't worry about never coming out again. There are times when, inside her eyes, in their pink pigment glaze, I see Barney's face. He's usually spitting at me for allowing him to vanish. Just because I see him now and then in Margaret's eyes, it doesn't mean I won't remain with her forever.

Barney Hester was not a genius. After he disappeared, some people claimed that he'd been a genius. This is a lie. People always try to glorify the victim. He cheated on tests in school. I saw him doing it. As a matter of fact, I was often "coerced" (read: bullied) by Barney into supplying him with answers. His spelling was primitive. His implementation of the scientific method consisted of seeing how many BBs a garter snake could

74 Harpur

be shot with before it finally croaked. If it somehow turns out that Barney faked his disappearance, his own swallowing, at the age of twelve, then maybe I would concede that he is a genius. An acting genius for sure.

Sometimes, even after all these years, I look for him. I still live in Grand Rapids. It's a big city. It would have been easy for him to be absorbed into the streets. He could've become a prostitute, a thief, a gambler, a gambling prostitute thief, or a bouncer. Any of those romantic things.

When his parents found out Barney was gone, they spent a good deal of their money searching for him. I still have the milk carton with his face and statistics on it.

*Barney James Hester Five feet tall Age 12 Born November 12, 1970 Red hair One dimple in his cheek when he smiles Weighs 94 pounds Last seen wearing a blue Detroit Lions' jersey with number 17 and the word "Hipple" on the back*

For as much as his folks professed to care about him after he was devoured, it's worth mentioning that I had to provide the police with all of the above information, except for age and hair color.

My first clue that Barney had fallen in love was the smell of Dove soap. One day, with no warning, his hands reeked of it. He'd never smelled like anything other than burped-up Cheetos and bologna sandwiches, so the change was pretty obvious. I found out later that he was washing himself in excess of ten times a day. If he wasn't showering or taking a bath, he was scrubbing his face, neck, arms, hands—any area he could reach in his two-minute trips to the bathroom during Science class. One day his bookbag spilled and four bars of Dove tumbled out onto the floor. I desperately wanted to mock him for this, but



Darrin Doyle

couldn't bring myself to do it. He looked so damn pathetic kneeling down to pick them up. I didn't want to get punched either.

Talking to Barney was something one couldn't just "do." The moment had to be right, and it had to be on Barney's terms. Most days he showed no emotion other than anger and apathy. If he laughed, it was at someone else's misfortune. He talked tough, meaning he talked about everything that had nothing to do with anything. He talked football, MTV, cigarettes, bikes, private parts, baseball cards, video games, skateboards. I don't think he ever talked about food. Food didn't interest him unless it was covered with cheese, and then it only interested him in the same way that he interested Tanya.

Once in a while, however, Barney opened up. It was impossible to predict when this would happen. After baseball practice one day, we walked to my house. On the shoulder of the road we came across a dead squirrel. It was crushed and split open, with flies dancing on it. Expecting Barney to lift it by the tail and hurl it at me, I started running. I turned around eventually. He hadn't moved. He was staring down at the squirrel. I went back.

He said, "I don't think this was an accident."

"You think somebody killed it?"

"Of course somebody killed it. But they didn't mean to."

"You should go look up the word 'accident.'"

"This squirrel committed suicide."

Then he told me about his Uncle Lincoln, who had shot himself with an old Army pistol. He said it wasn't really a tragedy since his Uncle had wanted to die. Even his family agreed. Everyone was sad and everything, because Linc had been a pretty good guy, but the consensus among the Hesters was that everyone had the right to do it if it felt like the proper thing. Barney told me that every death was a suicide.

76 Harpur

"What if your plane crashes?" I asked him.

"Then it's the pilot committing suicide on behalf of all the passengers."

"You can't commit suicide for someone else."

"Jesus killed himself."

We went to a Catholic school, so this revelation really shocked me. "Jesus wasn't on a plane!" I said.

"He could've saved himself, but he didn't."

I couldn't see what his argument had to do with my argument, but I let it rest. As I said, Barney didn't open up too much, and I didn't want to risk getting ants stuffed down the front of my jeans. Barney removed his shirt and put it over his hands. He peeled the squirrel's body from the pavement. I followed him as he walked with it a few feet into the woods, then tossed it away as hard as he could. He said it was embarrassing for the squirrel, with everyone looking at it and commenting about it. He said the squirrel deserved to be away from all those eyes.

A week later, he told me about the girl who lived down the street. She was a few years older than us. Barney was smitten with her. He scrawled her name all over his notebooks and textbooks. I finally knew why he'd taken such an active interest in washing himself. I was sleeping over at his house one Friday night when he gave me the dirt.

"Her house is around the bend, on the right-hand side," he said, "She has really big tits. Her hair's long and black and stringy and when she sits on her porch, reading a book, she likes to twist the hair with her fingers."

That's all Barney knew.

I asked him, "Where does she go to school?"

He didn't know.

I asked him, "Where did she move from?"

Darrin Doyle

He said he hadn't noticed anyone living in that house before, maybe they'd always been there.

I asked him if he'd seen her tits.

He slapped the side of my head for even thinking about her tits.

It became part of our ritual to ride back and forth past her house on our dirt bikes, hoping to catch a glimpse. There was an unspoken agreement that if she ever came out, I wouldn't open my mouth. Only Barney could talk to her, and I was to laugh extra hard at anything Barney said.

Most times, the house looked uninhabited. Once in a while a light would turn on or off and we would get really excited. Barney would stop his bike and pretend to tie his shoe. The drapes in the front window were always drawn, however, so we only saw shadows inside.

This went on for two months. I didn't see the mystery girl. Not once. Barney said that she obviously didn't like me, since she came out of the house "a lot" when I wasn't around. I was ready to give up hope. I'd decided that this girl was nothing more than a fantasy, a diversion Barney had created because I wasn't entertaining enough for him. A snowless December came and went, as I tried unsuccessfully to draw Barney into playing Coleco football, hunting birds with our BB guns—anything that didn't involve the dirty grey house at the bottom of the hill.

In January there was a blizzard, and with the snow came the girl. Her face was bleeding. She was ushered into the Hesters' house by the grotesquely overweight Mr. Hester, who normally filled his custom-made recliner from the moment he came home from the Keebler factory until Mrs. Hester woke him to get into bed. But with the twelve inches of snow came a lot of shoveling, and doctors had told Mr. Hester that he needed the

78 Harpur



exercise.

