

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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## Harpur Palate, Volume 3 Number 2, Winter 2003/2004

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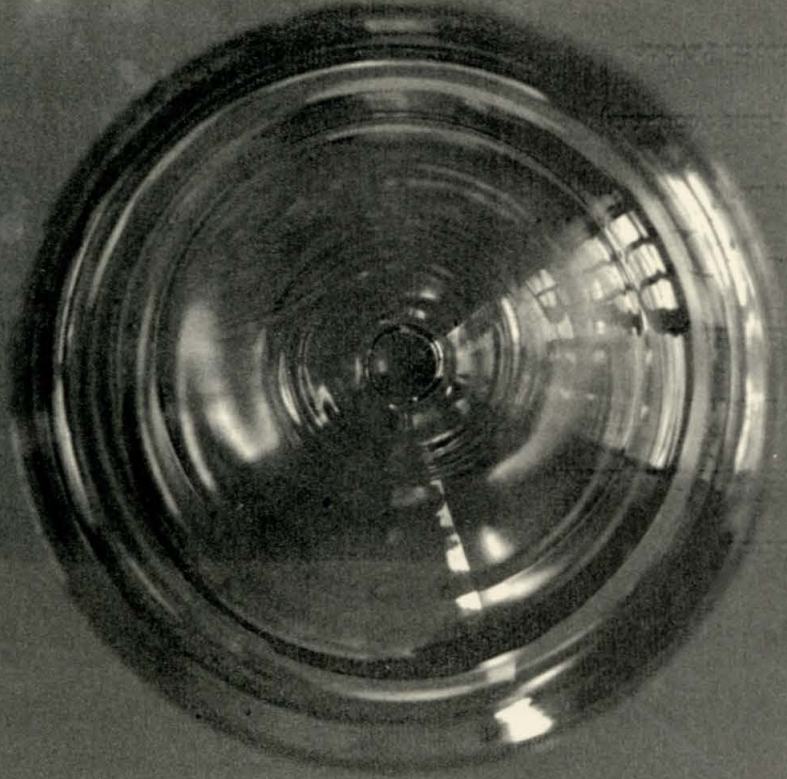
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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 3 Number 2, Winter 2003/2004

# Harpur Palate

Volume 3 Issue 2    Winter 2003/2004



Poetry by Ruth Stone and Lexi Rudnitsky  
Fiction by Mary Anne Mohanraj and Jenny Steele  
Creative Nonfiction by Sean Thomas Dougherty

# Harpur Palate

Volume 3 Issue 2 Winter 2003/2004



Binghamton University  
New York



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## The John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction

Award: \$500 and publication in the Summer issue of *Harpur Palate*

Opens: January 1

Extended Deadline: March 31

John Gardner—fiction writer, dramatist, and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the creative writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the Annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction.

Short story submissions should be: 1) 8,000 words or less, and 2) previously unpublished. You may enter as many stories as you wish. The entry fee is \$10 per story. Please send checks drawn on a U.S. bank or money orders. Please make sure your checks are made out to *Harpur Palate*, or we won't be able to process them (or accept your submission).

Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, e-mail address 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 send disposable copies.

Send entries along with a business-size self-addressed stamped envelope (#10 SASE) for contest results to:

John Gardner Fiction Contest  
*Harpur Palate*  
English Department  
Binghamton University  
P.O. Box 6000  
Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

## Policies and Oranges

Jenny Steele

### 1

Cutty's mother blindfolded him with a discarded scarf (a jade green scarf patterned with ash-white commas, silken, silky soft on the boy's eyelids). In this dim now, this hard gray. Restlessness circling him. Hot breath in his ear now, his mother's sweet breath. "Fun, Cutty. Remember." *Of course*. She had insisted on this to him when he had come into her room hours earlier. Her room: private, severed; in other rooms, she yielded or conquered: this was the language of her war with Cutty's father. In her room was a small bench with a slate-blue cushion, velvet, and an antique vanity, maple, with her tools, her paints. She was leaning into its foxed mirror. "We'll have fun, Cuthbert." She colored her mouth an improbable coral, clamped the excess color into a tissue. "Come here." Cutty obeyed; in the mirror he watched his reflection come up behind hers. "Am I beautiful, Cutty?"

