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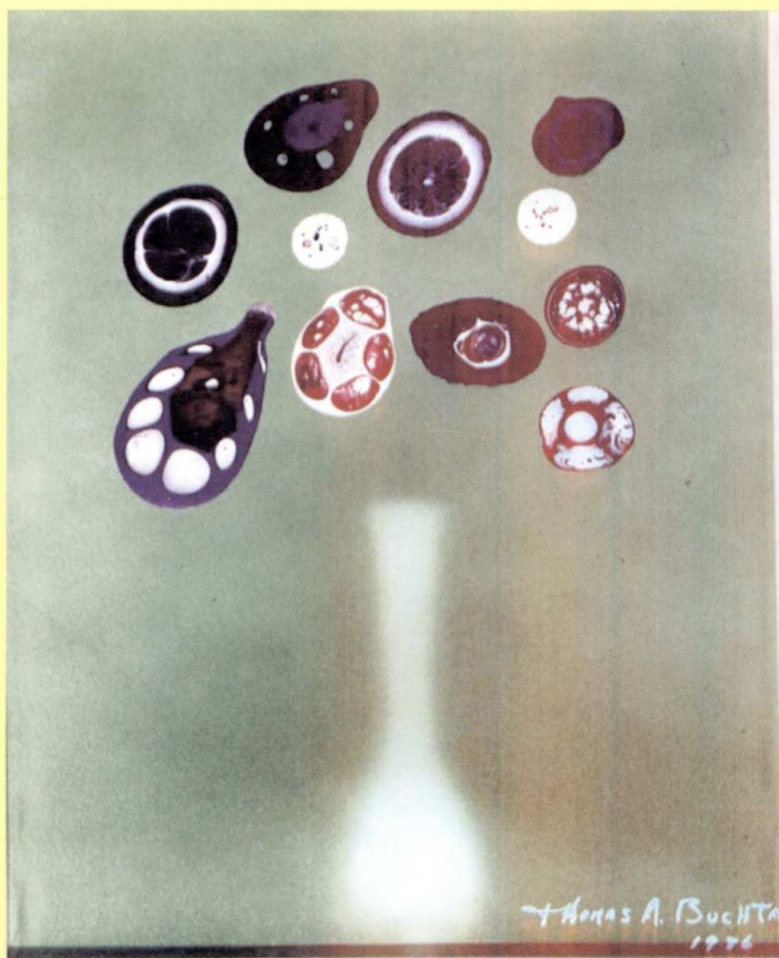
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Harpur Palate, Volume 2 Number 2, Winter 2002

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Harpur Palate



VOLUME 2 NUMBER 2
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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

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Does anyone really read these things?

Editorial intros, I mean?

My gut reaction is “no,” so this gives me the perfect opportunity to lay out my plans to take over the Northern Seaboard. Taking over the world is so cliché. Oh wait, somebody might actually read this after all. Never mind...

Congratulations to Ryan G. Van Cleave, whose “Blue Man Group & the Shiftiness of *Wu Wei*,” won the Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry 2002. Enjoy Taoist philosophy the seedier side of those slick, blue boys. Congratulations are also in order to Rich Kenney and Sommer Sterud who garnered honorable mentions.

We all agree that editorial entries are really boring, right? Well, then, I leave you with the option of choosing your own intro:

(a) an intro giving witty/thoughtful one-liners, such as “the myopia that telescopes bring to relationships” or “the dangers of staying overnight with that someone you thought you knew,” commenting on several pieces found within the issue

or

(b) something that has nothing at all to do with the issue that meditates on the deep stuff that goes on in the world...and stuff

or (!)

(c) a meditative intro on my paralleling the current Binghamton weather (rainy and grey) with this issue’s contents

Really, my plan for Northern Seaboard domination would have been much more interesting.

Anyway, I must again thank all of my minio—I mean, the HP staff for working so hard to put vol. 2.2 together.

Happy reading,
Toiya Kristen Finley
Managing Editor

Notes Toward a Supreme Writers Conference: Writing by Degrees Gains Momentum

This year's Writing by Degrees—still the only all-graduate national creative writing conference—was the most successful conference to date. Fiction writer Lydia Davis and poet B.H. Fairchild headlined the event along with Binghamton University's own extraordinary fiction writer Jaimee Wriston Colbert and Texas Tech professor/poet John Poch. Record attendance to both the keynote readings as well as individual panels attest to WBD's growing popularity. We know it will continue.

Many of the elements that writers and fans of writing have come to expect from our conference remain unchanged. WBD is still a small event with nearly thirty participants and readers and roughly one-hundred people in attendance over the weekend. Our panelists and readers came from all over the country this year, and gave to the conference a wide range of voices and aesthetic sensibilities. There were still the informal gatherings in the evenings; Dana still played the piano in between panels and before the keynote readings (way to go, Dana!), and the panels still offered one of the best glimpses into the state of creative writing at the graduate level. The results were marvelous: well-attended panels, interesting discussions that started in the panel room and carried into the breaks, onto the front steps, and out to local restaurants and bars and coffeehouses.

Oh, another thing changed: the quality of submissions. We've never had such a talent-packed year. But rather than talk glowingly about our participants, I'll stop and let you sample them yourself. If you haven't come to a Writing by Degrees conference, you're missing out. Keep on the lookout for next year's conference. In the meantime, enjoy this selection.

Onward!
Chad Davidson
WBD Coordinator

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Leah Umansky
Maybe One Night

Maybe one night, Van Gogh came home to a pale
woman, naked in his bathtub.
Her red hair all wild and spreading;
wildly spreading along the top lip of the porcelain tub.
Her red hair, a thin stream of silt, skimming clear waters,
skimming her round shoulders; her round breasts.

Maybe one night they spoke French
in buttered tongues, smooth and wet.
Speaking French, in long whispers like twilight.
While she brushed her hair in his
small bathroom mirror. Each gentle stroke
like a ripple, in water. Like a flare in a flame.
Wildly spreading down the curve of her back.
Wildly spreading down those round, milky shoulders. Maybe
one night, it became too much.
And his paint couldn't dry fast enough.
Or his fingers got thick and clumsy,
losing their depth in her texture.
Maybe one night, he lost his mind
when she stopped coming round. Maybe
one night, he had enough.
And just sliced his ear off, with a small flicker
of a pocket knife. A small flit of a star.
Maybe he looked out from his window
and saw her luminosity turning the street corner,
knowing she was only his to paint. Maybe her laughter
spread wildly round his small blue room;
spreading on the walls like light.

Scott Wolven
Controlled Burn

That Friday, I was Bill Allen. I was Bill Allen all that summer. Bill Allen was what caused me to jump every time the phone rang. I was Bill Allen from Glens Falls, New York, and I was taking a summer off from college. I repeated that story as often and as loudly as possible. And each ring of the phone might be someone asking me to prove I was Bill Allen, which was out of the question. Back in December, in the middle of another, different lie, I tried to rob a gas station near Cape May, New Jersey. It was off-season then, nobody around, and I thought it would be easy. It fit the person I'd lied about being. A high-school girl was behind the counter. I wore a ski mask and carried a cheap, semi-automatic pistol. I must have touched the trigger, because the gun went off. Maybe she lived. I really couldn't say. I left fast. My brain was on fire, I hadn't meant to shoot her. But it was too late for that. I took a roll of bills and ended up at Robert's. Robert paid cash at the end of the week, didn't bother with Uncle Sam, didn't ask for references and had plenty of backbreaking work that needed doing, without his son around to help him. Bill Allen was just the man for the job, and every day, I was Bill Allen to the best of my ability. It didn't help my grim yesterdays cast the longest shadows in the Connecticut River Valley. I watched every car, studied every face. Bill Allen never knew a peaceful day. If it hadn't been for the marathon workload Robert demanded, Bill Allen never would have slept. I'd have probably shot Bill Allen myself, if I hadn't been working so hard to keep him going. Some days, he lives on with different names. Allen Williams, Al Wilson, Bill Roberts. Bill Allen probably died in a fire that summer. Leave it at that, with questions about Bill Allen.

It was a bad winter and a worse spring. It was the summer Bill Allen lived and died, the sweltering summer I landed a job

cutting trees for Robert Wilson's scab-logging outfit near Orford, New Hampshire. June boiled itself away into the heavy steam of July. Heat devils rose in waves off the blacktop as timber trucks rolled in. By the end of July, we switched gears and started cutting stove wood. I was cutting eight cords a day while Robert worked the hydraulic splitter. Then we'd deliver it in one of our dump trucks. Some men drove to woodlot to pick up their own. Some of them had white salt marks on their boots and jackets from sweat—some of them smelled like beer. Most of them smelled like gasoline. They didn't say much, just paid for their wood and left with it in their pickup trucks. They were either busy working or busy living their lies, which is work in itself. I knew about that. The hard work crushed one empty beer can day after another, adding to my lifetime pile of empties. Summer moved on, gray in spite of the bright sun.

The phone at the woodlot rang around noon that Friday. I heard it, had been hearing it most of August. Robert's son John was in jail in Concord, awaiting trial for murderous assault, so there were a lot of phone calls. Robert had rigged the phone with two speakers—one bolted to the stovepipe that stuck out of the roof of our headquarters shack and the other attached by some baling wire to the sick elm on the end of the lot. The sudden scream of the phone spiked my heart rate at least twice a day. Echoing in the alleys between the giant piles of long logs. The woodlot sat surrounded by low, field-grass hills and trees in a natural bowl, just off the highway north of Hanover. Robert's house was on the top of the hill, built with its back to the woodlot, facing a farm field. On a still day, the beauty of the Connecticut River drifted the quarter mile over the farm field and quietly framed all the other sounds, the birds, the trees in the breeze. I was never a part of those days.

The phone rang over the diesel roar of my yellow Maxi-lift, the near dead cherry picker we kept around to police up the

Scott Wolven

yard. I was working, sweating in the sun, busy shifting a full twelve-ton load of New Hampshire rock maple to the very back of the drying mountains of timber, heat against next year's winter. The phone rang again, not that anyone wanted to talk to me. Most times, I'd shut the equipment down, run across the yard, slam into the shed, pick tip and get "Robert there?" and they'd hang up when I said no. Or they wouldn't say anything, just hang up when they knew I wasn't Robert. And I could breathe again, because it wasn't someone looking for me. Just locals, as if I couldn't take a wood order. Or it would be the mechanical jail operator, would I please accept a collect call from inmate John Wilson at the Merrimack Correctional Facility. Then I'd say yes and have to go get Robert anyway. Nobody wanted to talk to me, and I didn't want to talk to anyone, so I let it ring. Robert would get it. Or he wouldn't. They know where to find me, he'd say. Working in the same place for thirty years, if they can't find me, what the hell would I want to talk to them for, he'd say. Must be stupid if they can't get hold of me. Robert's voice was a ton of gravel coming off a truck, years of cigarettes mucking up the inside of his barrel chest. There was no sign at the dirt road entrance to the woodlot. It was Robert Wilson's woodlot and everyone knew without asking.

Robert came out of the shed and waved at me to shut the cherry picker down. I flipped a switch, turned the keys back a click and cranked the brake on. I walked over to the shed. Robert had his jean coveralls on. He squinted against the sun, nodded and spoke.

"That was Frank Lord. He wants his wood tomorrow."

Robert took twenty-five dollars out of his pocket and handed it to me. That was our deal—fifty dollars if I had to work on Saturday, twenty-five up front. "You can fix his load today."

I nodded. "What does he get?"

"Two cord, plus half a cord of kiln dried."

Robert had converted an old singlewide trailer into a kiln and most of his customers ordered mixed loads of both air and kiln dried. Kiln dried wood burns hotter than air-dried. Mixing a kiln dried log in with every fire produces more heat, allows the air-dried wood to burn more efficiently. People with woodstoves got as much heat out of two air-dried cords mixed with half a cord of kiln dried as people who burned four straight cords. When a single woodstove is the primary heat source for a whole house, each log has to do its job. Robert charged more for the kiln dried and nobody kicked about the price.

I took my Texaco ball cap off. "If you don't want it mixed, we'll have to take two trucks." Lord's farm was thirty-five miles north and slightly west, just on the Vermont side of the Connecticut River, near Newbury. The river came straight down through the Northeast Kingdom and just past Wells River, it made an oxbow, flowing briefly north in a u-shaped collar, before returning to its southern course. Lord's Farm encompassed all of the oxbow, stretching from Route Five all the way east to the river, which was the Vermont New Hampshire border. It was the most beautiful spot on earth, the most amazing fields and woods and sky that Bill Allen had ever seen. Robert and I had driven past once that summer, on the way to Wells River to pick up a chain saw. Looking out of the truck as we drove up Route Five and seeing Lord's white farm buildings and fields, I thought maybe I could make it through Bill Allen and still have a life, somewhere. On the way back, the view of the green fields sweeping out into the bend of the river made everything stop. I didn't hear the engine of the truck, nor the gears. We floated along the road as my mind took picture after picture, of the farm and the fields and the blue sky with the sun setting. That bend in the river. I came alive for a minute and as the farm slowly passed by, I died again, back into the zombie lie of Bill Allen.

Scott Wolven

Robert was talking to me, shaking his head. "He's got some extra work. Tobe can drive the small rig."

Tobin lived south of the woodlot, in White River Junction and did odd jobs for Robert. Tobin's wife was as big as the house they lived in. He didn't have a phone—if Robert needed him for something, I'd drive down first thing in the morning and pick him up. Just pulled my beat-up Bronco into his doorway and sat there till he came out. Sometimes, a thin, white hand would appear in the dirty window, waving me away. Too drunk to work. He lived in a culvert on the woodlot for about a month when things got tough with his wife. He was skinny as a rail, hadn't showered in about a week, month, year. His teeth were broken brown stumps and his fingers were stained from tobacco. But he could cut and stack firewood faster than two men, and at half the price.

"I'll pick him up in the morning," I said.

"That's okay. I'll get him tonight and let him sleep on the porch," Robert said. "I want to make sure he can work tomorrow." He walked back inside the shed. I fixed Frank Lord's load of wood for the next day and went to the loft of a barn I called home.

Next morning, I was at the woodlot at five-thirty. It was pitch black. Robert was already there, sitting in his pickup truck, drinking coffee and eating a hard-boiled egg. He had the running lights on. I drove slowly over to the open driver's side window.

"Thought you overslept," he said.

I climbed out of the Bronco and got into the big white rig. Tobin got behind the wheel of the small one. Robert was driving the big rig.