He burst through the door with Tanya squeezed under his arm, her face squashed against his enormous stomach. I think Mr. Hester was, in his arrested condition of social retardation, attempting to both console and restrain her. She was squirming. She screamed. She bit his hand. Cursing, he let her go. She ran to me and started shoving, perhaps in her dazed state thinking that I was the one who'd hit her with the rock-filled snowball.

Barney was frozen to his spot on the carpet. I think there were a couple of things going on in his mind at that moment: first, he was paralyzed at the sight of his dream woman standing in his own house; second, he was horrified that it was *me* she was touching, rather than him, albeit in a rude fashion. If Mr. Hester hadn't thrown his bulk between us, I believe Barney would've joined in with Tanya's assault and I wouldn't be here today to tell this story.

The mess got sorted out. Danny was hauled inside by his ear. He was made to apologize, which he grudgingly did, before flipping Tanya off as he stepped out the door. Mrs. Hester brought some rubbing alcohol and bandages. Tanya snatched these petulantly and applied them to her cuts.

Barney and I sat motionless at opposite ends of the couch, watching. By the rapid blinking and the unsteady breath pattern, I could tell that his brain was going into overdrive. He didn't want to look at the fantasy girl, but his eyes, those pea-green things which for so long had only expressed rage and apathy, were pulled to her. He was terrified. It was the first of only two times I ever saw him looking weak.

Barney's parents left the room. The three of us sat quietly. After a moment Tanya asked Barney what the fuck he was looking at. I was almost knocked off the couch by the force of her voice. Barney hadn't lied when he'd said she had big

Darrin Doyle

breasts; they were gigantic. In fact, her whole body was rather large. If I can tell the truth, I thought she was homely and dumpy. I recalled the numerous times Barney had said fat girls were worthless. Her hair was like black seaweed. The nose on her face looked like it'd been pinched into the shape of a shark's dorsal fin. She had unusually long fingers, which she used to tug absentmindedly at her detached earlobes. They were pale, bony fingers. They reminded me of icicles. Judging by the dark ditches beneath her eyes, she hadn't had a good night's sleep in months.

Barney demonstrated great tact in laughing rather than trying to answer her profane question. I laughed too, but not as hard as Barney. Mrs. Hester shocked us all by coming into the room with a tray of hot chocolate. In two years she'd never even offered me a glass of water.

Barney threw me a look that meant I was supposed to help his mother. I obeyed, handing out the mugs before taking my seat once again. Mrs. Hester asked Tanya how her head was feeling. Tanya performed a courageous feat. She screwed up her face, distorted it into a queer, pain-filled grimace, then answered in a perfectly level voice, "It's feeling fine. Thanks for the hot chocolate."

I prepared myself for Mrs. Hester's wraith. She was an alcoholic with a mean streak. Although she was blind, she'd always exhibited an impeccable skill for reading intentions in the tone of people's voices, like a dog who smells shit on the wind. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd hurled the tray at the wall and gone rabid on Tanya's ass. Instead Mrs. Hester said, "You're welcome," and walked away.

After that, Tanya began coming over regularly. Barney had promised her that we'd "fuck Danny up" for the snowball. I was always invited along whenever she visited, because although

he wanted her all to himself, Barney confided in me on a number of occasions on the playground that she “was empty on the inside.” She frightened him. Her presence unnerved him. He said that over the years her guts had fallen out, little by little, and been eaten by stray dogs.

The three of us spent hours in the back yard, huddled over a floor-plan of the Hesters’ home which we’d scrawled into the snow. I realized in those moments that three is a good number. In a group of three, you are always next to everyone. It’s a perfect circle. That’s why Margaret and I have only one child. He’s a five year-old boy named Barney.

Our idea was to put Danny’s headphones on him while he was sleeping, then destroy his eardrums with his own music. First we’d talked about putting dog shit on his floor. Then we’d considered shoving a few pieces of broken glass into his tube socks. For none of the ideas we tossed around was a floor plan necessary, but Barney was a detail-driven boy and I wasn’t about to argue with him. The true joy of those nights was huddling together against the whipping, frozen breeze, flashlights in hand, watching our breath clouds mingle above the crude snow-sketch, our knees touching each other’s.

The actual execution of the plan was anticlimactic. Since we had to wait until Danny was sleeping, we chose a Friday. I spent the night, as usual, at the Hesters’ house. We told his mother we were going to sleep in the basement living room, which was next to Danny’s room and which also had a sliding glass door leading into the back yard. In front of the television we lay in our sleeping bags. Barney stuffed handful upon handful of Cheetos into his mouth.

At 2 a. m. Barney’s teeth were bright orange from the Cheetos when Tanya’s face appeared in all its bloodless glory at the glass door. Barney let her in.



We took turns sneaking up to Danny's door and pressing our ears against it. We had to flatten our entire ear on the door for ten seconds, or else it didn't count. This was terrifying, knowing that Danny could throw open the door at any moment and then do God-knows-what. He was like an ogre in a cave.

After two turns apiece, we determined that he was asleep. The mood turned solemn. We snuck into his room with a flashlight. Barney selected AC/DC's *Back in Black* from the leaning stack of records and I plugged in the headphones. Tanya had insisted on the privilege of placing the headphones over Danny's ears. As soon as she did, however, he woke up. Barney didn't even get a chance to drop the needle before Danny flung back his covers and started screaming obscenities at us. He jumped out of bed. Tanya kicked him in the shin with her boot. She ran out of the house, leaving the sliding door wide open. The breeze played on the curtains and stirred up the newspaper that was lying on the sofa. Danny punched Barney a few times in the mouth. That was that.

If Tanya had ever been interested in Barney, which I doubt, she lost interest after the prank was complete. That's not to say she didn't come over anymore. She did. The three of us took long walks through the woods. We shot BB guns at birds. We threw snowballs at cars on the Beltline. Despite her rotund figure, Tanya proved to be a remarkably fast runner. She had a natural gift for vanishing into the trees, making no sound whatsoever. Whenever a car skidded to a stop and the driver hopped out to chase us, Tanya became a blur, sprinting smoothly over snowmounds and dead branches, through bushes and fallen saplings, until inevitably she was gone, only to announce her appearance later, when the coast was clear, by pelting Barney in the face with a snowball.