Cutty hesitated. This was a crucial element in their little game: a hint of doubt, purely false, then the erasing of it. "Like rain," Cutty answered. "Like a dove."

"Kind boy." She wadded the tissue with proof of her mouth on it, dropped it in a brass waste pail (swabs in it damp with astringents, lotions: residue). From a tiny glass bottle, she tipped a dark perfume into her wrists, into the blue veins under the wrist's thin skin. These were pulse points, Cutty understood. She put an arm around Cutty's waist and closed him to her body like a hinge. Cutty studied the folds in her red silk robe, how the light from her vanity's yellow bulbs lay in the glossy folds. And his mother inspected her finished face, each lash emphasized, each blemish eliminated, eyebrows plucked: such trouble taken. "Go get ready now." With a swim stroke, she swept Cutty back.

*Fun. Remember.* A long, cool hand cupped on the nape of his neck: his mother's hand. She welcomed the crowd around them, charmed them, jested, and the crowd buzzed, funned. She spun Cutty, dizzying him. Cutty imagined the blindfold's knot tight on his skull as a satellite of sorts, a moon in orbit. *Fun? No.* What Cutty would preserve of this day, his tenth birthday, would be moments from earlier in the day: in his father's den (lacquered swordfish, bearskin rug), opening dumb gifts from distant aunts (magic kits, model airplane kits: boys like kits!); and then he waited for his mother to come home from the city, from a city salon with a fresh trim and tint, a practical, masculine cut, golden; and in his mother's room later, breathing in the chemicals of her golden hair, witnessing in part her private hour of metamorphosis, glimpsing curves; later still, in his room, in plain brown pants and a plaid shirt, Cutty lay on his small bed, anticipated the knock, anticipated, "Come, Cutty. The party's beginning."

His mother stopped spinning Cutty and the foam rubber grip of an aluminum baseball bat was put into his hands. As he lifted the bat, Cutty wobbled, his equilibrium lost. Murmurs of impatience and innocent lust flowed from the circle of child guests. There was candy, wasn't there? and little toys too? And it was up to Cutty to split wide the piñata's belly and let gush the loot.

The piñata was a stub-legged donkey with a hide of pink, yellow, and green crepe loops, with a paper saddle and reins. The farm's loyal Jim had made a trip across the border to Nogales, Sonora for this piñata and other Mexican items: authentic vanilla and tequila, pills from the *farmacia*, whatever the Policy family needed. Jim was Henry Policy's right-hand man, a timid man, quiet, quietly tenacious. Clever with rifle and rod and reel, he went with Mr. Policy on hunts in western forests and fishing trips in the Gulf of California. Jim knew his value, but was cautious and proud. His home was a small clapboard house off the northern edge of the orange groves; his wife was Dee, a sour woman, undone, Mrs. Policy's domestic. Jim and Dee had

a daughter Cutty's age, Theresa. Theirs was a safe but severe existence.

With a skein of nylon rope, Jim had hoisted the donkey piñata into the rafters of the barn and secured it there in the shadows. Now he lowered the donkey into the ring of children. One hoof brushed the crown of Cutty's blond hair; he flinched and swung the bat in a clumsy arc. Jim tugged sharply on the rope, flying the piñata beyond reach.

Voices urged: "Come on, Cutty!" The boys and girls invited were classmates from the local elementary school, the children of the farm's employees. Henry Policy didn't like such intimacy: it harmed productivity. And lately, he'd been quelling chatter in the groves. When the news of her husband's censorship came to her ears, Susan Policy barked at him, "You forbid chit-chat? Idiotic!"

"I've heard gossip."

"Like what?"

"What isn't good. I am a private man."

"Twisted up. Afraid."

"Be smart."