The floor of the white rig was taken up with logging chains. The last job Robert had used it for was a semi-commercial haul and he'd left the chains in. He had a whole barn full of them

up by his house. He'd load them in the truck and then get weighed, toss them out at the job and then leave them there. The customer paid the difference. How many people paid for those chains, only God knows. The fuse box was open on the passenger's side, so that any metal that jumped up during the ride could cause a spark or worse. It made for a tense ride.

We started the drive up to North Haverhill on the New Hampshire side of the Connecticut River. It was beautiful. The sun began to shine. The truck could only make thirty-five fully loaded. Tobin was always right behind us, with the flashers on. Robert wrestled the gears up a hill. Then he lit a cigarette and spoke.

"When I was fifteen, I ran away and ended up on Frank Lord's farm." He looked over at me.

"I didn't know that," I answered.

"Frank Lord worked me so hard I thought I was going to drop. But it straightened me out. Best thing that ever happened to me."

"What was wrong with you?" I asked.

"Bad temper," Robert answered. "Bad temper and drinking." We passed a broken down barn.

"At fifteen?"

Robert nodded. "Back then, fifteen was like thirty-five. You had a job, a car—they made you live life back then and if you didn't like it, get the fuck out." He took a drag off his cigarette. He was silent, smoking, for the rest of the ride.

Frank Lord was standing in his driveway as we pulled up. He looked as though we'd just been there yesterday. He had an oxygen mask on and a green tank marked OXYGEN in white letters standing next to him. The fields stretched out behind him all the way to the river. The big white farmhouse behind him needed a coat of paint. There were a couple of barns and buildings. They needed paint too. Parked alongside of the main house was a brand new pickup truck. On top of the main

Scott Wolven

house was a black wrought iron weather vane, the silhouette of a big black stallion. The weather vane pointed north.

"What are you going to do, make something out of yourself or what?" His voice was muffled behind the clear plastic mask. His breath made it fill with mist. He pointed over toward the nearest barn. "Put it over there," he said through the mask.

"Don't mix it together." He and Robert walked slowly toward the main house and sat on the porch in kitchen chairs. Tobin and I unloaded and stacked the wood. Tobin worked fast. His stacks were the straightest I've ever seen. His face seemed frozen in a perpetual grin as we worked in silence. The stacks came out perfectly. We went back over to Robert and Frank on the porch. It was just around noon.

"We've got some other work to do," Frank said. He held out a piece of paper.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Yesterday, in the morning, Judge Harris stopped over here. Unofficially. I've known his family for probably, oh, fifty years." The breeze tossed the tops of the corn. "He told me that the State Police got a tip I was growing marijuana. They were trying to get a warrant to search my house and my fields." He held out the paper. "Harris dropped this off." I read the paper. It was a one-day special permit for a controlled burn.

"What do you want us to do?" I asked.

"Burn it, all of it. Right back to the river. I don't want a single thing left alive." He stared at the perch and then looked straight at Tobin and me. "Just in case there's a little Mexican hay that got mixed in with my corn somehow."

Robert came down off the porch to supervise. He and I rigged up a sprayer with some gas and soaked a good portion of the front field. We left a wide strip in the middle completely dry. Then we drove the tractor through a thin line of trees and there was a huge cornfield that stretched all the way to the river. In the middle of the field, probably six hundred yards

away, was a small white shack. Robert spoke up.

"That's where my first wife and I lived." He looked at it.

I looked over at him. "I never think about you being married."

He nodded. "Well I was, for a while." He pointed his chin at the shack. "People that live in places like that don't very often stay married." He stared at the white shack. "I had a bad temper then."

I nodded. "Should we burn it?"

"Oh yeah." Robert wiped his forehead with a red kerchief. Sweat had run down from his forehead and got into his eyes and on his chin.

"What if there are people in it?" I looked over at the shack.

"Then fuck 'em, let 'em burn. Their name isn't Lord and they don't belong on this property." Robert spit into the field. "Frank said burn it, and that's what we're going to do." He looked across the rows of corn toward the river. "Hotter than Hades." He looked over at me. "You'll never be cold again, after this." He started to drive the tractor toward the white shack with me on the back of his seat. "Here, watch this," he shouted over the tractor.

We pulled up next to the shack. The windows on the one side had been broken, but the chicken wire in the glass remained, rusted from the weather. I heard a faint hum.

"Watch this," Robert said. He took the nozzle from the gas sprayer and aimed a fine stream at the window. I saw some wasps beginning to fly out of the broken window. Robert pointed his chin at them and talked above the noise of the tractor. "Wasps," he said. "They're the worst." Some moved slowly, clinging to the chicken wire. I could see their insect heads, sectioned bodies and stingers. They were getting soaked with gas. "Throw a match," Robert said.

"No," I said. "It'll explode." I pointed at the sprayer and the tank of gas on the tractor.

Scott Wolven

"Gas doesn't burn," Robert said. "It's wet—nothing that's wet can burn. It's the fumes that burn." He took a wood match out of his pocket and struck it on the tractor, then tossed the small flame into the gas spray.

The air groaned and came alive with fire. The wasps were flying full-bore out of the broken window now, right into the wall of flame and through it. Their wings were on fire, still beating, the air currents lifting them up in the heat even as they burned to nothing. A flaming wasp landed on my work shirt and I smacked it into the corn. Now they were all over, burning and flying. Stinging anything they touched. One lost a wing and kept flying, a coin-sized flaming circle into the corn. I watched one come out of the window whole, coated shiny with gas. It flew over the corn, its wings caught fire and kept beating as the body burned to a cinder, the wings still going until they vanished in tiny ash. Robert smacked some wasps off his arm and backed the tractor up, driving over to the river.

We soaked the corn next to the river and then sprayed it a little thinner up on the bank. "The fire will seek the gas," Robert said. "That patch we left in the middle will burn slower than the rest. We'll be all set."

We decided that the best way to do it would be to have Tobin drive the truck around to the New Hampshire side of The Oxbow. Then I'd light the fire from the riverbank too, so that the onrushing flames wouldn't somehow jump the river. Robert drove the tractor back through the field, leaving me standing right on the bend in the river with a box of matches. I could barely see the white shack over the corn. The river ran behind me, softly laughing its way over the rocks. Everything was still and my heart almost stopped panting for the first time in a long time. Bill Allen stood on the riverbank and knew he needed to die. He knew he had to go back to the place he was born and answer for the crime that fathered him. I heard the air horn blow from the big rig, Robert's signal to me that he

Controlled Burn

was clear of the fields. As I lit the corn on fire, Bill Allen decided to throw himself into the blaze.

The flames grew fast and I jumped out into the Connecticut River. It must have been cool, but I didn't feel it. The heat from the fire seemed to reach across The Oxbow and right through the water. I climbed up on the bank on the other side just in time to see Robert's white wedding shack take the flames full force. The walls and roof caught like they were made of rice paper and in the next instant, the shack was gone. The fire was so hot, so intense, I couldn't look at it. I walked farther up on the bank and Tobin was there with the small truck. I got in and we started to drive back toward Vermont. A black cloud grew in the air of the beautiful blue horizon and we watched it for miles. It seemed as if we'd permanently smudged the sky.

When we got back to Lord's farm, Robert was busy fending off several local volunteer fire companies, who had arrived with sirens and lights going. He just kept showing them the permit Judge Harris had given to Frank. Tobin and I stayed in the small truck. At one point, I swear the flames in the field were higher than the farmhouse. Tobin backed the truck up so the windshield wouldn't crack. I finally got out and sat alone in the passenger's side of the big rig. I fell asleep. It was late that night when Robert climbed in to drive and slammed his door, bringing me straight up in my seat. The fields were still burning and all I could smell was smoke. We drove slowly back to the woodlot and I slept there in my Bronco. The next day—Sunday—I was going to drive all day and turn myself in. Bill Allen was dead.

The screaming echo of the phone over the woodlot woke me. I saw Robert go into the headquarters shack to answer it. He came back out shortly, still in his coveralls, and walked over to the Bronco. I got out. He handed me a Styrofoam cup of coffee and pointed his chin at the Bronco.

"Comfy in there last night?" he asked. I nodded and he

Scott Wolven

went on. "That was John on the phone. He's going to plead out tomorrow and take two years." Robert shook his head. "Anyway, you've got tomorrow off. I'm going up to Concord to be at the sentencing." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He handed it to me.

"What's this for?" I said.

Robert narrowed his eyes and looked at me. "Do you need it or not?" His voice was the hardest love I'd ever felt. I nodded. He turned around and started walking back to the shed. I watched him close the door. I climbed back in the Bronco and headed out onto the highway. I drove north, and crossed over into Vermont. There was still a huge black cloud in the sky over The Oxbow. I drove up Route Five and looked out over the burnt fields, still smoldering, scorched dead. Lord's farm looked gray from the smoke. I drove up into the Northeast Kingdom. I never did find the courage to turn myself in and things got worse. I spent the winter at a logging camp in Quebec.

I called once, when I hit a jam out in North Dakota. I called from a phone booth outside a diner. I recognized John's voice the second he spoke. I hung up. Later, much later, in another life, with another name, we were driving and someone handed me a road atlas. I flipped through it and found Vermont and New Hampshire were together on the same page. I started tracing their shared border, the Connecticut River, north toward Canada. I dropped the atlas when my finger reached The Oxbow. For just that split second, right on the tip of my finger, the surface of the map was scorching hot. I heard the roar of the fire, the little white house burning. The air rushing to be eaten by the flames. I smelled the gasoline. Riding across the top of the fire on a black horse was Bill Allen. Three dark shapes followed swiftly after him, the burning wasps in their long black hair, chasing him. Catching him and

dragging him down into the fire, screaming.

Years later, on the security ward at Western State Hospital near Tacoma, I saw a man in a straightjacket, strapped to a gurney. I walked over to him and spoke.

"I didn't know they used straight jackets anymore."

He could barely move his head. "Well, they do." The smell of ether was everywhere. He was quiet as a white-jacketed doctor walked by. "Say, Mac, scratch my shoulder, will you?"

I slowly reached down and began scratching the outside of the thick canvas that bound him. Solid steel mesh covered the ward windows.

"Harder," he said. "I can barely feel it." He looked up at me. "I think they're trying to save on the heat. Aren't you cold?" I shook my head. "I'm cold all the time," he said.

I dug my nails into the canvas on his right shoulder. "My name is John Wilson," I said.

He looked at me, his eyes wide. "That's my name," he said softly.

I stopped scratching the straightjacket. "What's your middle name?" I asked.

He shook his head slightly and closed his eyes. "Same as yours," he said. He shivered. It was cold. But my paper gown was soaked with dry sweat and my face was hot. I could smell smoke.

HP

Knute Skinner
A Suitable Guest

“What’s wrong with them?” I asked.

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong with them,” he answered,
lifting his cup.

“But you’ve given them all to me,” I said,
setting down my fork.

“Why aren’t you having any?”

He emptied his cup, hot as it was,
and he rose from the table.

The morning sun blazed on the deck,
visible through the French doors across the room,
and although the kitchen was cool enough,
I fanned my throat with my collar.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, walking to the door
and letting out his cat,

“I usually just drink coffee in the morning.”

He returned to the table and sat down.

“Don’t you like them?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, they’re delicious,” I said,
“but I’ve never had them before for breakfast.”

I took another small bite.

“Wherever did you find them?” I asked.

At that he lifted his chin and smiled,
and I noticed his crows-feet.

“Oh, I’ll never tell,” he said, laughing,

“just as I won’t tell my mother
where I found you.”

He laughed again and a surge of sweet fluid
coursed through my veins,
and I thought of his laughter the night before
as he handled my body. I took another small bite.

“Eat them up, eat them up, they’re good for you,” he said,
and he jumped to his feet and crossed the room.
“I don’t really care about them myself,” he said
letting his cat back in,
“but I keep them for suitable guests.”

“Our tastes are quite different then,” I said.
“It’s a mystery why anyone last night
would take us for twins.”

WINNER
MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY

Ryan G. Van Cleave
Blue Man Group & the Shiftiness of *Wu Wei*

I'm trying to decide if they don't speak because no one can figure out
just what the hell blue fellows with banana-ooze spray-plugs
in their chest might have to talk about or whether it's a commentary
on the vatic moments of our lives, how 93.6% of the words we
speak

are hollow as the PVC pipe marimba they're jamming bad 80s tunes on.

My wife is starting to boogie under her plastic raincoat, jiving along
with little funky chicken hand moves, and most of the audience is, too,
really digging this blue trio, and I catch myself firing up the Who's
Your Daddy Arm Swing and Hip Shake, which really isn't about

the experience of fatherhood, but more along the lines
of "Daddy-o" or "Sugardaddy," where the paternal character of the word
gives way to pseudo-sexual Electra-complex overtones. Suddenly,
I'm struck with a zzzzzzzZZZZAAAPPP of existential angst as I realize
that the dancer both ASKS and ANSWERS the same question:
"Who's your Daddy? . . . I am your Daddy," and I can feel my chest
tightening, so I shut my eyes and hunker into my clear rainsuit as
the dingbat preschool-teacher-looking stranger woman next to me (prissy,
bad shoes, white daisy dress) says *Do you think they're blue ALL over?*

And now I'm thinking about clogged pores and acne scars, blue rubber
gloves that choke oxygen out of your skin, how there's three Blue
Man Group teams in Chicago and they're completely interchangeable
because as long as there's three idiots in blue facepaint and jumpsuits
on stage, they'll look enough like the guys in the Pentium III commercials
to please the crowd. And as the giant toilet paper streamers descend
upon us at the end of the show, I'm still stuck on the idea of answering/
asking, the oxymoronic quality of life, the very same beachglass-
in-the-soles-of-your-feet unignorability that steered me into philosophy

as an undergraduate, where I learned about *wu wei* and the *Tao Te
Ching* which mutually define each other, this the lesson from my

philosophy of religion professor, Dr. Kissel, whose glass eye was the color of a chestnut while the other was, of course, Blue Man Group blue. Dr. Kissel once said *wu wei is both nothing and doing, it's action-not-action* and I remember thinking wow, zero-to-infinity in three words. One time in an elevator at Reavis Hall, home of the philosophy, sociology, American studies, economics, linguistics, and ethnic literature folks, Dr. Kissel, alone

in the elevator with me, punched the STOP button. Cheesy bells went off and he gave me a Chesire grin, leaned close, and said *I'll tell you what philosophy is, it's a hypodermic of sea monkeys right in your skull.*

A short time later, I was an English major, where I thought of myself in *wu wei* terms, both as “valiant warrior” and “helpless victim.”