82 Harpur

Barney took these assaults, as well as others, as signs of affection. How could he not? He was blinded and weak. Love to Barney meant punching, spitting and cursing. But I sensed different motives in Tanya. After all, she never spoke a word to Barney. She talked exclusively to me. When she spit grape seeds at him or thrust her smelly feet in his face, it was with a violence I couldn't ignore. For his part, Barney was so smitten that he could barely talk. The result was that I was constantly in the middle. They each talked to me, but never to each other.

Despite Barney's efforts to the contrary, Tanya and I were occasionally left alone together. Tanya took these opportunities to criticize Barney's clothes, his hair, his house—anything she could think of. Because she always whispered these derisions, it imbued them with a sense of urgency and secrecy. Her lips curled into a grin. She dripped profanities out of her mouth like slow, sticky molasses. Her eyes moved in her head, glancing to the left and right as if she could sense the presence of another being in the room. I became steadily more focused on her breasts as the days went by. When her fingers wrapped themselves around a throw pillow, I imagined she was grabbing my hands, my head, my shoulders—anything—to pull me in for a taste of her moist lips.

Recently I was downtown for the annual Thanksgiving parade when I bumped into Danny Hester. He was alone, staring at the newspaper machine. I was reminded of Barney, years before, mysteriously contemplative, hands in his pockets, looking down at the mutilated squirrel.

With my son Barney in tow I tried to hurry past, but Danny looked up. He recognized me. I hadn't seen him in eighteen years. Except for the added age lines his face was mostly unchanged, but he seemed to have shrunk. And he wasn't Danny anymore, he was—

“Daniel Hester. Remember me?” He shook my hand vigorously. He looked queer in his trenchcoat and three-piece suit. He didn’t ask about Margaret, but he did tell me that Mrs. Hester had “kicked the bucket six months ago,” from a stroke. The unspoken message, of course, was that I should pass along the news to Margaret. She’d divorced herself from Danny and the rest of his family eight years before, and the Hesters seemed to accept this reality in the same way they’d accepted Uncle Lincoln’s suicide: it was unfortunate, but unchangeable.

Danny smiled down at little Barney, then rubbed Barney’s head. I could practically hear the violins as he broke into a sappy, rambling speech about the old days. It was pathetic. He said he felt like shit the way he’d treated Barney when they were kids. He said that Barney had talked about me all the time, even when we weren’t friends anymore. Looking at my watch I mumbled something about taking my son to the movies. Danny shook my hand again, not wanting to let me go. I peeled myself away from him.

After we walked a few steps, I heard him calling after me. I turned around. He said that he’d heard something about Tanya. She’d migrated west, to California, to be an actress, leaving bits of Barney, I presume, in toilets all across the USA.

Now I suppose I should get to the point. My shrinks have always told me that writing things down is a way to finalize, to purge, to mend.

One Saturday afternoon at the beginning of April, Barney’s parents announced that it was time to get the family some new church shoes. Amid the protests, they corralled the children. Surprisingly, Mr. Hester offered to drop me off at my house on the way to the mall (usually they left me to fend for myself).

As we all fought our way into the pumpkin-colored station wagon, Tanya materialized on their doorstep. Mr. Hester, try-



ing to be polite, invited her to come along. She refused with a simple shake of the head. She walked to the car, grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me out.

"I need help," she whispered. Her fingers were crushing my humerus.

"They're giving me a ride home," I said, with the inflected meekness I'd adopted in her presence. Whenever possible, I did what Tanya commanded. She truly frightened me. I'd once seen her pull off the head of a dead crow we found in the woods. She took it home to use its beak as a "pen" for her diary.

"My parents can give you a ride," she insisted.

The entire Hester family was listening to our exchange. Mr. Hester was letting the car idle. Barney wasn't just listening, of course. He was glaring. I tried to pull away, but her icicle fingers wouldn't break.

I relinquished. "I'm gonna stay here and help Tanya," I said. I stared at the ground.

Mr. Hester spat a vindictive looger onto the driveway and backed his car into the road. He didn't like Tanya. Nobody did except Barney.

She led me to the rear of the Hester house. I didn't know what she had in mind, but all possible scenarios seemed both repellant and alluring. She jimmied open one of the windows to the utility room. She boosted me. I climbed inside. She followed. As I brushed myself off I asked her why we were breaking into Barney's house. As an answer, she ran away, out of the utility room. I saw no choice other than to tag along.

For the next two hours we wreaked havoc on their home. From the refrigerator we retrieved an onion. We broke off small chunks of it and planted them everywhere—in the teakettle, under the plastic placemats, inside the bottle of dish soap, in the cookie jar. We poured honey into the coffee maker. We

Darrin Doyle

taped together random pages of the *Merck Manual of Medical Information*. We diluted their mayonnaise with Vaseline. We greased a few doorknobs with butter. As we did these things, we giggled uncontrollably. There was no talking, only giggling. I was delirious, and I couldn't figure out why. Perhaps it was sexual tension. Perhaps it was the freedom of running rampant in this house where'd I'd spent so much time being reserved and polite, constantly afraid.

Soon after our orgy of subliminal vandalism, Tanya took me to the living room. I settled into the sofa, I calmed down, and the prospect of the Hesters returning reentered my mind. I told Tanya that we should leave. She pinned me to the couch. She sat on me. She took off her shirt and in a marvelous burst of blubbery flesh unleashed her breasts. She commanded me to kiss them. I obeyed, pecking like a bird at the strange pliable mounds, avoiding the nipples at all costs.

She grew impatient. "Put them in your mouth," she said.

I opened up as much as I could. Neither of them would fit, but I tried. Now and then I glanced up at Tanya. She was staring down at me, her chin doubled, tripled, giving her throat the look of two smiling mouths stacked upon each other. She watched me without joy, judging me as if I was a suckerfish busily eating the algae off the glass of a fish tank. For a few moments nothing existed but the vast fields of those pale mammarys and the looming face above.

I think she knew that the Hesters would be arriving home. I think she knew that Barney would be the first to open the door (using his mother's key), and that he would do everything in his power to usher us out before the rest of his family could see what we'd been doing. That's what happened.

Barney came in. He saw us. His face deflated. Without hesitation, without a word, he locked and bolted the front door. Danny started pounding on it. Tanya slipped into her shirt and

86 Harpur



we all walked hastily to the back door. Tanya, I remember, was laughing. I was stunned and ashamed, but more so I was terrified that Barney would murder me. Instead, he pushed me out of the house and out of his life.