"For Cutty's birthday, I want the children here. I want everybody here." This wasn't sedition. Susan believed this mingling decent and dignity-enhancing. She liked the farm's help: poor, desert whites and Mexicans, legal, illegal. She had come from Phoenix (girls' academy, swimming medals, smuggled schnapps). She met Henry in college, at a dance, and there was crude seduction, and he talked her into the world of oranges, growing oranges here in Bishop, Arizona, off the far fringes of Phoenix. "We'll battle, of course," she had said to him, and he had answered, "Yes, I hope to." And since, love lay with venom in her heart: heart joy, heartache.

Yes, Susan liked the people of Bishop. She joined Dee for bottles of cola in the laundry room, or she urged Dee to sit down. "Sit. Please." Often: the cushioned bench in Susan's room. These were bewildering, graceless moments for Dee, and she suffered. Mrs. Policy would unbutton a gray blouse, try a

blue blouse, stone cool in her red lace bra and red lace panties, and she would ask Dee's opinion.

"You look fine in anything, Mrs. Policy."

"Cocktails. Cubes of cheese on toothpicks. Boozy flirts. The usual nonsense. Come on, Dee. The gray?"

"The gray's nice, Mrs. Policy."

"Wouldn't you rather call me Susan?"

"No."

"Bring Theresa up to the house sometime." Susan Policy thumbed a fallen strap up over her bony shoulder. "Anytime."

"Thank you." Dee scampered back to her chores, breath tattered.

The children came to Cutty's birthday and the parents too, and they gathered in the barn on this Friday, this hot autumn afternoon. Most had plans for the weekend: some would go to Phoenix glimmering on the horizon like a biblical city; others would camp (cheap beer, cheap meat: pine woods, mountain breezes); lovers would lick traces of orange from hands and necks, juice and sweat salt from a week's labor.

The piñata dropped again, and Cutty thrashed the bat, bounced its barrel off the rope. He jabbed the bat again and again at empty air; the children became edgy and mad, candy demons. Cutty's eyes swelled hotly; he was glad for the blindfold.

"Here. Enough." Cutty's mother entered the ring of children. Cutty heard the hush, the awe for her. What he wanted to hoard of her was her flash and finesse, what, as an adult, he would tag carnality: it had snared his father, easy prey flayed. Her love scattered in the circle as she gripped the aluminum bat with Cutty. "Okay, Jim," she said. "Let it down."

Cutty understood this as another moment to package and shelve for later use: the clink of her metallic bangles, her hands tight around his. She kneed him forward and with a flourish they cracked the saddle of the donkey, halved the donkey neatly. A noisy rush nearly knocked Cutty down. He pulled the silky blindfold down around his throat. On the dusty floor

of the barn, elbows slammed elbows, greedy hands disemboweled the piñata. The parents spurred or jeered as their children jammed pockets with candy (taffies, lozenges, lollipops) and cheap plastic toys (tops, whistles, harmonicas). Above the chaos dangled the front half of the piñata. Jim, just visible near the barn's north wall, jerked the nylon rope, making spill what remained in the donkey's chest cavity and skull. Jellyed wedges of lime, lemon, and orange sealed in cellophane wrappers tumbled out. Jim and Dee's daughter, Theresa, sat back suddenly, sat on her heels, and cupped her palms in the lap of her blue and white dress, and the citrus wedges fell into her hands. Theresa smiled up at Cutty. Later, in recollection, he would decide that he returned her smile.

2

"Cutty? Is that you? Cutty?"

A woman, a clanging burst, descended on Cutty in the airport lounge. He shielded his face with one hand. "Sorry," he said. "You've mistaken me."

"No. It's you. Don't you recognize me, Cutty? It's me, Theresa. From Bishop?"

"Oh. Theresa. Yes. Hello. Please. Join me." He gestured at the barstool next to him and Theresa put a slim hip on it. She eyed Cutty up and down, cut him with knife eyes. "People still call you Cutty?"

"Close friends could. And people who knew me from Bishop."

"I knew you. I remember. I've forgotten a lot. Methodically. But not you. The Policy boy."

A disembodied voice cooed through the terminal, "Now boarding, Gate Eleven, Miami. Now boarding, Gate Twelve, Atlanta."