A few weeks later, during an Internet investigation into Shakespeare's Use of the Semicolon as Repressed Adulterous Guilt,

I typed *wu wei* into a search engine and found www.wuwei.com, which gave me this message “I'm toast and I am not functioning anymore.

I'm frozen and I can't move. I love all of you.” When Blue Man Group's neon glow-in-the-dark skeleton band kicks into the exit number, a rock-n-roll heavy-bass riff that has the red Briar Theater seats beneath us shaking, I follow my wife out in a surge of bodies past the tube-choked walls of the entryway and then into the chill Chicago evening, where starlight has just began to burst to life upon a blue evening sky. My wife grabs my hand, says, *Well, what'cha think about the show? Did you like it?* I think of silly Twinkie skits and ho-hum 80s ripoffs as well as how her folks dropped fifty bucks a ticket;

I feel the downward yank of gravity in my gut increasing as I quickly say *Yes-not-yes*, and my wife, no Taoist guru, knows exactly what I mean.

Kevin Frazier
Starlight

Sometimes he felt that he was losing her to the sky.

Julia bought the telescope on a whim. They were driving through Oak Cliff on a Thursday morning. Curt, an unemployed immunologist, had just finished a job interview at one of the Oak Cliff health clinics. He held the steering wheel silently and pretended not to be depressed.

They passed a camera shop with a row of telescopes in the display window.

"Let's pull over," Julia said. "I want to have a look."

Inside the shop she inspected the telescopes. Curt hung back at the door, his hands in his pockets. He kept thinking of the interview. Kept seeing the clinic's chief supervisor, the bored expression on her face, the glaze in her eyes as he'd answered her questions. Humiliating.

After a few minutes he joined Julia at the display window. He was ready to sulk openly now, and was anxious to be alone with her so he could start telling her how bad he felt about the interview.

"Since when are you interested in stargazing?" he asked.

Her eyes were wide, mesmerized by one of the telescope's deep black lenses. With a dim pang of resentment Curt realized that this was the way her eyes had looked the first time he'd kissed her, four years ago.

"I don't know," she said. She hadn't noticed yet how depressed he was. "It just came to me."

Then she asked the owner how much the largest of the telescopes cost. He said four hundred.

"Fine," Julia said. "We'll take it."

Curt was shocked at the price but was in no position to argue. For the past few months, since he'd been laid off from

his post at the Las Colinas Health Center, Julia had been supporting both of them. All of the money in their savings account—three thousand dollars—was hers, from the bonus she'd received in March.

So they bought the telescope and the owner helped them load it in their car. He also gave them several star charts and a general brochure on tracking deep-sky objects in space.



They drove to Julia's office in downtown Dallas. She worked as a designer at a small greeting card company. Today she had asked for the morning off so she could take Curt to the interview: his morale was always better when he knew she was near.

After dropping her at the office, Curt went home. In the apartment he read through the want ads. There were no new immunology positions. Then the mail came. It brought him two polite rejections from clinics in Highland Park.



At seven o'clock he picked Julia up from work.

As soon as they entered the apartment she unpacked the telescope and assembled it. It hurt Curt's feelings that she continued to be oblivious to his gloom. Usually she was aware of the slightest shifts in his moods and did her best to comfort him.

Once she had finished putting the telescope together, she carried it to the patio. They lived on the top floor of the building, so the view to the sky was unobstructed.

The stars were out. They were big. Texas stars had a style all their own. Many of them showed up as sharp lights, steady and full and neatly rounded.

Kevin Frazier

Julia squinted through the finder and adjusted the telescope till she located Saturn. "I've got it," she said. "Look at this."

She took Curt's arm, pulled him from his chair. He looked through the telescope's eyepiece. The view, he thought, was cramped. It was like having your vision stuffed into a tiny hole. At first he couldn't see anything at all.

Then he shifted his angle slightly. He discovered a small fragile circle of darkness with a fuzzy glow at the center.

Leaning beside him, Julia turned the focuser knobs. The fuzzy light sharpened. It hardened into a ball, featureless, gray. A slender white line sliced the ball through the middle.

"There," Curt said. "It's in focus now."

"Can you make out the rings?" Julia asked.

"I think so."

He blinked. The contours of his eye were somehow silhouetted in the focuser, and he could see the blink as it happened. He could see the outline of his eyelids, the alien antennae of his lashes closing together and snapping shut on Saturn.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Julia said. "Let me look again."

He stepped aside. Julia looked at Saturn for five or six minutes. Curt was astonished. He had no idea how she could watch the same image for so long without a break.

Then she located Jupiter. And Mars. And Uranus. At around eleven, when Curt said he was going to bed, she had just started to search for the Horsehead Nebula.

It took Curt a long time to fall asleep. He wanted Julia to come to the bedroom and finally ask him if he was upset about something. But she never did.



Her sudden interest in astronomy made no sense to Curt.

In all the years he'd known her, Julia had never taken up a private hobby. She had never collected stamps, never solved

crossword puzzles, never even played solitaire. Astronomy lacked the social element that had always seemed essential to holding her attention. If she'd met someone who had encouraged her to join an astronomy club or who looked at stars along with a group of her friends, her decision to buy the telescope would have been less surprising. As it was, though, the decision mystified Curt.

He expected her fixation on the telescope to be brief. He was sure she would tire of it after a week or two, put it away in the closet, leave it there for good.

But she used the telescope constantly and each week she was more devoted to it than she'd been the week before.

When she came home from the office she would immediately change into the old blouse that she liked to wear for stargazing. Sitting at the dinner table she would read the latest issue of *Sky & Telescope* or one of the half-dozen astronomy books she'd checked out from the library.

Then between eight-thirty and nine she would go out on the patio and start watching the sky. Curt would accompany her, at least for a little while, and she would find different deep-sky objects and urge him to admire them with her.

Taking out her sketchpad, she would draw the objects quickly and deftly. She used her protractor to form a circular frame and then sketched the image with her smudge stick and ebony pencil. Outside the circle she wrote the object's technical information: its magnitude, its size, its Messier or NGC designations, the general air stability and star clarity.

Her eyesight amazed Curt. He would look through the telescope and find only a vague smear where a galaxy or nebula was supposed to be. Then he would study Julia's sketch, and when he returned to the eyepiece he would now recognize the same details that she'd caught in her drawing.

Guided by the sketches, he would view the core of stars in a globular cluster and the complex patterning of those stars as

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they circled the cluster's rim. He discovered the elongated bars of spiral galaxies, the tails of comets, the moon's soft-rimmed craters on the crescent of the Jura Mountains. With Julia's help, he began to see things he would never have seen on his own.



When she showed him the Ring Nebula—a bite taken out of space, a disturbing flaw in the star field—he stepped back from the telescope and said:

“It bothers me.”

“Why?” Julia asked.

“I don't know,” he said. “It just does.”

The universe exasperated him. It was so obnoxiously huge, so pointlessly inhuman. Black holes and pulsars had nothing to do with him. Neither did Jupiter's moons. Or the asteroid belt at the edge of the solar system. Or the white dwarfs and red giants and interstellar dust that had somehow taken hold of Julia's imagination. Compared to his worries about finding a job and creating a satisfying future, compared to the feel of Julia's face in his hands and the smell of the apartment building's lawn after it had been mowed, the universe seemed to him infinitely abstract and irrelevant. It was, frankly, an inconvenience, pressing him for an attention that could never be more than a waste of his time.

Yet he kept most of these feelings to himself. He didn't think that he had the right or the authority to criticize Julia as long as he was out of work. He was on new and disturbing ground with her. And since her preoccupation with astronomy was a side of her that he didn't understand, it was also a side of her that unnerved him.



About a month after Julia had brought the telescope home Curt was offered a position at a private health clinic in Irving.

He was ecstatic. This, he felt, would change everything. He took Julia out to dinner, and she didn't touch the telescope all weekend.

On Monday night she said she wanted to sell the telescope back to the camera shop.

"Are you sure?" Curt asked.

"I'm positive," she said. "I'm sick of it."

"This is kind of sudden, isn't it?"

"Not really." They were at the dinner table, and Julia was sketching something on her napkin. "Actually, it's been frustrating me for a long time."

"You seemed so happy with it," Curt said. "It's hard to believe you want to get rid of it."

"You're not upset, are you?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Because even with a trade-in, the new telescope's going to be pretty expensive."

"You want a new one?"

She had finished the sketch on the napkin. It was a binary star system. "I *need* a new one," she said. "The one we've got now is totally inadequate for what I want to see. I have to move on to the next level."

Cautiously, Curt said, "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"But right now is the perfect time for it. With both of us working, we wouldn't even need to use any of our savings to buy it."

Curt tapped into his fresh supply of confidence—he had recaptured his role as a doctor, protector of the sick—and said: "I'm not sure I want a telescope in the apartment anymore."

"It hasn't been so terrible, has it?" she asked. Her tone was cheerful. She wasn't looking for a fight.

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“No,” Curt said, “it hasn’t been so terrible, I guess.”

Julia rose from the table, took her plate to the kitchen sink, went out on the patio. Hunched over the telescope, she studied Mars with quiet satisfaction.



An hour later a phone call came from the president of the Olive Theater Company. Julia was one of the theater company’s board members: it was a small nonprofit organization that put on low-budget musicals.

Curt took the call. The president asked if Julia was coming to the meeting tonight.

“I’m sure she is,” Curt said.

“Good.” The president was abrupt, almost rude. “She’s missed the last two meetings, so I want to be certain she’s not going to miss this one too.”

Curt was surprised. It was unusual for Julia to miss a meeting for any but the best of reasons. He went to the patio and told her that the president wanted to talk to her.

“Could you tell her I’m not in?” she asked, adjusting the telescope’s angle.

“There’s a meeting tonight,” Curt said. “Aren’t you going?”

She kept her face bent to the lens. “No,” she said. “I’m really not in the mood for it.”



The next evening, Curt had to stay late at the clinic for a special staff dinner. It was past ten before he made his way back to the apartment.

Julia was on the patio. She was looking through a new telescope, a bulky thick cylinder on a complicated multi-tiered tripod.

Curt decided to stay calm. “You went ahead and bought it,” he said.

She grinned at him as if she were a naughty child. “Couldn’t resist.”

“How much was it?” he asked.

Her grin shifted—turned detached, bemused. “Twenty-eight-ninety-five.”

“You paid three thousand for this?”

She slid her palm along the smooth metal cylinder. “I know it’s a lot,” she said, “but it’s worth it. It’s an LX200 Schmidt-Cassegrain. It has Meade three-point-three software with high precision pointing. Plus it has more than sixty-four thousand deep-sky objects stored in its memory. And I only had to put five hundred down to buy it. Our payments are less than seventy-five a month. Pretty good deal, don’t you think?”

He touched the back of her neck. This was his favorite way of touching her, his fingers stroking the nape and working down towards her shoulders. But this time it felt strange to brush her hair back, to reach in and handle her cool skin. Even her familiarity felt strange: he couldn’t possibly know this woman as well as he thought he did.

“Will you go someplace with me for a couple of hours?” she asked.

“Where?”

“Away from the city.”

“Why?”

“The farther we are from the city lights,” she said, “the better the telescope can pick up the stars.”



So they got in her car and took the telescope with them out on the freeway. They drove towards the airport, across the long flat fields near Las Colinas.

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In one of the fields they pulled over and parked. Then they walked across the dry grass and parched dirt. Crickets made layer after layer of noise in the night.

Curt carried the telescope on his shoulder. They went over a small hill and Julia paused at its crest and said this would be a good place to stop.

The sky was cloudless and huge. The moon was nearly full. Its dark rings and blotches tempered its brightness.

"Be honest with me," Julia said. "You aren't too happy about my stargazing, are you?"

Confronted this way, Curt backed off. "It's not that I'm unhappy. It's more that I don't understand it. I don't see why all of a sudden you care about it so much."

Julia had brought a pair of folding lawn-chairs with her. She opened them and placed them beside the telescope. "You don't think the sky is fascinating?" she asked.

"Not so fascinating that I'd enjoy staring at it for hours every night."

Julia took a seat in one of the chairs. Curt lowered himself into the other one.

"Do me a favor," she said. "Put your head back and look at the stars."

Curt moved around in the chair, settled his neck against the headrest.

"Okay," Julia said. "Now pretend there's nothing but stars all around you."

He looked up. As long as he stared straight ahead he couldn't see Julia or the atmospheric haze or the horizon line.

The stars didn't twinkle. Their light was even and calm. Some of them were red, some blue, some green. But the particular tint of each star was delicate, weak. Its color might disappear the moment he squinted or blinked, and he would be left with nothing but the basic pinpoint of light.

"Space," Julia said, "is a time machine. When you look at

the stars, you're literally looking into the past." She pointed towards the low southern end of the sky. "You see Scorpius?"

The only constellation that Curt could ever recognize was the Big Dipper, but he was embarrassed to admit this. "Sure," he said.

"Each one of the stars in Scorpius burns at its own point in time. Some of the stars are maybe ten thousand light-years away. So we're seeing ten thousand years into the past when we look at them. And right next to them, another star might be showing us images from two or three million years ago. Every star is a different message from a different part of history."

Curt swatted a mosquito on his arm. Julia stared up into space. Her long angular cheeks were starkly shadowed, lovely. She always seemed to be most attractive when he felt least secure about their relationship.

But he resisted the practiced sincerity of her voice, the gentle insistence that he agree with her. "I know what you mean," he said, "but it's not really something I can help. I don't like the way space feels." He shrugged. "Space is sort of dead, isn't it? It's all these moons and comets and collapsing galaxies, and they're impossibly big and far away, and I don't see how I'm supposed to care about them."

He fidgeted uncomfortably in the chair. With every minute, without any effort on his part, he saw more of the stars in the sky, greater depths in the star field. A mild dizziness came over him, a hint of nausea.

"You're looking at it all wrong," Julia said.

"There's a right way to look at it?"

"There's a less negative way to look at it."

"I'm not being negative," Curt said.

"You're not being very constructive."

"You can't really be constructive about something like an

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interstellar dust cloud.”

“Have you ever tried?” Julia asked.

“It’s *dust*. It’s not even alive. And it’s creepy.”

“What’s creepy about it?”

“Everything in space is creepy,” Curt said.

“Why?”

“It just is,” he said. “There’s nothing personal in space. All the important things happen down here. Between people. Between us, for instance.”

“But that’s the point,” she said. “We’re the ones who make space personal.”

Curt continued to look up at the stars, continued to feel the queasiness unwinding inside of him.

“The universe can’t see itself,” Julia said. “A pulsar doesn’t know it’s a pulsar. It doesn’t know why it is what it is. And it doesn’t know how it relates to the stars around it or to dark matter or galactic cores or anything else.”