I've never told Margaret, or my counselor, any of this. Margaret believes that my absence from her home for those eighteen months was a result of my parents banning me from being with Barney. That's what Barney told his family. He needed to save face, and so did I.

I stayed far away. The summer passed. I dreamed of Tanya many times. They were nice dreams, dreams of vulgar, sloppy kisses, of squeezing our hands together until they were one piece of flesh. Later, the nature of my Tanya dreams changed, but they began that summer.

I missed Barney. The look on his face as he'd escorted me out the door—the confused stare, his eyes quivering in his skull with rage and pain—haunted me. I wanted to hang myself. Barney had been my only close friend. I stayed home on Friday nights. I read my comic books, rode my bike around my neighborhood, stared out my window.

When the sixth grade began, my pain worsened. Being in the same classroom with Barney, and being ignored by him, was almost intolerable. He never looked at me, spoke to me, or referred to me in conversations with other people. In his eyes, I'd vanished. I got used to it eventually—I had to—by buddying up with the class reject, "Stinky Harold" Trebek. Barney went out for all the sports—baseball, football, basketball and even track—so by default I had to drop those activities.

My parents were concerned about me. I was growing taller but my weight wasn't keeping up with my height. My appetite shrank until I was only eating from necessity. My entire life philosophy changed in those eighteen months. Sports no longer



interested me. Deciding to devote my future to Veterinary Medicine, I took up collecting Wild Animal cards with fervency. I experienced the first uncomfortable pangs of doubt in the existence of God.

When seventh grade rolled around, I was totally alone. Stinky Harold had moved away during the previous summer, so I was the class reject. The other boys sported acne and dirty mustaches, talked about newly-sprouted pubic hair in squeaky voices. I was taller, but otherwise externally unchanged. Friendship seemed like an investment I couldn't afford to make.

I should probably be grateful for those solitary months. During that time my thoughts inexplicably turned to Barney's little sister Margaret. I realized that she'd always been there, on the periphery, a quiet, soothing presence in the chaos of that unsettled home. She had smiled at me when no one else would. She had a pretty face. Her eyes, I discovered in my reminiscing, had often lingered on my face, but I'd ignored it. Tanya faded from my dreams and Margaret stepped into the vacancy. I fantasized about calling her. I even dialed up their house a few times, only to hang up the phone when Danny or Barney answered.

Then, for reasons I've since figured out, Barney thrust himself back into my life.

He slipped an invitation into my desk. I still have it here in my Barney Scrapbook. On a red sheet of construction paper, he wrote, and I quote: *You are invited too selebrate the 12fth berth day of Barney James Hester, onthis Saturday at 7pm. Please bring a presint for him.*

There was no name on the abominably-spelled document. I thought it had to be a mistake, possibly a joke.

He approached me the next day as I stood at the urinal in the boys' bathroom. His first words to me in almost two years

were,

“Draining the lizard, huh punk?”

He seemed jovial. I detected no hidden malice in his tone. I was thrilled and nervous at the prospect of forgiveness, but the past eighteen months felt like too enormous a chasm to bridge during a toilet break.

He asked if I was coming to his party. I said I didn’t know. He frowned. He said that it was going to be a blast; his parents were buying him a ColecoVision, which he didn’t have to share with Danny. There was going to be pizza from Fred’s, the best in town. He was vague when I asked who else was coming to the party. At last I promised that I would be there. Even after eighteen months apart, I couldn’t say no to Barney.

My parents dropped me off. My mother told me to behave. I told them that I would catch a ride home from one of the other kids. With present in hand, I paused in front of the unremarkable Hester home. For some reason, I expected it to have changed after such a long absence. After all, I was different, Barney was different, the world was different. The house was the same.

Danny opened the door. Out of habit I tensed up, expecting at the very least a scathing insult. He let me inside without even a nod of his head. He was sullen and quiet, I soon realized, because Mrs. Hester was in the middle of one of her notorious alcohol-induced cleaning frenzies.

For a drunken blind woman she navigated the room with remarkable precision, sweating, hauling the vacuum here and there, cursing under her breath, dusting shelves, polishing the windows. She glanced up when I came in. “Who is that?” she said, not even attempting to hide her annoyance, “Who’s in my house?” Danny tiptoed away.

“It’s Earl Brinkman,” I said.

She had an impeccable memory. "You're the one who spit on my carpet, aren't you?" she snapped, "you gonna apologize for that?"

"I'm here for Barney's birthday party," I said, "he told me seven o'clock." For once I felt afraid because Danny had *left* the room.

"There's no goddamn party," she said.

I was turning to leave when Barney appeared. He motioned for me to follow him. I followed. Mrs. Hester forgot about me and resumed scrubbing the baseboards.

In the basement, we plopped in front of the television. No other kids were there. Danny came out of his bedroom wearing his black Cain's Karate jacket and his white karate pants. Before leaving for his lesson, he reminded us not to go into his fucking room. I'd forgotten how much I hated Barney's family.

"Where's my present?" Barney asked.

I handed him the package. He opened it. It was a pair of walkie-talkies. I'd chosen these over anything else because they implied that we would use them together.

"We can go hunting in the woods with them," I said, "like we're soldiers or something."

"Let's do it," he said.

We grabbed his guns and headed out. He carried the powerful ten-pump Ryder pellet gun, while I received the one-pump Daisy air rifle. I never asked about the absence of other kids. I was elated by the notion that Barney had selected me as his sole party buddy. I was his best friend again.

That feeling lasted approximately thirty minutes. Walkie-talkies in hand, we split up. The sun was disappearing fast. The world was growing dimmer by the minute. I tromped through the woods, heading east, scanning the leafless overhead branches for movement. I received a transmission.

"Nothing over here," Barney's voice said, "over."



“Me neither,” I said, “over.”

I wandered further, through a dense patch of trees, until I reached a small clearing. The woods seemed completely vacant of life. I fired at a log. I pulled the walkie-talkie out of my jacket pocket.

“Where are you?” I said, “this sucks.”

“I think I see something,” his crackling voice whispered, “I’m getting closer.”

I heard the snap of a branch. I turned. I strained my eyes for a moment before realizing that Barney was squatting behind a tree at the edge of the clearing, less than thirty feet away. He was aiming his rifle at me.