Cutty grinned and blinked at Theresa, pushed the plastic bowl of Spanish peanuts towards her. How to identify in this woman the girl Theresa, the sad, anxious girl from Bishop,



Arizona? He remembered her from elementary school, its hot rooms, its stink of paste and the janitor's bucket and child crevices. Theresa's desk was next to Cutty's; he noticed her dirty socks, her dirty ankles, the grease in her hair. During recess, she scuffled with brutal boys, bit them, bloodied her mouth. But where was that girl now? Hidden, swallowed up by this woman: put together, bold, in silk and leather, hair clipped and fox red, silver hoops in her earlobes, silver links around her wrists, wireless frames with lenses tinted pink.

"I'm happy bumping into you like this," Cutty said. "What a coincidence."

"Is that vodka and tonic? I'll have one too. My flight isn't for another hour. Yours, Cutty?"

"It's delayed. Bad weather."

Theresa waved to the bartender, then dug in her calfskin purse for a wad of cash. "Limes too, okay?" she added. The bartender tipped airport vodka into a cup of ice cubes and blasted tonic from a nozzle into it. Theresa put her elbows on the bar's lip and again eye-slashed Cutty. "Remember that stupid birthday party? With the piñata? Flailing that damn bat. Funny."

"It's a blur."

"I need the ladies' room." Theresa shouldered past a group of British tourists coming into the lounge. The tourists settled around little round tables; they wanted beer, they were mad with time's slack. "Now arriving, Gate Five, Dallas." Birthday party. Piñata. Yes. That day. Gift kits. His mother, her mirror. Uproot the panic, there was custom love and lewd salvation. The bartender, a rail-thin black man in a blue vest, set fresh drinks down, took the money. Cutty waited.

"This *is* amazing, isn't it? Really." Theresa sat on the barstool, picked up her drink. "You and me in the same airport, in the same concourse. Simultaneously. Where is this? Saint Louis."

"It is amazing."

"And where are you going, Cutty?"

"Minneapolis. I teach at a small college in southern

Minnesota.”

“Oh. Teach what?”

“English Literature.”

“Oh.”

Cutty Policy was clean and lean; in a nice brown suit and nice brown shoes and a blue and yellow necktie. There had been a colloquium Saturday and Sunday in St. Louis for teachers of poetry: were curriculums infecting students with poetry or immunizing them? And there were readings each evening; Cutty was asked to share selections from a book he had edited, a collection of Christina Rossetti’s poetry (Rossetti’s selves: boxed blaze). He thought of showing a copy to Theresa, but he didn’t. In its olive-green dust jacket, the volume throbbed in a pocket of his backpack; it was proof of what he had become, of who: someone unlikely, someone who rented a tidy cottage with bare pine floors and plain white walls, with catalog furniture and a Turkish rug. He walked to the school every day, in the snow if necessary (snow an unlimited joy for the desert boy), to his classroom in a red brick building where he would funnel and jam and unleash words.

“And you, Theresa? Where are you flying today?”

“Phoenix.”

“Home?”

“No. No need. I’m on business. I’m a consultant for a fiber optics company. A scout.” She gulped down her drink, beckoned to the bartender; in her mouth was ice and she shattered it with her teeth.

Cutty thumbed the thin red skin from some Spanish peanuts and popped them down his throat. He prompted Theresa. “A scout?”

“It’s what I ended up as, Cutty. I was here and there and then I went to New York with just enough of this and just enough of that to become what I am now. I guess that’s how it is for everybody. And now here’s this day and this hour and you and me. Converging.” Theresa put another fist of cash on the bar. “Happenstance. What if I? What if you? But no ifs. Here

we are. What if I wasn't in New York? What if I was in Guatemala City? I *was* there. For two whole years. Volunteer shit. Recruited as a senior in high school. An adventure! Travel! Escape! You were sent to private high school, right, Cutty?"

"Yes. A boys' academy."

"Little blue blazers?"

"Little blue blazers."

"I know. I saw you."

"And Guatemala, Theresa?"