Another mosquito hovered into Curt’s view. Its tiny threatening hum instantly brought him back down from the sky, back down from the unsettling sensation of starting to drift through the stars.

The mosquito zigzagged away from him and landed on Julia’s neck. She killed it with a quick reflexive slap. “Don’t you see, Curt? Most of the universe doesn’t even notice itself. That might be why all of us are so important. It might be our duty—it might be the duty of all life in the universe—to create the universe’s sense of itself. Without us, the universe has no mind, no personality, no spirit. We’re here to give the universe its soul.”

Curt laughed. “Julia, *please*.”

Too late he saw how deeply he had offended her. She frowned, looked away from him. “Should we go back to the car?” she asked.

“We haven’t even tried out the new telescope,” Curt said.

“That’s okay. I’m ready to go.”

They picked up the telescope and the chairs. Then they trudged across the field, stepped into the car, drove to the apartment. They barely spoke to each other on the way home.



That was the last time Julia tried to involve him in her stargazing.

She wasn’t cold to him, and they didn’t fight. She still massaged his feet in the mornings. She still followed the daily ups and downs of his work. She still said that she loved him.

But she devoted most of her time to the telescope. The pattern turned rigid, obsessive. She stayed outside sketching and gazing until midnight or later almost every night. If the weather was bad, she read her astronomy magazines, flipped through her sketchbook, plotted graphs of celestial movements.

Then Curt’s own problems began to distract him. At the clinic the head of the immunology department, Terence Mulligan, took a dangerous dislike to him. Mulligan was a petty bureaucrat, and Curt angered him at a staff meeting by suggesting that the patient registration system was needlessly strict. The rumor spread that Mulligan was furious with Curt and planned to punish him somehow.

In bed, when Julia was trying to fall asleep, Curt said that it was only a matter of time before he made a mistake that Mulligan could exploit.

Julia yawned. “Don’t worry,” she said. “It’ll be fine.”

“I can’t help it,” he said. “I’m nervous about him.”

Drowsily, Julia turned on her side, away from him. “It’ll be fine,” she repeated. “You’ll see.”

Then she hugged her pillow and breathed slowly and evenly as if she’d fallen asleep.



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As the months went on, she mastered celestial photography and mapped most of the visible surface of the moon with her telescope's CCD imaging system.

She completely stopped attending the Olive Theater meetings—stopped attending the meetings of any groups or organizations at all. She lost touch with her friends, never wanted to go out for dinner, never wanted to go dancing, never wanted to invite anyone to the apartment.

It might be just a phase for her, Curt thought. If so, possibly the smartest way to handle it was to let it run its course and not make a big deal out of it.



In the spring she built a new folded-refractor telescope on the patio. It was bizarrely angular: a wide plywood support frame holding a trapezoid scope with a multi-faceted prism box.

The night she finished building it, Curt said they should go somewhere to celebrate.

"It's a sweet idea," Julia said, "but I'd rather stay home."

Curt touched the rectangular opening of the telescope's lens, rubbed the smooth grain of the wood. The telescope was taller than he was, and its broad base took up twice as much room as the LX200.

He looked at Julia, and suddenly it struck him as senseless and intolerable that she could be more interested in this weird combination of plywood and glass than she was in him.

"Listen," he said, "can you explain something to me?" He stepped along the edge of the patio. The night was warm and clear overhead. "I really don't get why these telescopes are so important to you."

Julia lifted her head from the prism box. She looked at him with the first sign of curiosity that she had shown in weeks.

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"I've always wanted something of my own," she said. "Something that's mine and no one else's. Now I've found it."

She gathered up her hair from both sides of her hollowed cheeks. Nimble she twisted the hair into a ponytail. In the dry summer breeze a few small beads of sweat stood out on her temples.

"And it's more than that." For a moment she couldn't find the words, as if it were one of those thoughts so obvious and so private that she had never considered how to describe it to anyone. "I want to be out there. In space. I want to be out there with nothing closing me off or shutting me in. I want to take it in, all of it—all of it everywhere at the same time. Do you understand?"

She kept looking at him with a mixture of wariness and expectation, waiting for him to take the next step and encourage her to go on. It was, he saw, up to him now. All she needed was for him to ask her to keep talking.

But he couldn't do it. He didn't see why it was his responsibility to understand her when she wasn't taking any responsibility to understand him—when she didn't even care about Mulligan's plans to ruin his career.

With a small tight smile Julia turned away and peered through the prism box again.



A week later, when Curt came home from work, he noticed that the plywood telescope and the LX200 were no longer on the patio. Julia's Chevy wasn't in the parking lot and he assumed that she must have taken the telescopes with her to a field somewhere.

Then he checked her closet in the bedroom. It was empty. The wire hangers were bare and clicked together when he ran his hands across them.

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He went through the dresser drawers, the cabinets, the other rooms in the apartment. All of her clothes were missing, along with her two best suitcases, her camera, most of her prints and sketches.

He walked down the hall. On either side of him he passed pictures of constellations and comets and various phases of the moon.

In the living room he stepped over a stack of *Sky & Telescope* magazines and brushed them with his heel. The stack fell to the carpet and spilled out a roughly staggered row of eclipses and asteroids, novas and galaxies, gas clouds and stars.



He went down to the parking lot, started his car, pulled away from the building. Driving slowly and calmly, he took Belt Line out towards the fields where Julia liked to do her stargazing. If there was any chance she wanted to be found—if she hadn't left him for good—this was where she would be waiting for him.

There was no moon tonight. Long stretches of empty land rolled off into the darkness. Each field merged gently into the next.

At a small frontage road he turned left. The road split away from Belt Line and wound through a series of small hills.

Eventually the road became gravelly, rough. His car shuddered across rocks and potholes.

He parked on a stretch of gravel shoulder that looked familiar to him. Then he walked out into the field.

Most of the grass had died. The landscape was a sweep of dirt and crumbled cement blocks and the tread-tracks left by heavy construction equipment.

He looked up at the sky as he walked. The stars were all around him. They filled the night.

The darkness of the sky deepened. The darkness was so rich that it grew while he looked at it. New stars surfaced gracefully from the depths, but the depths themselves never ended, only carried him forward.

He drifted across the ground, into the starlight. His body felt airy, almost weightless.

The night drew him in. The sky engulfed him. The stars were above him, below him, suspended about him in every direction. He floated, lost in the disorientation—the madness, really—of every star’s relationship to every other star.

Vertigo. The dizziness of gliding through space.

In his mind a fleck of interstellar quartz, no larger than a dime, caught and reflected the image of a quasar, a frozen-methane moon, another fleck of quartz.

Then a globular cluster—hundreds of suns bound to each other by gravity—burned ahead of him in stippled whites and blues. Dust shells and flare stars added subtle streaks of shade, sharper stabs of light.

Then a pulsar preyed on its companion star, absorbed the star through the incandescent stream of hydrogen pulled in by the pulsar’s spin. The star was deformed, and the side facing the pulsar bulged into the stream, into the particle wind’s ferocious suction.

And then beyond. Through the spiral arms of a whirlpool galaxy flooded with brightness. Through the galaxy’s central disk. Through the bursts of star formations and explosions and magnetic fluxes. Through the light sculpted in arcs and streamers, loops and filaments.

And out again. Into the vacuum, a thousand light-years of emptiness. And then across a thousand more light-years of dust veils, dark matter, hot stellar winds.

Billows of glowing gases twisted through the dust grains. Nebulae. Brilliant young stars set the clouds of gas on fire. The clouds flamed with the fluorescence and translucence of giant

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jellyfish, ghostly hybrids of light and shade. Throughout the gases' burning pinks and reds, the vast dust veils mirrored the starlight in cool splashes of blue. Color wrapped around color, cold around heat.

Galaxies gathered about galaxies, hundreds of them, thousands, too many to count. The galaxies tilted at odd angles to each other. Their radiant disks and spirals were scattered haphazardly, their groupings thicker in some places, thinner in others.

All around the galaxies, arcs of light streaked and played. The arcs were background galaxies, distorted by the gravitational effects of the dust and gas and other dark matter distributed across the universe. In the deflection of the arcs a galaxy could be itself or the twinned image of itself. A single galaxy could appear over and over again in varied elongations and sizes millions of light-years apart.

Beyond the galaxies were different textures, different shapes. But they were baffling, obscure, indecipherable in the darkness. Nothing was distinct. Nothing could be heard. Endless silence. Endless distance. An endless starless chill.

HP

HONORABLE MENTION
MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY

Sommer Sterud
Amputation Dream

"If all I am is a body, I'm up a shit creek."

-Chana Bloch

My stump-stilt legs made me a misfit
ballerina, as though I walked
on my toes—not sensible
footwear for fighting
this phantom. Brother
said not to worry:
It could be worse. But

never better. I felt
a slow
throbbing that thumped
in time
with my pulse. Stumbling
over
furniture, I wobbled—
hula girl
on the dashboard—from one
side to
the other, never falling, but feeling
the phantom pain: memory made physical
the way the body copes

with loss just like the millions
of hands that reach for

Sommer Sterud

the deflated side of the bed, and
despite the coolness
that is *empty*, the hands still feel
warmth
in the curve of the mattress
like hot breath
blown in your hands.

Walking home, I passed construction workers.
Trying to be the clever, maybe
even scary, clown
in Mardi Gras parades, hovering
above the crowd, I
was more the Amazing Lady
with a beard
who'd never shake her ass

in this lifetime, never
perform a true hula dance
while showing off
a painful tattooed ankle—never
that pain. Only this haunting
phantom transformed,
finally,

into a steel safe (see *vault* or *secret*,
see *crippled*, *loss*, or *suffocation*, see
fear) that fell and
pounded me
into the ground,
where I remain
girl stuck
to dashboard—who cannot

42 Harpur

Amputation Dream

even dash; girl who can only
gyrate hips
and swish
her straw skirt.

Sheree Renée Thomas
Black River Ritual

She fought the river all her life.
It cracked her walls, dug in its tongue
split them apart, swallowed her land whole.

She rebuilt them stronger, thicker
but it bit her ramparts at their base
spat lime-aged bricks as far as Somerville.

She dug deeper, lined up fresh river stones
poured concrete crossed with bone and shell.
Now she sits on her porch
with watchful eyes, waiting.

I was ten years old when she carried me
to the mouth of the river
her hand—knotty fingers and a ring of gold—
hard on my arm, my shoulder.
It is always like this with families—
everyone involved in sacrifice.

She held me there
down past where the water turned
from brown to black to green
down through the rows of weathered weeds
the low branches of murdered trees
then up, wringing me back
one, two, three until I gasp
in the name of the father
until I am lost
in the name of the holy

found in this black river ritual
drowned then reborn in the lushness
of black river women.

Sheree Renée Thomas

EXCERPT FROM BONECARVER: The Bonecarver's Daughter

On the night they were going to kill her, Dusa Dayan left her damp and shuttered house at a quarter past seven to wait and see the fireball fall from the sky. She wanted to see the sun make its last evening descent before the preacher came blocking the air with his prayers, toting his Scriptures and his sorrow. She'd dreamed she was pushing through headwaters, slick thighs straining, her head thrust into the last embers of sunset and blueblack waters, but the waters were so deep when she awoke she felt completely drenched in them.

"That child was always dreaming up some kind of flood and trouble," Willie J. Kimbro, her grandmother, told me some seventeen years later, remembering every shade and shadow that darkened that somber Sunday. "The day before, she'd dreamed that she was sitting up under them three elm trees when the river come busting up through her navel." I wanted to ask her what elm trees—Willie J. was pointing at a clearing, and there were none sheltering her airless yard, nothing but a twisted bit of willow not fit to switch or fan with and that old stump she sat on. But Willie J. cut her eyes at me and sweating as I was in that linen suit, the beads rolling round the nape of my neck, I didn't dare speak, for fear I might not like her answer. Now, I'd been told by some folk north on the island that Willie J. kept to herself and stayed out of most folk business, but she was known round these parts for not taking kindly to criticism, so I kept my tongue resting firmly behind my teeth—'cause everybody know don't no conjurer like contrary.

I watched her as she sat on a painted tree stump, whittling what looked like some kind of bone whistle. Her knotted hands flew across the petrified piece in swift, graceful motions. It was hard to imagine such skill in a woman folk said was more than a

century old, but the grooves in her skin, the deep lines marking her neck and jaw and them high cheekbones seemed to tell a story one hundred years couldn't begin to hold.

When they didn't come for her whistles, said to call up only the plumpest croakers in the creek, or her baskets woven from sweetgrass, braided in ancient patterns designed to prevent the basket from ever going empty, then they came for her visions, and them was just about the only thing Willie J. gave somebody for free. "They come through me but not for me," she answered when I asked her why she hadn't been able to foretell the nature of her knee daughter's passing. "When I was a young'un, not much older than you, child, I used to try to make myself see what I want to see, try to bend the Will to my end, but I done lived long and hard enough to know that kind of Seeing don't never see straight. The Sight like chil'ren," she said, smoothing the shiny bit of bone with the back of a rusted knife. "They come through me but not for me. I can't make'm what they gone be. They is."

The knife rested in her hands and for a moment I thought she would cry, but then again, I couldn't rightly tell. Her eyes were already rheumy and water-filled, murky marbles wavering like some kind of trick glass in the light, and her voice sounded like two trees falling or the wind sulking beneath a sagging roof. They say a lucky bone will swim, but from the bend of her back it was clear that Willie J. hadn't foreseen anything, not a sliver of moon in gutrot or footprints in molded clay, nothing that could have warned her of her granddaughter's future, or the pain that would wake her most everyday.

Nor did Dusa Dayan see the signs waiting for her at the end of them headwaters. She had slept in fits and spells most of the morning and none at all it seemed the night before, lying in her bed, her head throbbing beneath a thin layer of cotton, still dressed in her wedding gown or what had passed for it. She lay

Sheree Renée Thomas

there, watching the band of copper and brass turn green on her ring finger and thought it a telling marker for a marriage that most everybody knowed was already bad before it was on. Besides that, all the folk who had seen her tear out of the church that evening, not even bothering to snatch off her wedding veil, hadn't even raised a toe or a heel to come after her, not even her so-called groom who was barely standing, and she suspected once they'd gotten over the initial shock, they'd gone on to fetch the liquor, the sour peach whiskey that was tucked in a corner in the Fellowship Room, waiting. At least that's what she'd do, and she told them as much over her shoulder.