The gun cracked, followed by an intense stinging in my left hand. I dropped my gun. I ran. Barney followed. I could hear his footsteps crashing. He pumped his gun and I counted along with it. When it reached ten, I covered my head. He fired again.

I dashed through the clearing, my arms and legs ablaze with adrenaline. I arrived in another mess of trees. One of his pellets snapped a branch near my shoulder. He kept calling out the same phrase over and over—“I’m gonna get you!”—playfully, as if this was an old game between pals.

My only thought was that I should get to somebody’s house. He would never shoot me if other people were around. In my disoriented state I didn’t know which house I was approaching when I finally made my way toward the road. It was Tanya’s house.

She was seated atop the picnic table, staring into the trees as if expecting someone to emerge. Up the sloping back yard I ran to her.

“Help me,” I said, “Barney’s after me.”

“Oh he is, is he?” she said. There was something strangely theatrical, even by her standards, in her voice. I’ve played it

over enough in my mind to know. "Well, let's just see about that."

Barney came stomping into her yard. He was winded, pale and disheveled. This is how I remember him. He pumped his gun with cool deliberation, adding his own element of drama to the scene. It was too unreal for me. I hid under the picnic table and covered my face.

Peeking through my fingers, I saw it unfold. I will tell you what happened.

Tanya walked forward. Barney walked forward. They were like gunslingers. I couldn't see Barney's face. I saw Tanya, in her dirty blue jeans, start to skip. She skipped towards him, singing a little song, "Barney, Barney, you forgot your hat. Barney, Barney, I'll punish you for that."

"Get out of the way," Barney said. His voice was tiny. "Or you'll get it right between the eyes."

"Barney, Barney," she said. She wasn't singing anymore. "Give me the gun, sweetie."

The next thing I knew, the gun was hurled into the air. It landed with a crash on top of the picnic table. I recoiled at the noise.

When I looked up again, Tanya and Barney appeared to be engaged in a peculiar dance. With her hands on his shoulders she pranced around him, chanting "Barney, Barney," over and over again. He was motionless; his shoulders slumped. He was gazing directly at me. The way his eyes looked at that moment has never left my mind; it was an empty look, a surrender, a blame. All at once, he burst into tears, working himself into a cacophonous, plaintive wail that defies description, if only because of the horror it creates in my body and mind. With that, his head disappeared into her mouth, followed by his neck, his arms, his Detroit Lions' jersey, his parachute pants, and his blue Converse sneakers.

That's all I can see. The rest is buried.

I was repacking the Barney Box yesterday, preparing it for the trip to the garbage dump. It's got a few pocket combs (some with strands of red hair still intact), the old hand-held football game, a bunch of pictures, his school notebooks, the birthday party invitation—even his pellet gun is in there. It took a few years to get this stuff back from the Grand Rapids Bureau of Missing Persons, and it still retains the musty odor it acquired there. Now it's all trash.

I couldn't bring myself to throw everything away. Reliving that period of my life so vicariously over these past few months has brought it too close once again. Just yesterday, while Margaret was at work, I peeled through the box in search of the walkie-talkies. For some reason it seemed appropriate to keep these, although I wasn't even sure if they still worked.

I could only find one of them. I searched through the box again, taking everything out, without any luck. Confused, I sat at my desk with the one walkie-talkie in hand. I stared at it. It felt as if everything I'd said to Barney, everything he'd said to me, was contained in that one tiny piece of plastic. For the hell of it, I pressed the button.

"Earl to Barney," I said, "come in, Barney."

A few seconds passed. I smiled. I was about to toss the thing in the box when, in my hand, the walkie-talkie came to life with a loud crackle.

"I'm here," a voice said.

I dropped it onto the hardwood floor. It broke. My entire body trembled uncontrollably. I told myself that I'd imagined the voice because there was no other explanation, no logical reason that he should reappear after such a long time. If he was calling from the Other Side, then I didn't want to speak to him. My life was complicated enough. I wondered if he'd been swal-



Darrin Doyle

lowed with his walkie-talkie in his pocket, that the police hadn't recovered it, that my best friend Barney Hester had been frozen in time, perpetually twelve years old, all these years just waiting for my call, out there in the timeless void clutching his radio, praying to be contacted by his only friend. I'd never attempted to reach him. In all the years following his disappearance I'd only thought about myself, only thought about what he'd done to me, when all along I'd done nothing for him. I'd betrayed him. He'd been calling out to me for years, in my dreams and in my waking thoughts, and I'd never known how to reply.

The door creaked open. My son Barney was standing there in his Grover pajamas. He was holding the other walkie-talkie.

"Why didn't you answer me?" he said.

HP

**March 10th Spring**  
by Katherine McCord

Spring

The lake at the halfway point of my two-hour commute looks green, metallic, oxidized. Copper. Slick as if peeled back from something and here—for boats to heat up and skate on. If you pop over the next hill, you see junkyard cars in the distance sparkling like jewels. Then at dinner you smell Pine Sol. Some old desert café trying to be clean, the glitter of someone you knew like dust in the air.

The wind rising from the ground again. A storm of sorts. Home is the capsule of air within, the soft lead of a pencil, silk, against the page, the answer back, past, an abandoned house, weedy yard, then wood for miles, then a mid-day field, the foundations of houses, blank, staring square at the sky. Waiting. New. I will not live here. In my mind, they'll never be built. Thick gray pages. Sweet grass. We are heating up and rising toward the sun. We are witnessing summer. We are new.

You are blackbirds, any, that swoop before my speeding car. Did I ever tell you that? That you are *blackbirds* that dip before my car?

## Up, Up, and Away by Shari R. Fineman

“Here’s what I want you to do.” Roger handed Dana the wooden spool of kite string. “Reel it out about a foot at a time, not too fast. If there’s too much slack it will knot.”

Dana sighed. She rolled her shoulders, first one, then the other, loosening up the way she did in yoga. It would take less time to go along than to argue. How long could it take for him to get the need to fly a kite out of his system? An hour?

The wind was strong, whipping fiercely enough that even the hardcore members of the private beach had relocated to the cocoons of their backyard pools. Dana was relieved. They didn’t know the beach crowd yet and this wasn’t the impression she wanted to make. Sand sprayed against her thighs, her neck, every inch of exposed skin. At least it was exfoliating.