"I could have stayed there forever. Could have met some beautiful young man at the American Club and we would have had beautiful children. And the beautiful young man and I and our beautiful children would dig wells and sewers and we'd distribute toothbrushes and toothpaste and we'd wear filthy ponchos and hats woven from hemp and we'd *fit right in*. But I didn't stay. I *left*. Ideals? Why bother. I needed a bath. A bubble bath. A *soak*. I checked into a Holiday Inn in Florida. And I had a bath. Those little soaps, Cutty. Those little soaps wrapped in glossy paper, and you use the soap once, maybe twice, then the maid tosses it away the next day. The waste, Cutty! Isn't it terrific? *Guilt? No*. Here's this cocktail napkin. Entire forests are chopped down to make cocktail napkins for our vodka and tonics. And then the napkins are disposed of, hauled to a dump. We're not sitting here worrying about secondary use, we're not saying: oh, toilet tissue, oh, kindling. I love the waste here. A tub of water, sixty gallons, precious, unpolluted, the village dreams of it, and we *soak* in it and *drain* it. *Guilt? No*. I refuse it. Here we are, Cutty. Pure chance."

"What if."

"Exactly."

The lovely, urgent voice again: arrivals, departures; Cutty listened for his flight and for Theresa's. A swarm of people (peddlers, fugitives, pilgrims, fools) went past the lounge, and some came in, bleary eyes tilted down at wristwatches. The lounge bulged. Cutty was suffocating. Bolted on a high shelf was a TV and the bartender switched it on now: beach volleyball, plash of

yellow sand, tanned limbs. Somebody jostled Cutty roughly. Theresa squeezed her slice of lime into her mouth, and the juice squirted. Cutty again pictured his tenth birthday party, how candy fell from the donkey pinata and into Theresa's cupped palms: jellied citrus. Cutty needed air. "I don't want you to miss your flight, Theresa."

"I won't."

"This was fun."

"You know I came up to your house. Your mother gave me Pepsi and fancy cookies. She was like magic. Still is, no doubt. I crept into her room once. I remember: she was down in the den, she was trying to find a certain song on an album like she wasn't sure of its title, she was taking the needle off the grooves, laying the needle on the next grooves. I went into her room. It was dim. My heart was jumping. Scraps of music blasted up through the floorboards, piano, trumpet, jazzy music. I went to her vanity. The array: lipstick, mascara, pencils of color, jars of cream. I swiped a pink puff, put it in my pocket. I was terrified. But I had to have something of hers."

"Okay. There. Your flight. Phoenix. Now boarding. Gate Sis. Here, Theresa. Allow me." Cutty guided Theresa from the lounge to her gate; he wished her luck and walked away. On a bank of screens, an inventory of to and from, in blue: on time; in red: Minneapolis, Delayed. Cutty slumped against a window and breathed. Heavy jets lifting off lightly, lightly touching down.

3

This aberrant rant in an airport lounge: Theresa blamed the vodka. This idiotic vent. It was because of Cutty too, colliding with him. Odd Cutty. Fussy Cutty. Had he quit his boy-hood? Yes. Had he broken from his mother's gravitational pull? Surely, yes. But Theresa hadn't asked him what his life was like now: had he wed, was he happy, was he on a track? These seemed like critical issues this morning. (Wait: Cutty

taught in Minnesota, college English; this fact clung.)

Theresa swung her feet from the bed to the floor. Her head felt tight but all right. She shucked her sleep tee and scuffed into the bathroom and bowed into the mirror. The body's truth: skin drift, used eyes, dark moons under those eyes. Pee, flush. She splashed milky tap water on her face and neck; she rinsed her mouth, spit. There was a coffee pot in the room and a basket with packets of sugar and cream. Theresa tore open a mylar pouch with a little pillow of coffee in it. With coffee and maybe a brisk swim in the hotel pool, she would restore herself. She had the entire morning free; she wanted to visit the city's aquarium. She knew the museums (paintings of wistful cowboys and somber squaws) and the zoo too: targets of school field trips. Sack lunches. Hot, dusty bus. The zoo day caromed in her skull: Cutty's mother (in ivory, in melon) and Theresa's (small, dark, witless) joined the trip, helped to herd and to hush the children; in the petting pen, how a drawf goat sneezed on her mother and how her mother reacted (flustered, quick tissue); peanut butter and jelly, cheese sticks, tepid punch; Cutty and Mrs. Policy hand in hand into the aviary, lost in mist and tropical squawks, Theresa's heart knotted. The aquarium? Sure. Illogical, ironic in this bowl of desert. Joyous and wet. Not blurred with what was.