All during the night the scent of ripe peaches, wet and pungent, had left her nose burning, the skin rising up off her flesh in protest, and later, after she'd been quietly burned to ashes, every blueblack bit of skin and bone, they remembered the odd smile on her face, wide and generous like the underbelly of the moon, almost ecstatic, as if she had no idea that in running, she was shaming every drop of blood, aboveground and below, that could ever claim her as kin. "Don't let it go to waste" is what they had thought they heard, her lips curving beneath a beautiful gap tooth. Nobody could reckon for sure if she was speaking of the whiskey, the music—a banjo and a mouth harp had been employed despite the preacher's protests—or the wet ground beneath their feet, the world connected from the heart to the head. Folk remembered this and remarked on it, like the passing weather. It was just another strange thing that happened that night on the island when a yellow caul had slipped over the moon, while the storm clouds hung low, hovering above the marshland, and later, at the very moment of the trouble, when the dark waters started to rise and pitch and the sky overhead seemed to catch afire just like Dusa Dayan had seen in her dream delivery. But it's been a long time since I ran fast as a young'un, and back then I was hard to catch, recovering from my peach

The Bonecarver's Daughter

whiskey in the apocalyptic arms of John Immanuel Porter, and I only woke up because he rolled over on top of me when the racket from the church bells reached a crescendo, and we was both trying to catch our breath and wondering what could have happened, thinking somebody drunk had set them to ringing to welcome the guest preacher, forgetting that he had already come cross the waters for a wedding that was never held.

Dusa Dayan slipped out of her gown and put on a blouse and skirt of stained indigo, no shoes, and a blue ribbon tied around her throat like a scarf. It was the same wardrobe she had worn on the night of her proposal, and she wore this for most special occasions, rare as they were. If it hadn't been for the preacher's coming, she would have worn a plain cotton shirt, a pair of blue denim, and some highwater boots she'd inherited from her mama who got them from her daddy, the heavy-toed shoes she wore up and down the island, over most of the land that was left to her and her grandmama. In the marshland she wore the boots with a machete dangling from a wide leather belt that sloped low across her high waist, and it was said that the machete, forged by blood and hammered from the chains and neck collars of the first Africans who lived on the island during slavery days, carried spirits and the only way to stop the machete from killing somebody, should it come to that, was to call it by its right names. Now, anybody who remembered them first nine Africans was probably long dead, but it was said they were two men and seven sisters. Folk said their spirit lived in the machete, not to harm but to protect, and they believed Dusa's grandmama, Ms. Willie J., had taught her how to swoop and handle the machete quickfast as any man chopping cotton or cane. And in this place where salt and sugar burned, where folk tied three knots in any string they owned to hold their luck, only fools misbelieved and even the preacher lit a candle and carried a key before he took the ferry across the water.

HP

HONORABLE MENTION
MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY

Rich Kenney
Another Season

Trotting back to left field
more than three decades later
I can still hear the crack of the bat:
Hoagie's hitting high ones,
arcing tiny cowhide specks
against the cleats of clouds
as we set up camp far below,
calling and coaxing them back,
our pockets of leather well pounded
and ready, waiting. I am turning 16
in an outfield far from Hanoi,
but close enough to hear
All You Need Is Love
on Murphy's transistor at third.
In right field, I spot Whitey
sitting on a milk crate wailing away
on a 6-string while Sheila Smart
circles him in a curious wiggle
dance, beads and boobs whirling.
Hoagie notices, too, and lets go
a gut-deep laugh, then kills
the Cowsills when we remember
the Red Sox are at home in Fenway.
Murf finds the game in time and Yaz
hits one out on cue. It is 1967
and everything is falling
into place:

Now it is dark
and Nelligan is hit in the shoulder.
It is the evening Chico nearly loses
an eye to a ball he should have had.
Hoagie lofts one more. I watch it
momentarily leave the night-quick sky
and for the first time I can see the moon
stealing signs and corking horizons
before dropping the ball into the reeds
and tall grass well beyond our reach.
It's time to pack up but, instead, we break
against the backstop, listen to Whitey's
version of Jim Morrison and how best
to burn the night. I turn on the radio
again to hear the Red Sox
and casualties in Nam
are up.

Now, back in my spot,
a chalk line on a soccer field,
nightfall trumps practice between
shooter and goalie on Hoagie's old
launch pad. High school kids walk by.
One with a fire fighter baseball cap
lip-syncs to numbing rap blasting
from a flag-bearing PT Cruiser
in the parking lot. A girl with two-
toned hair and a purple lip tattoo
slinks along in an uneasy sway
and says, "Sup?"
It's the explosive thunder
of a soccer ball rising rapidly
towards mid-field that curbs my reply.

Rich Kenney

I watch it climb dusk's dark ladder
while the radio pauses for headline
news with another spin on al-Qaida,
and one more time I think I can see
a piece of the moon painting
corners, changing speeds,
burning away
the night.

Melinda Tromara Kirstein
As If

When you lost your hair I stopped
cutting mine, and that last Spring
every time I passed a lilac bush
I paused to bury my face in the blooms,
purple and white profusion,
my lungs filling up with their heady
sweet fragrance, your favorite,
and I'd still my breath
as if I could hold it there,
will my alveoli to a state of rigid expansion,
propel my stiff body to your bedside and then
finally exhale into your face, sweep
your pale cheeks with my long locks,
as if my simple gifts,
lilac perfume once-removed and
now wild overgrown tresses
like acts of defiance could
keep you from death and hold you here,
hold you here.

Phillip S. Mandel
Self-Discovery

I. Life

my journey of self-discovery began
with a jar of vaseline
and waded through pierced eyebrows,
blonde hair dye, and gravity bong hits
before settling on a gap credit card
and monthly car payments.

II. Music

although i was trained in classical piano
at thirteen, i've found that there is no music
more inspiring than christian punk rock.
i skip over the songs about jesus
and right-to-life and feed off of the faith
for a religion i don't even believe in.

III. Satire

i'm going to make some jokes about nazis,
it's in all the movies and all over tv,
the soup-nazi, the doughnut-nazi,
it's one big joke now, isn't it?
cancer still isn't funny, but racism is.
i'm afraid of the n-word,
afraid that someone will attach it to me
and think i'm a racist,
that i might say it
and mean it.

IV. Supplements

i'm addicted to legal additives

that are probably doing more harm
to my body than good.
one daily multiple vitamin at breakfast
with artificial sweetener stirred
in coffee; caffeine to stimulate heart rate,
creatine to stimulate muscle growth,
st. john's wort to curb depression,
advil cold and sinus to clear nasal passages,
and metamucil for ass traffic.

V. On Being In Love

the first time i fell in love i was five.
her name was lara vazquez she lived up the street
she was so incredibly beautiful
we played doctor a few times in my basement
we dug a hole in my front yard and kissed
she's a model now and would never ever
date a guy like me again.
the second time i fell in love was jessica levy
in fourth through sixth grade.
she was jewish but looked puerto rican
and went out with every guy in my elementary
school, i think, but me.
i started a fanclub for unrequited love,
currently i'm the only member
but i know there are more guys like me
out there, in love with some wonderful girl.
i'm in love with a wonderful girl
and she has no idea. i'm waiting
for the right time but most likely
i'll belch it out when i'm drunk.

Phillip S. Mandel

VI. On Being Gay

i'm not gay. but sometimes i wonder what it would be like
if i were.

VII. Asphyxiation

applying to college was the most stressful
experience in my life up to that point,
and i wonder sometimes just how easy i had it.
now i really know what freedom is,
and what the fuck it's not.
there was one security guard in high school
and we all knew him by name, ed.
you can't be afraid of a fat guy named ed,
and none of us were, but usually he just socialized
with the jocks, and sent us potheads home.

VIII. Parenthood

i don't have any kids yet
but when i do i will love them
surreptitiously because if they ever
call their mother a bitch
i will beat the shit out of them.

IX. Diagnosis

one day i woke up and i was dying,
but i didn't know yet.
i suffered a little and was reborn,
the details are boring and inconsequential.
point is, life is so beautiful,
and so are you,
my darling.

Benjamin Gebhardt
One Spinning Second

I have these pictures of my mother. I can remember being suspended by the driver's side seatbelt, looking down at her. Her back was against the passenger door, which was pressed against the asphalt. She was unconscious, but her lower jaw hung open as though paused before telling me something important. Soon blood began to trickle down her forehead from a split just below her hairline and I realized we were in an emergency. But before that, when it was just me looking at my mother about to speak, I felt peaceful, ready to listen. She was wearing jeans, still a deep indigo, and a puffy powder blue coat with chrome snaps. Her hair was a respectable balance of gray and dark brown and a single lock had fallen forward beside her sharp nose. Altogether—at that moment—I thought she looked very rational, maybe even a little bit wise, and then the blood came.

My mother's divorce—that was how I thought of it, something she owned, like a kettle or a purse—occupied no space in my mind and had nothing to do with why I had visited her. I was turning twenty-eight and I went because I worried she was getting loony out on the peninsula, becoming some kind of eccentric. The sort of person you see from your car and feel sure you'll never know someone like that, because all of your friends are so normal, so level. I planned to go as a stabilizing force, a touchstone to the rational world if indeed she was that far gone.

The day of the accident I was angry with her. I was angry with what she was letting herself become and I didn't have the guts to say anything about it. I just smiled as she explained her birdhouses to me. We had finally gotten into the car when she began her discourse. She had chosen this craft as the object of her unraveling; she made and made and made these cubic houses from pine boards, and painted them in solid colors with the

Benjamin Gebhardt

glossiest paints available—orange, purple, lemon, lime, fuchsia. They looked like fruit chews hanging on the trees in her backyard. If she had been a man, perhaps it would have been young women instead of birdhouses—bright, glossy girls, one after the other—and I might have been okay with that, because I craved something normal, some kind of depravity that was labeled and well known. But the birdhouses disgusted me; I can remember the feeling as she talked to me in the car, feeling sick beneath the anger, like I was somehow implicated by her neurosis.

She made boxes for birds. They weren't houses except by some great abstraction of the term. She had spent the morning cutting a 1x8 into squares. Enough wood for two bird boxes. After two hours I joined her in the garage, watched her trim lengths of dowels for the perches. Her methodic cuts annoyed me. She had a little jig set up to establish the appropriate length, then three slow passes with the Japanese handsaw and another perch dropped onto the workbench. She arranged these as she progressed in two neat rows. I watched for ten minutes not knowing whether or not she knew I was there.

"Hey, why don't you take a break for a bit?"

She wasn't the least bit startled when I spoke. She kept her head down and said, "Let me finish with these dowels, honey, then we can drive to town for lunch."

I nodded and hit the garage-door opener. The gray brightness of a hazy morning drowned out the incandescent light above her workbench. I walked out to the driveway and looked across the road. I had forgotten how thick the forest was around her. Just down from her house two giant cedars seemed to reign over the firs that packed in around them. They grew so close together their foliage was indistinguishable on their adjacent sides. Red, stringy bark encrusted the trunks like barnacles on sea rocks. They seemed as ancient as rocks to me, bark and soft flat needles perpetually sloughing off while their hearts remained.

One Spinning Second

I drove us in her car that day, an old blue and silver Japanese hatchback with brittle vinyl seats and dull paint. It had started to rain lightly, and the road had gone from gray to a deep charcoal color. I brought the aging car up to speed on the two-lane highway and had to hug the right side of my lane to diminish the blast of air as a truck sped by. There is a sawmill fifteen miles past my mother's house that receives a dozen or so logging trucks a day. They seem to accelerate wildly through this last semi-unpopulated stage of the drive. My mother talked to me as I drove the winding road toward town. The Doug firs were dense on either side of the road, and reached high above the earth—I couldn't see the tops through the cramped windshield.

She started in about the birdhouses again, this time positioning her hands above the dashboard displaying one plane and then the next of her craft pieces. She talked about symmetry and the pros and cons of using knotty pine. It paints well, and she can select pieces with large knots to knock out for the doorway, but it can warp on her unexpectedly, destroying the tidy look she's after. And what was it I felt in my throat as she spoke? Something sickening, confirming, an oily taste that felt like hunger and nausea simultaneously.

Over what? Was I afraid of her hobby? It wasn't the wood-working as much as the way she talked about it. Like I should understand, or rather, understood what she was going for with her craft. My reaction was almost entirely physical, somewhat dizzy, removing me from the actual steering of the car. We were taking a long curve to the right that seemed endless in the thick forest, and the car was edging closer to the centerline. I was vaguely aware of this, but from a distance, from somewhere outside of the vehicle.

The oncoming truck blasted an air horn just as our wheels crossed into the paint. I jerked the wheel to the right and somehow missed the truck. The car was sideways for a split second

Benjamin Gebhardt

as all four tires lost traction. In a moment they would grip the asphalt and flip the little hatchback into the air for one silent, spinning second before we landed passenger side down, skidding to the side of the road like an upturned brick. Before we went airborne, I remember looking at my mother and feeling guilty as though it was something deliberate I had done. In this picture, she was far away from me. Her eyes were shut and she looked more sad than afraid. Her hands were flat on the dashboard and her posture was apologetic, and then the car lurched violently off the ground.

So I had these two pictures of my mother, like bookends with nothing between them, which I owned now. It was the beginning of really seeing her.

In the emergency room all I could do was focus on what the doctor was telling me. It had taken an hour for my mother to regain consciousness, and apparently she was paralyzed in both arms.

The doctor took me out to the corridor to talk. “I have to say it’s a bit mysterious. The X-rays came back completely normal and show no sign of spinal or shoulder injury. Apart from the obvious, there’s really nothing to indicate any damage was done to the nervous tissue.”

I looked at the door to my mother’s hospital room before responding to the doctor. “Yeah, but the ‘obvious’ is that she can’t move her arms, and she doesn’t feel it when we touch her. So what is that—is this all psycho stuff or what?” I could feel a twisting in my stomach as I thought of my mother’s birdboxes and glossy paints. The doctor had not wanted to talk in front of her. She was that delicate.

“Your mother has what appears to be a psycho-somatic paralysis, which I admit I’ve never seen before. But I have to believe it is temporary—shock related. The psychological trauma of the accident was overwhelming and her mind is choosing

One Spinning Second

this—temporarily—to cope.”

I stared at him. I wanted to know how long it would take, I wanted to go back to work, I didn't want to be stuck on the peninsula taking care of her like this.

“Her arms will come back Tom; her reflexes are all there...”