“OK, get ready,” Roger raced with the kite into the wind. Dana watched her husband trip across the sand in the Vuitton beach loafers she’d insisted he buy. The wind blew through his thinning hair and pinkness of his scalp flashed in the sun. His legs were too skinny and something about the way he ran reminded Dana of a duck. She glanced over her shoulder to reassure herself that no one was watching. Fine, Dana thought, so he wanted to fly a kite. Maybe he would get interested in prop planes, too, would take some flying lessons and get a pilot’s license. It would be nice to have a husband who was qualified as a pilot.

Dana felt a sharp tug on the kite string, what she imagined a big fish on a line felt like. She tilted her head up to the sky, shielding her brow with one hand, holding on to the string with the other. There was the kite, high up in the air, climbing higher. And also up there, also climbing, was Roger. Dana’s hand flew to her mouth. She gasped. He waved.

96 Harpur



Dana looked up and down the beach. It was still empty and she was even more relieved that no one would see her husband now that he was on the kite. Then a wave of panic hit as she realized she wasn't sure what to do. She cursed under her breath. Why couldn't Roger be normal, out playing golf or day-trading? She looked up at him. "GET DOWN!!!" she shouted. The wind pushed her words behind her. It drowned out her voice so that even she had trouble hearing it. Dana pulled at the spool and the string as hard as she could, but it wouldn't budge. The kite felt as if it was wedged between two cement blocks. The force was tremendous—as if Roger had managed to steer into some kind of thermal pocket. Dana wondered if the force was enough to yank her up too, if the winds would carry both of them over the sea. And where would they land? On the Long Island Expressway? Staten Island?

Dana dug her feet hard into the sand. She was *not* getting sucked off to some unplanned place by her husband and his kite. Not a chance. She took a deep breath, and held it. A yoga breath. Breathe in. Breathe out.

In the distance she saw a couple walking along the beach, heading in her direction. Behind her, a parking lot of lounge chairs, naked of cushions, was lined up. She unwound enough string to reach the nearest chaise and wove the spool through three chairs. She yanked the string, testing its grasp and when she was as sure as she could be that it would hold, she let go. The anchor worked. Up in the sky, Roger and the kite floated freely.

Dana ran to the water and waved to the approaching couple, feeling like a desperate accident victim on a highway flagging down a speeding vehicle. Though they weren't on a road, and there was no reason not to stop. The couple waved back and ambled over; they were younger than her and Roger, maybe

Shari Fineman

early thirties. The woman wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and a simple linen dress, employing her basic outfit as a canvas to display the intricate gold rings and bracelets she wore on both wrists. It was a look Dana liked, something she might try herself. She made a mental note to ask who the jewelry designer was.

"Morning," the man said. He had a deep tan and thick white blonde hair. He held up a palm in a wave and his antique Rolex glinted in the sun.

"Morning," Dana said, and for a moment nothing was wrong. "I'm sure this is going to sound crazy," she began, and to her surprise her throat closed up and she couldn't say another word. She pointed up at the sky with one hand. "My husband," she squeaked.

"Well, would you look at that," the man stared up into the sky, barely squinting, without shielding his eyes. A sailor, Dana thought. He's used to the sun.

"Annie, do you see him?"

His wife nodded. "Look at that," she repeated.

"It just happened, maybe five minutes ago. I let out the string, and then the next thing I knew..." She pointed. It occurred to her that she did not know if Roger had planned to go up or if it had happened accidentally. "I mean it happened out of the blue, right out of nowhere..."

Annie smiled. "Out of the blue," she repeated.

Dana nodded, dazed. She hadn't realized her pun.

"We should do something, Don," Annie said to her husband. He nodded, and took his cell phone from his shirt pocket. It was one of the newer models, with a sleek silver face and mother of pearl buttons. He offered it to Dana. "Do you want to call 911?"

She took the phone.

Dana wondered if Roger was in calling range. His phone

98 Harpur

Up, Up, and Away

was in his pocket. "I'd like to try him first," she said, gesturing with her neck to her husband in the sky. "Do I dial a one?"

Don shook his head. "Just area code and number."

Roger answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Roger?"

"Dana."

Dana turned slightly away from Annie and Don so they wouldn't hear her and then hissed into the phone, "Roger did you *plan* this?"

"Dana, it's amazing up here. Just amazing!"

The couple on the beach looked at Dana, then looked up into the sky. They looked from Roger to Dana as if they could hear both sides of the phone conversation and were following it the way people watch a tennis match, turning their heads from side to side to the rhythm of the game.

"Roger, you have to come down. Roger, this is *insane*!"

"Not yet. Go get a manicure or something, I'll catch up later."

"Roger!"

She heard the click of the connection cutting off. He had hung up.

Dana turned to the couple and wished she had not stopped them. She was embarrassed by Roger's actions and surprised; in their three years of marriage he had never made a scene.

She held the phone in her palm. "He's decided to stay up for a bit," she explained. She tried to sound calm, approving even.

"Icarus Complex," the man commented. "Read about it last summer. It's not uncommon."

"You should still call 911," Annie said. "You know, they're probably trained in talking people down and all."

Again, Dana looked up. It appeared to be less blustery that high, where the kite and Roger dipped and floated across the sky. She heard a whistling. It was the wind, it had to be,



Shari Fineman

although it did sound a lot like it might be Roger going  
“Wheeeeeeeeeee!”

Seconds later the Coast Guard appeared; they explained that a well-known actor who lived on the beach had called 911 the moment it happened.

“Which actor?” Annie asked.

Dana wondered the same thing. She hoped it was someone with an academy award.

“I’m not at liberty to say, ma’am,” a man from the Coast Guard said. He and his crew had arrived in an all-terrain beach buggy type vehicle, in bathing suits and military looking vests. They carried bright orange medical bags, a rubber raft and walkie-talkies. They looked like something between a S.W.A.T. team and television actors playing lifeguards.

“I bet it was one of the Baldwins,” Annie said and pointed. “Alec has a house somewhere right around here.”

Dana shrugged one shoulder, in hopes of communicating nonchalance and indicating she wasn’t impressed.

The man in charge introduced himself. “I’m Lieutenant Reilly,” he said. He faced Dana and her new acquaintances. “Is anyone here related to the man on the kite?”

Dana tipped her chin up. “Yes, he’s my husband.” A crowd of attractive people, residents of the area, was forming on the beach and Dana had begun to feel proud of the situation. Being the center of attention wasn’t a bad thing when you considered who was paying attention.

Annie held up the cell phone. “He won’t come down,” she said. “We called him.”