Coming here to Phoenix wasn't Theresa's idea. She had endorsed San Diego as the site for the fiber optics plant. The ocean! The beach! The naval base with its clean young sailors skilled and eager for jobs. "Yes, Theresa, but Phoenix is still on the agenda." Her boss had peered into her cubicle, drummed his fingers on the hard tweed partition. He was recently wifeless: stubbly jaw, musky, gym-raw. "Just go. Chat Phoenix up." *Okay.* It was worth this job, this life in New York: souvlaki in the park at noon, lunatics with saxophones collecting coins in cases, the hiss and piss of the subway, ice rinks, holiday windows, crime news, blood and miracles, the crush and flurry, her room and a half in the Village, a busy futon, this pace, this pace. *Okay.* For this, for New York: Phoenix today, an urban panel

scheduled today.

The coffee pot gurgled, bitter, chemical coffee, black. Theresa's neck popped and her sockets popped as she whirled her arms. Jeans, a silk tank top, Portuguese sandals: she took these from her suitcase and put them on the bed. Her business suit (soot-gray trousers and jacket, butter-yellow blouse) hung in its garment bag. *Right*. She unzipped it, put the clothes in the closet. Extra bras, extra panties: in the suitcase, in the swag with the elastic lip. *Settle now. Focus forward*. Theresa inched open the window drapes. Other downtown buildings loomed, horns honked, pedestrians clustered and flowed. She expected the fluted copper columns of the old bank, but it wasn't in view. Maybe that bank was on another block.

That bank held much meaning, hated; it evoked the picture of her father there, hat in his hands. Jim asked for few afternoons free. Mr. Policy nodded yes, nodded hello to Theresa if she had come up with Jim. (Mr. Policy oiling a shotgun in his garage, crimping shot into shells, Theresa's fist a little ball of bones and sweat in her father's hand.) In their battered El Camino, Jim and Dee and Theresa made the quick trip from Bishop to Phoenix. In a city lot, Jim parked, prayed, "Our own corner. Our own trees. Or lettuce. Radishes."

"They're not bad to us," said Dee.

"I want out from under them."

Jim took the straw hat with its black ribbon band that Theresa had held in her lap and he set it tenderly on his head. "Go shopping," he said, his voice bright. "Buy a nice outfit." Dee exhaled: another dumb go, love marred.

Theresa's father vanished down the street, towards the bank's columns, a shiny rib cage. Theresa and her mother dashed across crosswalks and into J. C. Penney's entrance (aqua blue tile, flaked caulk). Women's and girls' clothes were on the second floor. Staff were carrying mannequins up the escalator; Theresa and Dee rose between slender, pink legs and curvy torsos. In among circular racks of girls' dresses (the screech of hangers on the chrome rod), Dee grumbled to Theresa: how

much prettier you'd feel if you'd just *try* something *soft*, something *feminine*, it won't *kill* you, it won't *result in instant death* if you'd just *try* a *god damn dress*. Locked in the fitting room, stripped down to her white cotton underpants and white training bra, Theresa shook, hot, cold.

Dee rattled the latch, pleaded, "Come on, Theresa," and her voice was terrible, cauterizing. A dress dead on a hook: blue and white, synthetic, a floppy collar, multi-use for burials, mass, parties. Hate flowered like a burn on Theresa's skin. They collected Jim in the sterile lobby of the bank. He closed his eyes: enough; he wouldn't beg again. On the way back to Bishop, they stopped at a cheap cafeteria off the freeway. Beef cubes, noodles, corn, carrots, rice pudding, chocolate pudding. It reeked. But Theresa liked this cafeteria. The tabletops were laminated with antique French newspaper, ads for *chapeaux* and *gants* and *parapluies*. These mysterious words under her plate, reflected in her knife's blade, cooled Theresa, cheered her, somehow confirmed for her that someday she would be an adult and real, that she would be sophisticated and melancholy like Cutty's mother, that she would have boobs and regrets like Cutty's fantastic mother. This numbed Theresa to Phoenix, to the Bishop groves, to her ordinary, failing parents.