I worked at a mechanical engineering firm in Seattle. I rented an apartment in an overpriced brick building a stone's throw from the uptown neighborhood. There was a plethora of clubs, bars and cafés there, whose noise soothed me to sleep at night. Financially speaking I should have been looking at getting into a house, but I loved the hubbub. As a rule I never went, I drank beer at upscale bars downtown before I came home, if I felt the need. I'd sit with my fellow men, my peers—though I was the most junior among them—and talk about sprinkler systems and college football, sewage problems, the horror stories of design flaw. At home, the noise from the populous streets nearby provided an antidote for loneliness while remaining alone. Like a blanket, it filled the space around me until two a.m., when I would fall safely asleep.

I played basketball on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I ran the steep flanks of Queen Anne hill once a week—three times on an especially good week. There were times when I hiked with old friends from college. I had a life to get back to.

My mother didn't know anyone on the peninsula very well. She had moved out there five years ago and never made any friends, never saw the need I guess. She had consigned herself to a state of meditative loneliness, and now I was going to have to pay for it. We were released after six hours at the ER. The doctor gave me the number of a physical therapist to call if her arms weren't back in a couple of days.

We sat on a concrete bench waiting for a cab to show up. The doctor had put her coat back on for her and we sat side by side without talking. Her arms hung into her lap, palms out on

Benjamin Gebhardt

the thighs of her jeans. I watched her hands, anticipating movement.

“You trying to move them?”

She shook her head slowly, without speaking. I thought about her birdhousing. My dad had a complete woodshop in the garage when I was growing up. He wanted to teach me everything he knew along this line, and I remember many Saturdays spent listening to him drone on about safety with the power tools. We always wore plastic eye goggles and dust masks. We pushed boards through the table saw together, slicing long thin strips off the sides. It’s called a rip when you cut a board parallel with the grain. My mother and father ripped apart this way.

My mother would flick the lights off and on when she wanted us to come in for lunch, rather than try to make herself heard over the saw. I always thought it annoyed her—all the cutting, the dust, and the long hours of concentrated silence. It all seemed intolerable to her. It was for me. When I made it to high school I realized I could decline my father’s invitations and I never joined in again. He was a fabulous wood worker. He made a rocking chair one summer, and even carved the back-board with a kind of sunburst that was perpetually rising or setting in a choppy sea. But there was a tyranny in it too. His rules, his decisions: he didn’t take suggestions. I envied my mother for never having to be subjected to the repetitive teachings on tool maintenance and respect for your materials. She was smart about it. She would flick the lights and by the time I looked up she was gone. Which is why I was surprised to find her so taken up with the birdhouses. If I ever thought about it, I thought carpentry was one of the reasons she left. I never asked.

I fixed a can of instant soup and spooned it into her mouth for dinner. The silence between us was thick. It seemed to emanate from her lifeless arms and fill the house. The paralysis

wasn't real. The doctor had said that. *Move your arms, Mom.*

I wasn't in the habit of drinking tea but I was struck with a memory of my mother drinking tea and reading late at night, so I offered. I fumbled in her kitchen, finding the right accoutrements, feeling sudden washes of familiarity when I came across old utensils so that opening drawers in there was like looking through a photo album. The teapot was one of their wedding gifts. It had a copper bottom and a black plastic lid spring-loaded over the spout. It was the kind where the spout is the only opening. As I filled it with water I realized that in all my life, I'd never done that. Never held back the lid, never had to peer in and listen for the rising pitch as the water filled in the dark space.

I tipped the cup to her lips. She blinked when she'd had enough. We didn't speak to each other; we focused on the physical task. I helped her change into her pajamas, undressing and dressing. These things I hadn't thought of. The bra. The toilet. I wiped her, pulled up her pants. I told myself she had done this for me. I told myself I did this to her.

Her silence seemed inscrutable to me as I lay awake in the guestroom. The pictures came back to me then. My mother apologetic. My mother wise and wounded. The bookends with dark space between them. My frailty in the face of all this: the trembling water of her teapot, rising in pitch.

We had come home from the hospital Saturday night. It was Monday before my mother got out of bed. I called my work and the elementary school where she was a nurse, and told them what had happened: I was stuck, she was stuck until further notice. I wasn't planning on waiting long.

I called the physical therapist immediately after we ate breakfast. The earliest I could get an appointment was the end of the week but they said to move her arms as much as possible in the meantime, for circulation. I looked at her when I hung

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up the phone. She was slumped on the sofa, still in her green pajamas—darkened at the chest from where I spilled a spoonful of cereal on her and had to clean it with a wet sponge. Her arms looked boneless at her sides.

“The PT said we should move your arms around so your lymphatic vessels will keep going and the tendons and all that. Here.” I crouched in front of her and lifted her arms up and down like she was dribbling basketballs. “Can you feel that?”

She shook her head and sighed, watching her arms swimming in front of her. Her lips curved into a smile and she said, “This is ridiculous, Tom.”

I ignored her; I wanted the whole thing to be over. I kept going, watching her shoulder joints and then her eyes, half-expecting her arms to kick-start from the movement. After a minute I stopped and said, “Unless you have a better idea, I think we’ll just have to do that once in a while.”

She nodded and turned toward the window. There were maybe two-dozen birds scattered on the yard and among the fir trees, scouting out what remained of the seed. Where the Stellar Jays perched on some of the orange enameled cubes, their bright blue bodies crackled with contrast. She watched the birds come and go between the forest and the many colored boxes for the rest of the day.

I watched TV and shook her arms out once an hour. There was nothing else I could do. After dinner I couldn’t take it anymore. She seemed too complacent, like she wasn’t even trying, just watching the birds. I bent at the waist and grabbed her wrists, dragging one at a time into the air. She glanced at me and then looked back to the darkening forest.

I threw her arms down and said, “Come on Mom! There is nothing wrong with your arms. Everything’s connected okay? You have to do this with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong except I can’t move them, you mean?” She looked around the house, appealing for support. “I don’t

care what the tests say, I can't make my hands move. I tell them to over and over and they lay there like they don't know me." She leaned forward as she talked and then heaved back against the couch between her motionless arms.

It was all I could do not to yell at her. "Look, Ma," I growled, "I need to go back to work and so do you. Stop watching the damn birds and try to move your arms. You are not paralyzed. It's in your head." I pointed at my head for emphasis and glared. My father made this gesture, usually indicating something was inexplicably crooked in the person he was talking to. She recognized it before I did.

She turned and caught a Flicker taking off from a lemon-yellow box, the last one visible in the encroaching night. She continued looking at the windows, now nothing more than dark mirrors reflecting her living room. She said, "Tom, those birds are free in a way that you and I can never understand freedom. I try to approach that. I'm trying to learn something, okay?" She was looking at me in the black reflection of the window. "If you want to be like your Dad, that's fine. But you'll never get to be you, and someday you'll want to."

My stomach twisted, bilious and tight. "What are you talking about, Ma? I'm not the one with a woodshop in my garage making stupid bird boxes!" My heart thumped audibly as I spoke to her; I could feel the blood flaming up my neck. All the disgust swelled up in my head and I wanted to kick something.

My mother's face trembled; the rest of her was motionless. "Thomas, you will not speak to me like that in my house," there were tears on her face now, "you don't even know what you're talking about—how could you? You never even bother to think about it!" She shook her head to get the tears from her eyes, sending ripples down her dead arms. "It's true. I miss him. I'll never be the same without him. He's good at things, Tom."

Benjamin Gebhardt

I was silent. Suddenly her divorce had ripped open the ground beneath me, and I fell in. It was a place she'd been before; I could see that. A place she'd climbed out of once, that I never knew was there. It lay beneath me these many years and now swallowed me up. I had to keep an eye on her for balance, the living room was threatening to spin upside down. She continued to talk and cry.

"But he's not good with me alright? He'll never be good with me. Never." And here she began to bounce her hand on the seat cushion beside her while she sobbed, "never, never, never," and she was gasping for air, wiping tears from her eyes with her delicately thin, calloused fingers. She looked at the ceiling and swallowed, wiping her fingers on her shirt.

I saw that her arms were working again, but I was too overwhelmed to speak. I backed away from the couch and left her there, my mother breathing heavily, looking up. I found myself outside on the granulated asphalt of her driveway. I shivered in the wet dark, facing the trees. They spread out beneath the vast clouded sky like a cold multitudinous army. The cedars and the firs. It seemed to me that there were not enough trees in the world to fill the space around me.

HP

WRITING BY DEGREES

SUPPLEMENT

B. H. Fairchild
A Photograph of the *Titanic*

When Travis came home from the monastery,
the ground had vanished beneath him,
and he went everywhere in bare feet

as if he were walking on a plane of light,
and he spoke of his sleepless nights
and of a picture in *National Geographic*

a pair of shoes from the *Titanic* resting
on the ocean floor. They were blue
against a blue ground and a black garden

of iron and brass. The toes pointed outward,
toward two continents, and what had been
inside them had vanished so completely

that he imagined it still there, with the sea's
undersway bellying down each night
as each day after compline he fell into

his bed, the dark invisible bulk of tons
pushing down on the shoes, nudging them
across the blue floor, tossing them aside

like a child's hands in feverish sleep
until the shoestrings scattered and dissolved.
Sometimes he would dream of the shoes

coming to rest where it is darkest,
after the long fall before we are born,

when we gather our bodies around us,

when we curl into ourselves and drift
toward the little sleep we have rehearsed
again and again as if falling we might drown.

*Previously published in The Yale Review and Early Occult
Systems of the Lower Midwest, Norton
Republished with permission of B.H. Fairchild*

B.H. Fairchild
Airlifting Horses

Boy soldiers gawk and babble, eyes rapt
in what seems like worship as the horses rise
in the bludgeoned air. A brush fire is swarming
roads and highways, and the last way out is up

or a flatboat in the lagoon. We used to drop
the reins and let them race there, hurdling
driftwood, heaps of kelp, waves lapping the sand
in a lacemaker's weave of sea and foam.

Now they're startled into flight, and the air,
stunned and savaged by the propeller's flail,
beats us back. Its sudden thunder must be a storm
their skins have for the first time failed to sense.

Cowering beneath the blades, we have cradled them
like babies, strapped them in slings strong enough
to lug trucks, and their silence is the purest tone
of panic. Their great necks crane and arch,

the eyes flame, and the spidery shadows,
big-bellied and stiff-legged, swallow us,
then dwindle to blotches on the tarmac
as they lift. The cable that hauls them up

like some kind of spiritual harness vanishes
from sight. Their hooves pummel the heavy wind,
and the earth they rode a thousand days or more
falls away in hunks of brown and yellow.

Even the weight of their bodies has abandoned them,
but now they are the gods we always wanted:
winged as any myth, strange, distant, real,
and we will never be ourselves till they return.

Republished from The Art of the Lathe, Alice James Books
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Lydia Davis
Letter to a Funeral Parlor

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you to object to the word *cremains*, which was used by your representative when he met with my mother and me two days after my father's death.

We had no objection to your representative, personally, who was respectful and friendly and dealt with us in a sensitive way. He did not try to sell us an expensive urn, for instance.

What startled and disturbed us was the word *cremains*. You in the business must have invented this word and you are used to it. We the public do not hear it very often. We don't lose a close friend or a family member very many times in our life, and years pass in between, if we are lucky. Even less often do we have to discuss what is to be done with a family member or close friend after their death.

We noticed that before the death of my father you and your representative used the words *loved one* to refer to him. That was comfortable for us, even if the ways in which we loved him were complicated.

Then we were sitting there in our chairs in the living room trying not to weep in front of your representative, who was opposite us on the sofa, and we were very tired first from sitting up with my father, and then from worrying about whether he was comfortable as he was dying, and then from worrying about where he might be now that he was dead, and your representative referred to him as "the cremains."

At first we did not even know what he meant. Then, when we realized, we were frankly upset. *Cremains* sounds like something invented as a milk substitute in coffee, like Cremora, or Coffee-mate. Or it sounds like some kind of a chipped beef

dish.

As one who works with words for a living, I must say that any invented word, like *Porta-potty* or *Pooper-scooper*, has a cheerful or even jovial ring to it that I don't think you really intended when you invented the word *cremains*. In fact, my father himself, who was a professor of English and is now being called *the cremains*, would have pointed out to you the alliteration in *Porta Potti* and the rhyme in *pooper-scooper*. Then he would have told you that *cremains* falls into the same category as *brunch* and is known as a port-manteau word.

There is nothing wrong with inventing words, especially in a business. But a grieving family is not prepared for this one. We are not even used to our loved one being gone. You could very well continue to employ the term ashes. We are used to it from the Bible, and are even comforted by it. We would not misunderstand. We would know that these ashes are not like the ashes in a fireplace.

Yours sincerely.

HP

Republished from Samuel Johnson Is Indignant, McSweeney's Books

Republished with permission of Lydia Davis

Lydia Davis
A Mown Lawn

She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was—a *woman*. A *mown lawn* had a sad sound to it, like a *long moan*. From her, a *mown lawn* made a *long moan*. *Lawn* had some of the letters of *man*, though the reverse of *man* would be *Nam*, a bad war. A *raw war*. *Lawn* also contained the letters of *law*. In fact, *lawn* was a contraction of *lawman*. Certainly a *lawman* could and did *mow* a *lawn*. *Law and order* could be seen as starting from *lawn order*, valued by so many Americans. *More lawn* could be made using a *lawn mower*. A *lawn mower* did make *more lawn*. *More lawn* was a contraction of *more lawmen*. Did *more lawn* in America make *more lawmen* in America? Did *more lawn* make more *Nam*? *More mown lawn* made *more long moan*, from her. Or a *lawn mourn*. So often, she said, Americans wanted *more mown lawn*. All of America might be one *long mown lawn*. A *lawn* not *mown* grows *long*, she said: better a *long lawn*. Better a *long lawn* and a *mole*. Let the *lawman* have the *mown lawn*, she said. Or the *moron*, the *lawn moron*.

HP

Republished from Samuel Johnson is Indignant, McSweeney's Books

Republished with permission of Lydia Davis

John Poch
Apartment Complex

The woman on the patio below calls Brown Kitty into the night air as if this were the country, as if no one were sleeping here. It is not the country. I am not sleeping. I am hearing the tune of her throat and swallowing. I have heard her rant and despair to the men she loves to fight, who come and go, bay and croon, for she approximates the only late-night-calling woman home, letting chaos fly all hours with the brushing of her perfumed hair. The stars are visibly upset, and the moon...where is the moon? Where is the brown kitty the awakened take for a bad name in the night? I have paraded by the sliding glass door down there pretending things. Strange I should want to extend my call to save her from something terrible, having thought of fire and wished abusive men on her. How her precious game, her face and voice will fade, I cannot say. After all, I favor solitude and fear to give my throat away. She sings the name into the night. The words return with animal desire.