Dana shot her a look. He was *her* husband. It was her story. “Well, maybe now he will,” she said to the Coast guard. She punched in Roger’s number and handed over the cell phone. “You try.”

They watched him with the phone in one hand, binoculars

100 Harpur

Up, Up, and Away

in the other. Dana turned to Don. "I really appreciate the use of your phone. Of course you'll have to send me the bill."

He waved her off. "Not a problem. I have free weekends. Call anyone you want."

Reilly had Roger on the line. He introduced himself, then paused. "Sir, is it that you're unable to come down?"

A nod. "I see. Well I'm afraid that's not possible. See, we have a Trailer plane scheduled to occupy the airspace you're in. It's up in fifteen minutes."

Again he paused. Dana strained to hear what Roger was saying but the only sound was the wind.

The Coast Guard continued speaking to Roger. Apparently he was answering a question. "A Trailer is a plane with a banner behind it. Advertising banner." He gave a slight nod of his head. "Uh huh. That's right." He looked at Dana, Annie and Don, and held up a palm as though to say, I've got this under control folks, you can just go on with whatever it is you were doing.

"Sir, I'm afraid we need the airspace. There are a lot of advertising dollars at stake here and if that plane can't run the trailer along the ocean..." He pursed his lips. "Well, it's an ad for a Wet 'N Wild party in Southampton, I believe." He looked over at his partner.

The partner nodded. "That's correct, Lieutenant, Wet 'N Wild in Southampton."

Reilly was still talking to Roger. "Sir, I really don't think that's a good..." he stopped mid-sentence, taking the phone from his ear. Up in the sky Dana saw a flash of silver.

"My God," she exclaimed.

Annie craned her neck. "What? What is that?"

"It's his Nokia," Dana said.

"He said he was going to do that," Lieutenant Reilly com-

Shari Fineman

mented. The group watched as the phone flashed against the horizon, a piece of space confetti.

Don shook his head, his mouth agape in awe of Roger's action. "Those babies are five hundred a pop without the custom headset," he said.

Annie nodded. "That's balls."

Roger had now been in the air three hours and the beach was crowded with emergency personnel. The Trailer plane had been rerouted, Wet 'N Wild in Southampton would attempt to draw the crowd out near the bay instead. "I mean really, who out *here* would go there anyway," Annie had snorted. She gave Dana an approving look. "You just did them an enormous marketing favor."

The problem was that there was another Trailer scheduled to come through. This one, advertising a new series of HBO documentaries, was set to go up in less than two hours.

"We need to be resolved by then," Reilly said. "HBO is not about to compromise their air space."

The kite string was still wound around through the lounge chairs. Yellow tape, the crime scene type, was strung around the chair on all four sides. Up in the sky, Roger swayed in the wind. Dana picked up Reilly's binoculars and studied her husband. He had hooked the kite through his belt and his arms were stretched wide. The binoculars were so strong she could see the smile on his face. "Wow, these are good."

Don chuckled. "Your tax dollars hard at work." He unwrapped a sandwich. He had gone to the farmer's market to get them all something to eat.

Dana studied Roger through the binoculars. He wove in and out of the current, a serene look on his face. Now would be a good time for him to return to the beach, she thought. He had

102 Harpur



made a statement against worthless advertising in the sky, he had taken on the Coast Guard. And, Roger had shown Dana a side she didn't know; or didn't pay attention to. This newly demonstrated assertiveness was sexy and Dana was caught between feeling attracted to her husband and the realization that for most of their relationship that feeling had been absent. She forced the thoughts from her head; she could analyze it all later. Now, she had to focus on the situation at hand.

Dana put down the binoculars and picked up a sandwich. If Roger came down now Dana was sure they'd be regarded as local celebrities

"Mmmm, is this arugula?" Dana asked, her mouth full.

Don nodded. "Poached chicken, arugula, Creole tomatoes and low-fat chipotle mayo. The best."

Behind them, more vehicles were arriving. An ambulance with dune buggy wheels headed their way.

"Wow, I'd like to go four-wheeling in that," Don commented. And then they saw the tank.

"What on Earth is that here for?" Dana felt her heart rate speed up. Now things were going too far. They couldn't possibly be thinking of shooting Roger down, could they? "Why is there a tank here?" She began to pace. The coast guard signaled the ambulance driver, who came over with a serious looking toolbox.

"Ma'am, let me give you something to calm you down."

"I am perfectly calm," Dana said.

The coast guard spoke up. "The tank is just protocol, Ma'am."

Annie tapped the ambulance man's shoulder. "I'm feeling awfully anxious," she said. "Do you have Valium? Or Adavan?"

Dana continued pacing the ground. A new man had shown up and was being briefed by Reilly. He wore a very starched

Shari Fineman

shirt with striped patches on the sleeves and epaulets. His haircut was definitely military. Dana approached him with her head high and her shoulders back. She imagined herself with Roger at a cocktail party several weeks from now, relaying the fantastic details to a captivated audience, as they explained how they had stood up to the military. She spoke in a slow and determined tone. "Are you planning to shoot my husband down?"

The military officer met her gaze, then shifted his eyes just to the left of her face. "Of course not."

Annie rubbed Dana's back. Her bracelets clinked softly, the musical jangle of twenty-four carat gold. "They would never do something like that," Annie said, "Not with all these witnesses."

Dana turned to address the entire group. "I'm sure he'll be down any minute. We have a reservation tonight for *Le Dang* and I am *certain* he won't want to miss that." Annie raised her eyebrows. "Oh it's fabulous. You're right, no one would miss that."

Dana looked at Annie. "You've been?"

Annie and Don both nodded. "Opening night. The foie gras," he began, and just stopped and shook his head in awe. "Words just don't."

There was a sudden flurry of activity as a group of men ran down the beach toward the water. A murmur ran through the crowd and then the men were back, handing Reilly something shiny. He held his palm out to Dana. "These were just recovered," Reilly said.

In his hand was a set of keys. For a moment Dana said nothing, then, "He threw those down? Did he throw those down?"

"Yes ma'am."

Dana took the keys and gripped them tightly. She spoke softly, her defiance now gone. "They're for the BMW."

Up, Up, and Away

Dana turned then and walked away from the group. She walked several yards to where the sand was hard and crusty on top like a creme brulee, soft and silky underneath when her feet broke the surface. She sat on the sand and hugged her knees to her chest. She looked up into the sky, already knowing what she would see but fiercely hoping she would be wrong. There, in the sky, was Roger, now detached from the kite, soaring higher and farther and becoming a smaller speck each second, leaving his wife while everyone watched.