*"Apartment Complex" originally appeared in The Laurel Review
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John Poch
October Jogger

Kierkegaard would frown at my longing for her ponytails
alive with love. No race, her patient autumn rhythm spells
the turning of the leaves. I'm driving, storebound, out of fruit,
and she seems a cornucopia to me. All peaches and pears,
her yield demands the others stop. She jogs her warm-up suit
around a Studebaker, its back seat a love bench, threadbare.
Like that, I'm past. I leave her in exhaust,
the rear view disappearing until all is lost.

Regina, my heart's a liquor-spill. Run, reign, fell
a family tree, but leave alone an island where bread
is the yeastless cracker of exile and a new Bible smell
rises after every rain. The first freeze of fall, and a fear
drops in me. Like my pen when I drift off in a chair,
it wakes me up and rights me toward a better bed.

*"October Jogger" originally appeared in Salmagundi
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D. C. Gonzales-Prieto
History Lesson—Part II

Wasn't it beautiful to have been
us back when we had no history
written to speak of and always lived
in the now? Fucking corn dog pogoheads,
living like dogs: whatever we couldn't eat,
we screwed; and what we couldn't eat
or screw, we pissed on.

Such a truth

will never change; it endures
from the jagged sylvan crags of Olduvai
Gorge, through the subfuscine sewers
of Mycenae, into labyrinthine
drunk alleys of Pesht and Paree,

and the beer

can strewn back yards of San Peedro.
We have taken what all we have made,
splashed it with feces and switched

around syntaxeez. Cranking it loud
to call it 'art'. Such art!
Grafittied over fortress walls
to show just how ephemeral stone
may be. One Cro-Magnon blows
the juice of crushed berries
over hirsute hands grasping rock;
one can of paint scrawls "TINNITUS"

underneath a freeway overpass.
Naught could keep us from this.

D. C. Gonzales-Prieto

We name this time “now” and mark it
like a lynx spraying trees in possession.
Those who come after only smell the scents,
and tell what went down then. We are brash,
obnoxious, loud and toxic; ah, the future.

Jaimee Wriston Colbert
EXCERPT FROM DREAM LIVES OF BUTTERFLIES:
Haole Girl Blue

I'm a white girl, *haole girl* they call me in my neighborhood. It's not like it's a choice. If I were given a choice about this I'd look like my best friend Nalani, who's half Hawaiian. This means she's got more rights to Hawaii than me, Nalani says, when she's mad at me. Which isn't so much. Like I said, we're best friends. Nalani's skin is the stripy tan of buttered toast.

We live in Punaluu, Hawaii where the air is pink and wet, and the mynah birds chatter up such a storm every morning, crack of dawn, you think you'd get lolo from lack of sleep. Lolo means stupid, which I am not. A little slow sometimes, my mama says—But you'll get married, and then you won't need algebra ever again, she says.

My mama's hope is that I'm married before she dies. She wants to know I'll have someone in this world besides her, she says, so then she can rest in peace. Not that marriage is the *be-all-and-end-all*, she reminds me; only if it's to the right guy. The right guy, Mama says, is the one who stays.

She says it could be any time, her dying, but she's been telling me this about as long as I've known her, which is all of my life of course. She's got this disease called Marfans, where she's really long and skinny in her fingers and toes, and her heart's too fragile, her doctor says, to pump to all that needs pumping. Abraham Lincoln had it, but he didn't die from it. She's got arthritis in her hands, fingers twisty and gnarly as twigs, and she wears five copper bracelets that jangle when she moves. It's what the Egyptians did, she told me, wore copper for arthritis. My mama knows things like this because she reads. Reads, reads, reads, all of the time. It's about all there is left for her to do, she says.

Me, I'd rather paint, and not houses like Mama thinks when

Jaimee Wriston Colbert

I tell her this. I just can't understand a thing like algebra, and I don't see much use for it either, I tell her. I can't get *vested* (that's a Mama reading word, so sometimes if I ream these words back at her she's impressed enough to actually listen), in what X equals, or what Y equals, or whether, in fact (that's my algebra teacher's way of talking, Mr. Soto), X equals Y. I mean, who cares? It's not like they're even real. No Y's strutting their stuff in low slung pants, no X's in short dresses, some unspeakable need to be part of Y.

I tell Mama I just want to paint walls, and she reminds me we're living in Uncle Ray's house, who's only an uncle by *someone else's marriage*. It's not even our house, she says, Why on earth would you paint it? I doubt he'd pay you, and besides, she says, Uncle Ray keeps threatening to take his house back. He's already got one, he doesn't need *this* house, but people who have money can behave this way and there's not a damn thing the rest of us can do about it, Mama says.

I let her go through all that since it's rude to interrupt, then I tell her I don't mean painting houses. I mean painting *walls*, I say, tunnel walls, construction site walls, the outsides of old buildings, sea walls that keep the ocean from washing up onto the road, those sorts of walls. Pretty much anything but houses. I'm a tagger, or anyways I'm *aspiring* (another Mama word) to be one, a graffiti artist. Nalani already is one. Her tag is a giant cursive A, for akamai, which means smart. Nalani's so smart they skipped her a grade in school, put her in my grade, and still she's the smartest in our class. When we graduate she'll probably be the one to do that, aloha-it's-been-wonderful-be-the-best-we-can-be kind of speech. Nobody gives her any *huhu* about being smart, not Nalani. I figure if the guys let me be one too, a tagger, than my tag will be a giant C, for Creamy. It's what they call me, my nickname, Creamy, since I'm a white girl. That's when Nalani's around, and they like her around, so they let me be too. Otherwise they call me haole girl—Get the

fuck outahere, haole girl! Tagging is mostly a guy thing.

They don't mean anything by it though. We're identified by what we are in my neighborhood. You're a hapa-haole if you're at least part Hawaiian and part something else too, like Chinese; you're a local if you're a lot Hawaiian and some other things too, but not haole; maybe you're a benny, a Filipino; maybe you're a moke, which is a big Samoan and the tita is the big female Samoan. At the bottom of all this is me, pure haole, a white girl. The way I see it, if I could be a tagger I wouldn't have to be *just* a haole girl. I'd be Creamy with a huge, shining, True Blue (blue's my favorite color) C. I'd be somebody.

My mama though is *horrified*, that's what she says. I'm horrified you'd even consider such a thing, Lucy! Public buildings aren't really for the public, she says, You ought to know that, you can bet someone owns them. There's people who own and people who don't. We're the don't type, she adds, that bitter look in her eyes, her mouth squinched down. But that doesn't mean you just go out and deface what people do own. It's illegal, she says. It's not art, it's vandalism.

Nalani does, I whine. I know this is immature, *Nalani does*, but everyone generally admires what Nalani does. And I can pretty well tell that mentioning how beautiful graffiti art is, all those shapes and letters and colors looping and swirling and blending together, the way it changes a dull plain wall into *something*, wouldn't do it for Mama.

If Nalani jumped off the Pali, would you? Mama asks. It's the old 'if somebody jumps' question that's supposed to make you feel lolo for letting another person lead you around, for not *standing up on your own two feet*, which is the other way my mama puts it.

But honestly, if Nalani jumped off the Pali I'd have to believe there's a pretty good reason for it, or that there's something there to catch her, like a big old sloping banyon on the side of the mountain the rest of us can't see, bending its gnarly

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branches, its air-borne roots just for Nalani. She's that way. But I don't say this. I just give Mama a sour look, lets her know how I feel but doesn't get her red faced or coughing, or something that might *tax* her heart. She's told me about the things that could tax her heart, and most of these have me in a starring role. My mama returns to her reading, as if the subject is all pau.

But the subject is not pau, not finished, not for me. Nalani gives me one of her old paint brushes, says she's into spraying now anyway, that *real* taggers spray, and I take that brush, a bucket of water and some blue food coloring I nab from Mama's spice cabinet, I take these down to the Punuluu sea wall. This is not the kind of lava wall that jets into the ocean, the kind you walk out on, spray from the waves shivering each breath, blue sea, blue sky, and you in the center of it, like being in the heart beat of the world. This one's a concrete wall keeps the ocean from rolling up onto the rich peoples lawns. I'm not so lolo to think food coloring and water's going to make anything lasting on this wall. That's the truth of tagging; you make your mark, often by sneaking out into the night or the early morning so no one can see, then it stays there for everyone to see. If they don't want your mark they have to sand blast it. But I can practice, until the day I save up enough money for my own paints, my own True Blue. Then I'll be real. A big, beautiful C.

How I got that name, Creamy, comes from a long time ago. We were little kids, Nalani and me, and our other, almost best friend Cherise. Cherise would rather be Nalani's best friend than mine, but she likes me OK. One day, like I said we were kids, we were trying out some coffee Cherise's mama left hot in the pot before she tore off to work. Her mama works in the bank, and that's an important kind of work. Important enough to leave almost a whole pot of coffee so as not to be late. *Waste*

not, want not, my own mama would say. We're pouring it into thin little cups with these roses painted on, Cherise calls them *demitasse* or some such word, sipping it down with globs of cream and sugar because we're trying to *like* this coffee. We're pretending we're important too.

Cherise is black, but she isn't really, not like black paint or a night without a moon. She *says* she's black, her mama is black, and we're supposed to call her *a* Black. It's a pride thing, she says. On this day the suns reams down on Cherise's lanai, a wavery pattern of it through the monkey pod growing beside, doves are doing their dove sounds, the air's that sharp sweet trade wind air, not the muggy Kona kind—jewel-like is the way my mama describes this air—I think she got it from some book. It's a really *good* morning, and Nalani tells Cherise her skin looks like the coffee we're drinking.

That's the color, she says, Dark not black.

And she gets away with it, mostly because she's Nalani, but also because it's a good morning.

Cherise says to Nalani, Well your skin *is* coffee, with the sugar dumped in! And she giggles and Nalani does too. Everyone likes Nalani, that's why she gets to be sugar.

Nalani stares at me, says I must be the cream then since I'm a haole girl, and we all laugh like it's the most hilarious thing in the world.

That's how it started, Creamy. It's a better name than Lucy, I think, and since I've got that hopeless haole kind of skin anyway, not really like cream, more splotchy and freckly and all kinds of weird marks on it that announce to the world—Hey look, haole skin! I kind of like it OK. When you're kids you can talk this way. We didn't care. We were friends.

These days Cherise is not interested in tagging and she isn't interested in me, either. The guys are all interested in Cherise though, they say she's *hot*. She tries to get Nalani to go places with her where the guys are, older guys, not the geeky ones at

Jaimee Wriston Colbert

our school, she says. She tries to get Nalani to go into town with her, Waikiki, where *real* guys hang out, mainland ones and surfers, and some that go to the University. Even *graduate* students, Cherise tells us outside the Hauula IGA, the afternoon sun blasting down, and she's standing with her hands plastered on her hips, light blazing through her hair she's let snake out all wild-like, like some dangerous Medusa. That's what Mama called her, said—That girl's up to no good these days, you watch, one *dangerous Medusa*.

Cherise turns to me, Creamy! she says, only she pronounces it in a way that doesn't make it sound like such a good name, *Creeeeeemeeee...*, I bet you don't even know what a graduate student is!

I tell her, I do too! But I don't and they both know it. Cherise laughs and then Nalani laughs too, but not like it's really so hilarious; mean this time, a different sounding Nalani, more of a Cherise-sounding Nalani who's laughing at me.

And I get this kind of tight, burning feeling in my throat like I swallowed lit coal. It hurts enough to cry, only I'm not going to let them see me do that. Instead, I grab Nalani's lahala paint bag that's leaning against the side of the IGA, it's the closest thing to me so I don't even think about it, and I yank out a can of yellow spray paint—Marigold Yellow, not even my favorite color—and I spray her feet, with her blue slippers on. Blue *is* my favorite color, but I wish to God Nalani wasn't wearing it.

She doesn't grab the can away from me, doesn't even call me *bitch* and spray me back, which I would've preferred. Even in the face, I would've preferred being sprayed in the face to what she does instead, because what she does instead makes me the loneliest person in the world, standing there in the broiling Hawaiian sun, in front of the IGA.

Nalani thrusts her bag at me, says, Here! Take them, baby! I'm not into tagging anymore, anyway. She stares coldly at me,

a hollow, nothing kind of a stare, like someone who doesn't even know me, wouldn't want to know me, then she seizes the bag back again. On second thought, she says, You don't deserve to be a tagger. You're not smart enough. Then Cherise and Nalani loop their arms together, coffee and coffee with sugar, but no cream, and off they go.



There was this time a couple years back, when I asked my mama about my dad. I never asked before because with her head always stuck in a book and her heart so *sensitive*, you don't want to alarm or surprise Mama with any conversation out of the ordinary. What's for dinner? kind of conversation, is mostly what she can take. But I had been bursting with being curious about it for so long, ever since Nalani, who's got a dad that actually lives in her house, asked me about mine. When I told Nalani I didn't have one, she said, shaking her head at me, that wise, tolerating look she gets, Of course you do, you have to. Whether he lives with you or not, somebody had to get your mom *hapai*, and that person's your dad. Ask her! Nalani said.

Mama said she never married him so it didn't really count. She said if they had been married then maybe they would've tried harder. But as it was, she said, he had the kind of manic-depression that became more and more just a constant depression, and my mama couldn't be with him that way, she said, it was too hard. When he was manic he got it in his head he could be somebody else, and when he was depressed you kept wishing he *was* somebody else. It was like living with somebody waiting to die, she told me.

When I think about this now, it's pretty strange that she said that. Because sometimes I feel like *I'm* waiting for my mother's death, not wanting it to come, but figuring it's going

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to anyway, just reach out and grab her one day. I'll come home from school and her books will be there, alphabetically in her bookshelves the way she likes them, but Mama will be gone.

When I asked her where my dad is, she said he left her and me when I was just a baby, and he moved to an apartment in St. Louis. Because he thought St. Louis was in the middle of the country, she said, and that the middle was the place to get lost from the rest. That's what he told her anyhow, my mama said, and she didn't care enough at that point to wonder if it was true. It's what he wanted, she said, to get lost. Hawaii was too small and set apart, so he probably figured a city that announced itself as the Gateway to the West would do it; it wasn't east and it wasn't west, just somewhere in between.

The thing is, my mama told me, one day she was reading a book about Lewis and Clark that had a map of the USA in it, and she noticed that St. Louis wasn't in the middle at all, it was really almost a good two-thirds of the way east. And furthermore, she said, that whole Westward Expansion business, which is what the Gateway Arch monument was about, meant stealing native peoples lands to do it. Think of it like this, Lucy, Mama said, It's as if they were *renting* and you could just take the land back. Only they weren't. It was theirs to begin with.