HP



## Stars

by Fredrick Zydek

Open the windows!  
Let the stars blow in.  
Deep is calling deep.  
I want to unlock the magic  
waiting in their distant lights.

I love watching them bloom  
in the night like celestial  
chrysanthemums and neon  
hydrangeas of the solar sky.  
Some night I watch

until my legs go numb.  
The stars fire up one by one.  
I go among them seeking  
time and remedy. Someday,  
when I'm mad with old age,

just a drying piece of leather  
tightening in the sun,  
they'll find me munching salad  
and drinking celestial teas  
in the darkness between them.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Lory Bedikian** will be receiving her MFA in poetry from the University of Oregon, June of 2002. She has been published in *Drumvoices Revue*, *Timberline*, and *Westwind*.

**Darrin Doyle** is a graduate of the MFA Writing Program at Western Michigan University. His work has appeared in *LitRag*, *The Laurel Review*, *The MacGuffin*, and *The Midwest Poetry Review*. He lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

**Shari Fineman** graduated from Binghamton University in 1987. She received an MFA at Bennington College. She has previously published work in *Colorado Review* and was recently awarded a summer residence at the Saltonstall Artists Colony. She lives in New York City.

**Alison Hoffmann** will receive an MFA in May from the University of Arizona, where she teaches creative writing and composition, and currently serves as a poetry editor for *Sonora Review*. Her poetry has recently been awarded an Academy of American Poets Prize, the Leslie Leeds Prize from *Connecticut Review*, and a U of A Foundation Award. She lives in Tucson with her husband.

**Sara Johnson** works at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts where she hopes to attend the MFA program in Creative Writing starting in Fall 2002. She is originally from North Carolina but is falling in love with New England.

**Katherine McCord** has an MFA in poetry from Warren Wilson College. She has recently been published in or has upcoming work in *Rhino*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Antietam Review*, *Chaminade*, *Parting Gifts*, and *Primavera*. She teaches Creative Writing/Poetry at New Mexico

Institute of Mining and Technology.

**Tony Medina**, who has taught English at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus for over eight years, is the author of ten books, the most recent of which are *DeShawn Days*, *Love to Langston*, *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*, and *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature & Art*. Named by *Writer's Digest* as one of ten poets to watch in the new millennium, Medina's poetry, fiction and essays appear in over 20 anthologies, as well as two CD compilations.

**Paul Michel** was born in Philadelphia, grew up in Ohio, and now lives in Seattle. He is a graduate of Kenyon College and of the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. His stories have appeared in a number of journals and have won several national awards, including this year's Writers' Workshop Fiction Contest and the Frank O'Connor Short Story Competition.

**Luivette Resto** was born in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico, but proudly raised in the Bronx. She currently resides in Northampton, Massachusetts with her cat Subcomandante Marcos and her fiancé, Jose. She is also in the process of finishing her Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

**William P. Robertson** is a freelance writer who has been accepted by such periodicals as *Premonitions*, *The Glasgow Magazine*, *Transversions*, *Bloodsongs*, *The Catbird Seat*, and *Northern Fusion*. *GASP*, an audio book of some of his best known horror verse, was released last summer by Robyl Press. His first novel, *Hayfoot, Strawfoot: The Bucktail Recruits*, co-written with David Rimer, will be released any day by White Mane Publishing Company.

**Bruce Holland Rogers** is the author of *Word Work: Surviving and Thriving as a Writer* from Invisible Cities Press. He lives in Eugene, Oregon. <http://www.shortshortshort.com>

108 Harpur



**Mark Rudolph** lives in New Albany, Indiana. He is a graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop and the editor/publisher of the small press magazine *Full Unit Hookup*. His work, both poetry and fiction, has appeared in many online and print venues.

**Justin Stanchfield's** fiction has appeared in publications ranging from *Boys' Life* to the SFF.Net *Bones of the World* anthology. He lives with his wife, daughter and newborn son on a cattle ranch in south-west Montana.

**Benjamin Vogt** is a Minnesotan pursuing his MFA at The Ohio State University—Columbus where he also teaches writing and literature. He has been published most recently in *The Evansville Review*, *Front Range Review*, and the *Comstock Review*.

**Fredrick Zydek** is the author of five collections of poetry. His work appears in *The Antioch Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and other journals. *Kopechuck: the Buckley Poems* is forthcoming from Winthrop Press later this year. Formerly a professor of creative writing and theology at the University of Nebraska and later at the College of Saint Mary, he is now a gentleman farmer when he isn't writing. Most recently he has accepted the post as editor for Lone Willow Press.

## The Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry

\$500 Prize and Publication in the Winter Issue of *Harpur Palate*

Opens: July 1 Postmark Deadline: October 1

Winter 2001 Winner: Eric Machan Howd for "Cell"

Milton Kessler—poet and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in Binghamton University's creative writing program. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce The Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry.

Poems in any style, form or genre are welcome as long as they are 1) no more than 3 pages and 2) previously unpublished. The entry fee is **\$10/5 poems**. You may send as many poems as you wish, but no more than 5 poems per envelope. Please send checks drawn on a US bank or money orders made out to *Harpur Palate*. **IMPORTANT:** Check **MUST BE** made out to HARPUR PALATE, or we will not be able to process it!

All poems entered will be considered for publication in *Harpur Palate*. All entrants will receive a copy of the issue in which the winning poem appears. Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, an email address you check regularly and poem titles. Entrant's name should **ONLY** appear on the cover letter and should not appear anywhere on the manuscript. Manuscripts cannot be returned, so please only send disposable copies.

Send entries along with a SASE for contest results to:

Milton Kessler Poetry Contest

*Harpur Palate*

Dept. of English

Binghamton University

P. O. Box 6000

Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

110 Bye Bye

Inside the Third Issue  
Fiction and Poetry by:

Lory Bedikian  
Darrin Doyle  
Shari Fineman  
Alison Hoffmann  
Sara Johnson  
Katherine McCord  
Tony Medina

Paul Michel  
Luivette Resto  
William P. Robertson  
Bruce Holland Rogers  
Mark Rudolph  
Justin Stanchfield  
Benjamin Vogt

and Fredrick Zydek

Cover Art by Del Umbers