I called my father a month after asking my mother about him. It took me a while to get up my courage and a while after that to find his number. Some apartment in St. Louis, I told Information. I tried the three numbers they gave me, of guys who had his same name, then I knew I got him on the third try.

I said, kind of weak-voiced, my heart hammering up through my throat, but I was trying to sound casual, Hey, this is Lucy.

And he said, Lucy!

Just like that. I figured he must have thought I was someone else. He didn't even hesitate when he heard my name, like this was a name he hadn't heard for a while, or even that this

was a name he wasn't sure he *wanted* to hear. And he was the one who named me. After *I Love Lucy*, my mama said, the one person who could make him laugh. Insisted on watching her every day, sprawled out on the couch like a slug on a sidewalk, laughing at a stupid TV show.

He was just too cheerful sounding on the phone, I decided, for a depressed person waiting to die. So I hung up. Anyhow, he left before I could walk, so chances are he doesn't remember me at all. It's ironical, Mama said, one of her reading words and she sounded pretty satisfied about it too, that he walked out before *I* could walk.

But these days I'm wondering if my dad had stayed around, if he could've taught me about guys, about the way they are, about how to *be* with a guy. Then maybe Nalani and Cherise would be friends with me again. The only guy I sort of like even close to the way Cherise and Nalani seem to like guys, is Brandon Nakamoto. I feel a kind of fluttery thing inside me when I'm near him, like a moth got stuck in my stomach, battling my insides the way they whack against a light bulb on a hot summer night, slamming it again and again.

It's a strange kind of feeling that has to do with Brandon, I know this much. Because I feel it even when I stare at the back of him sometimes, his skinny neck and his arm muscles rolling and pumping, kind of jittery but sweet-like, tagging something with his can of spray, concentrating on it like nothing else in the world matters. Brandon is nice to me when the other taggers aren't around, but when they show up he says, Get the fuck outahere, haole girl! so they won't think he was being nice to me.

If I knew more about guys, then maybe I could be with Nalani again, spend the night at her house, talk about the kinds of things girls who like guys talk about, our hair maybe, make-up, which I don't wear but I would if it could help things; it would be like tagging, only on my eyes and lips instead of a

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wall. I could talk with her about *doing the thing*, which are Cherise's words for *getting laid*—and these are the words I heard Nalani use, whispering to Cherise on The Bus yesterday, her hand cupped around Cherise's ear. I heard though, I was right behind them. Even though they pretended I wasn't.



As it turns out it isn't my mother who suddenly dies. She's the one who tells me about the accident on Monday afternoon, I'm just getting home from school and the only thing on my mind is a snack because I didn't get lunch. I don't go into the cafeteria anymore. I figure Cherise and Nalani will be there, and that's a lonely thing, seeing them eating together, and the guys, the taggers saying, Get the fuck outahere, haole girl! How would I have known that today Cherise and Nalani weren't even there?

It came over the news, Mama says, About a half hour ago. She's got the TV on like she does when she isn't reading, when she's resting her brain; That's what TV's good for, she says, letting it all go empty. I'm sucking in the salt smell of the sea blowing through our screens, big nosefuls of it even though we're a couple streets back from the beach, only rich people get to live right by the beach. And then I think I'm hearing it, the rumble and rush of the waves, the in and out breath of the sea, because I don't want to listen to what my mother is telling me.

She's gone, Mama says, Passed away, *make*. Didn't even make it to the hospital. Thrown from the car, and someone else was too, some University student. Not the one driving, Mama says, He's going to make it OK and so will Cherise. I'm sorry, Mama sighs, picking up her book again, flicking the remote to turn off the TV, I know you and Nalani were friends.

Haole Girl Blue

It seems like all of Punaluu comes out for her funeral, and they're making those speeches about her inside the small modern church—One of those reborn Protestant places, my mother said, You're supposed to feel like you can't get to God without stopping there first—wood and glass and cramped and hot. Speeches about how smart and how beautiful she was; what a good citizen and student and friend and daughter and granddaughter and child of God she was; how we may think it is tragic that this life with all its potential was taken away, but the Lord works in mysterious ways, and maybe He wanted one as precious as her for a reason we cannot, are not meant to, understand. Was she saved? the preacher howled, Do not doubt this! Nalani will go on to her greater glory. Those kinds of speeches.

I steal a glance over at Cherise who's sitting with her mother. She's got a sling on one arm and a stiff medical-type collar about her neck. Her face is scratched and puffed up like a blow fish; I can't tell from the accident or her crying. I know Cherise liked Nalani too, maybe she even liked her as much as I liked her. Lots of people are crying, but not me. I can't seem to, even tried to make myself cry by thinking about really awful things, run-over mongoose, their guts strewn about Kamehameha highway, or drowned kittens washing up on the beach. I wanted a kitten, something to hold on to, that would love me without having to consider first if I'm worth it, but Mama said chasing around after a kitten would tax her heart. Imagining one drowning, even this isn't making me cry.

Cherise doesn't look at me. Nobody looks at me, not even when they talk about how much Nalani's friends will miss her. They look at Cherise, but Cherise just stares straight ahead at the empty space over the preacher's head where there's a high angular window, a stab of dusty light poking through, tears tumbling her cheeks like Sacred Falls. We swam at Sacred Falls, Nalani and I, but nobody here knows that. And I'm beginning to wonder if maybe, just maybe, they're not looking at me

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because *I'm* not really here. Maybe I can't cry, can't really *feel* anything about Nalani's dying because I'm dead myself. I'm just some *hologram*, a Mama reading word, an image of me who's not really me at all.

When I'm back home again Mama, who didn't go to the funeral because she felt too tired, slaps down her book on the scratched mahogany end table beside the sofa, says sternly, Lucy, you have to accept that Nalani's in a better place.

My mother's not religious, but she believes in an after-life, she calls it, a heaven-like place that's not necessarily up in the sky, but more like a prairie, she thinks, grassy and free like the prairies used to be. Before people destroyed the prairies, and now they have to cultivate them and re-seed them and import nursery-born butterflies to pollinate them, she said, to make them wild again. The way Mama sees it, death is a kind of going back to the way things were.

I listen to her like I always do, it would be impolite not to, and anyway I wouldn't want to upset her and then maybe her heart gets *taxed*, and suddenly she's out on that prairie with Nalani and I have nobody. That's the way I would usually think. But, though I start out thinking like this, listening politely to my mama, this time I don't really feel these things behind her words. I don't feel the threat of her dying, coming apart every minute she's on this earth, as Mama once put it; Marfans is a connective tissue disease, she explained, everything slowly disconnecting. But I don't feel anything.

I'm going to go paint! I announce, surprising myself about as much as Mama.

She says, For heaven's sake, Lucy, at a time like this? Is it the rebel you want to be, is that it? You can rebel in ways that don't destroy other peoples property, you know. For instance, you can tell me you're never going to get married, since you know that's what I want for you. Now there's a non-destructive form of rebellion.

Haole Girl Blue

I'm never going to get married, I tell her, *And* I'm going to go paint. It's not about destruction, I add. It occurs to me that sounded pretty smart, like something Nalani might have said.

I still don't have the money to buy my own paint though and this is a problem. Because the urge is firing up inside me so strong now I can feel that True Blue C catapulting through my blood, my muscles, my bones, my organs, *connecting* to my heart like life itself. Like I *am* alive, if I can do this. For a minute I consider going to Nalani's house and asking her folks if I can have her lahala bag. Probably they wouldn't want it, and maybe she still has her paints in it. But I couldn't do that, not while they're grieving so fresh. Maybe they don't believe she's on a prairie somewhere. Maybe they don't even believe their own preacher's version, that God had a reason for taking her to His better place. Maybe they can't accept she's in her greater glory. Maybe they're afraid she's just plain gone.

The burning inside me is too strong and I run into my room, which isn't really my room—Mama always sets me straight on this, it's Uncle Ray's room because he can take his house back at any moment—and I grab up Nalani's old brush she gave me from under my bed where I stuck it, as if I have to hide it, as if I have any real paint for it, and I race back out of the house.

I'm not sure where I'm headed, the most visible wall I can find, I'm thinking; if you make your mark on something visible, then you are visible too. I run up Kamehameha highway, the ocean roaring on one side, the traffic roaring and honking in the street, and I feel like I'm hearing all of this in a dream. Because I pay absolutely no attention to it, not even to the car full of locals that swerves almost up on the grass beside me, pretending like they're going to hit me: Hey, haole girl, you like run from me! I pay them no mind.

Suddenly I know where I'm going, and I head off the road at the Crouching Lion Restaurant, toward the rocky path at the

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side of the hill, leading up the bold bare face of the mountain behind. Nalani said folks should never go up into the Koolaus at this place; It's where the Night Marchers come down, she said, Hawaiian ghosts, the army of the dead. She said I didn't know this because I'm not Hawaiian, not even a small part Hawaiian. But now it's Nalani who is dead. And going to places you shouldn't is what tagging is about, at least that's what Brandon Nakamoto said. None of this matters any more.

I kick off my slippers and begin the climb up the stark rocks, feeling their heat and roughness beneath my bare feet, breathing the ocean, the red smell of the iron earth, and somewhere back in the mountains where it's green, the ripeness of this island, guavas, mangoes, papayas, akala and ohelo berries that stain your teeth when you bite into them, sour as old rain. I tug my brush out of the back pocket of my shorts where I jammed it, up on the highest ledge that faces the sea, where the rocks are giant and become a form—a lion, how the restaurant got its name.

Here it is like a wall, a place where everyone can see. I take my brush without any paint, and I move it across the face of the rock in a big swooping motion, a semi-circle, a half of something that's not quite whole, but it's a half that says *something*. For me, C, for Creamy. I feel the motion of the brush under my hand, dipping and swooping, back and forth, becoming its own movement, spinning over the surface of the sun-warmed rock like the world spinning under my feel, real as that. It could be a L, for Lucy, I realize, it makes no difference what the letter is named. I'm thinking *blue*, a fine, new blue, not Cerulean Blue or Midnight Blue or even True Blue. My blue. And above the blue sky, below the blue sea, and here, on this mountain, me.

HP

*"Haole Girl Blue" originally appeared in F Magazine
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Jennifer L. Holley
Mother Ghost

At night I lay my spirit
down, daughter, into your body.
Our widow's peaks align,

my fingers slip into yours
as into buttery gloves,
my toes stretch to your length.

Asleep, you do not notice
how gently I lift two fingers
and rub their smooth pink tips

against your thigh to feel
the slightest flesh on flesh
on you, the living body

closest to what I was.
I tremble inside of you,
our two hearts beating as one.

Another move might wake you,
or make me fall in love
with touch, make me forget

I don't belong in you.

*"Mother Ghost" originally appeared in Tattoo Highway
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Jennifer L. Holley
Diamond Dust

Beneath the hurricane's wide-open eye,
beneath the moon that steps across the sky
like an angel afraid to fall, we strip
in ones and twos along the wall that keeps
our houses safe against the sea.

We pull down jeans, unbutton shirts, unhook
bras, and rub our hands in between the stones
to find deep gaps in which to hide our soft
shed-skins. Walking apart to conceal our grins,
we stumble on rocks into the sea.

Spirits conjured sheer-white into this world,
together we find what parts of us light loves—
the milky undersides of arms and wrists;
on Jessica, the periwinkle twists
upon her breasts; on Michael's hips,

the curves on which he cups his hands. Light loves
the hair Linda secures behind her ear,
and Jennifer's lips, glittering black, unclasped
to let a scream slide out, as she's the first
to vanish underwater, to come

up painted silver-blue. We all dive in
to be as beautiful as she, to shine our dullest spots,
which in the day we'd love to give away.
Only storm waves keep us from swimming out
and catching hold of night's tail.

*"Diamond Dust" originally appeared in The Harford Courant
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Lydia Davis has written numerous fiction works, including *Break It Down* (Serpent's Tail, 1986), winner of the PEN/Hemingway Citation in 1987, *Almost No Memory*, and most recently *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (McSweeney's 2001). Her fiction has been selected for the Pushcart Prize, the PEN Syndicated Fiction Contest, and the Pushcart Foundation's Writer's Choice. She is a prominent translator and also holds the distinction of being named an official Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Government.

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Kevin Frazier's fiction has appeared in *The Wascana Review*, *The Journal of Baltic Writers*, and the *Seattle Weekly*, among other places, and his poems have appeared in *Cider Press Review* and *For Poetry*. He has won the Luckie Budd Waller Award for short fiction, the Richardson Scholarship, and the Edith K. Draham Award for Creative Writing. In addition, he has published studies of the Russian poet Khodasevich.

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Jennifer L. Holley has studied at Fairfield University, Oxford University, Southern Connecticut State University, and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received her MFA in Writing. Her poetry has appeared in *The Best of the Prose Poem* and *Tattoo Highway*. She works as the editorial assistant for the *Yale Alumni Magazine* and teaches English at Southern Connecticut State University. She lives in Old Saybrook, Connecticut.

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Sheree Renée Thomas is the editor of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (Warner Aspect), winner of the World Fantasy Award and the Gold Pen Award and a co-founder of *Anansi*. She is the publisher of Wanganegresse Press and works as an editorial consultant and freelancer. A 1999 Clarion West graduate and a Cave Canem Poetry Fellow, her short fiction and poetry is collected in works selected by Ursula K. Le Guin and Elizabeth Alexander and appear in several anthologies and journals, including *Role Call: A Generational Collection of Social & Political Black Literature & Art* (Third World Press), *2001: A Science Fiction Poetry Anthology* (Anamnesis Press), *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam* (Three Rivers Press/Crown), *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* (Smith College/Wesleyan University Press), *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* (New York University), and Ishmael Reed's *Konch*. Her short fiction is also forthcoming Spring 2003 in *Mojo: Conjure Stories* edited by Nalo Hopkinson. She is currently editing a second volume of *Dark Matter* (Warner, 2004). A member of the New Renaissance Writers Guild and the Beyond Dusa Artist Collective, Thomas, a native of Memphis, lives in New York with her family.

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The John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction 2003

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

Opens: January 1 Postmark Deadline: March 1
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John Gardner—fiction writer 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 John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction.

Fiction in any style, form or genre is welcome as long as it is 1) no longer than 8000 words and 2) previously unpublished. The entry fee is **\$10 per story**. You may send as many stories as you wish, but no more than **1 story 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 stories entered will be considered for publication in *Harpur Palate*. All entrants will receive a copy of the issue in which the winning story appears. Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, an e-mail address you check regularly and story title. 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:

John Gardner Fiction Contest
Harpur Palate
Dept. of English
Binghamton University
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