*Forget that, forget wholly*, Theresa scolded herself now. *The girl of then: somebody else. I am no more her. I am this now: sexed, hard, quick, waxed, and dyed.*

A sharp knock sounded on the door. "Room service!"

Room service? Had she ordered breakfast? No. Theresa grabbed her tank top and slipped into it. She went to the door and peeped through the peephole at a uniformed boy with a tray balanced on one uplifted palm; on the tray, on a beige linen napkin: a cinnamon bun, cantaloupe and honeydew and strawberries, a thermal carafe. "I'm afraid you have the wrong room," Theresa said. Or had she rung for this? No. She held still, her breath shallow in the bottom of her lungs. Checking into this hotel, a bellhop with her luggage: nothing of these came to her. A jumbo jet at JFK, the flight into Sky Harbor? She had no

memory of these either, of any aspect of it: a stewardess with her emergency patter (oxygen mask, floatation cushion), a snack box, turbulence. *Wait.* The layover in a midwestern airport, vodka and tonic with Cutty. New Cutty. Fit Cutty. The theft of a pink puff from his mother's vanity: she'd given Cutty this secret. Inhaling that puff, the residue of lavender talcum rimming her nostrils like a drug: she'd kept that from Cutty, it was still hers. The luggage carousel, a cab to this downtown hotel: nothing, nothing. Her final recollection: Cutty guiding her, using her elbow as a rudder, putting her into the line for her plane.

Theresa ignored the second knock on the door and the boy's weary summons; she went to the window again and pressed against the slot of glass. Below, a woman stumbled on a curb. In her arms was a grocery sack brimming with vivid oranges; as the woman fell to her knees, the oranges spilled and bounced into traffic. A light cry pinched Theresa's throat. *Where am I? What is this?*

4

Cutty strolled with his mother within the southern margin of the orange groves. Trips home were infrequent, but Cutty always came into the trees just as dusk hit. His mother buckled her sandals on and followed him in. This had become a cherished ritual for them, and nobody else was aware of it. Cutty's father was isolated and happy with his guns and maps (he wanted a lion pelt and elephant tusks: lawless safari in Africa). Cutty had found him in his den with his finger on Zambia. "Hello, son," he'd said. He had lost at last and it was obvious to Cutty. Cutty backed out of the den. A cool bath, a nap in his room, a boy again in his quiet boy room. And then, the day's heat unfixed, Cutty went into the groves. The sun had saturated the blossoms, the soil, the leaves; the atmosphere was thick and adhered to the skin, a sweet film.

"And how is Cutty? My kind boy." Susan drew up to



Cutty, linked her arm in his.

"I'm well."

"And school? You like teaching?"

"Yes. You always ask the same questions."

"Of course." She nestled against him. She seemed frail, pale, less a wow. Her dress was white cotton, sleeveless; around her neck lay a choker of turquoise chunks. "Where did you put the rug?"

"In the front room." Susan had shipped to him a lush, indigo blue and ginger-brown rug, Turkish. She'd flown to Minnesota to inspect Cutty's cottage and she had frowned at its plainness, its stark efficiency. She gestured suggestions: a cabinet in that nook, art on that naked wall, a floor lamp there, chairs there. Cutty came up behind her, pinned her wrists to her hips, held her still. "I like it as it is." He inhaled fully, filled his chest against her back; she elbowed his ribs. In Minneapolis, Cutty took her for dim sum, green tea, lychee nuts, and a foreign film, glum Czech. It was an anxious visit, mercifully brief. Six months passed when Susan sent the rug; Cutty laughed as the delivery men unrolled it.

They cornered into another neat row and they slowed. Cutty rubbed his chin in her hair; her golden hair was dark brown at the roots, her precision lax now. He had noticed it earlier, this loosening; neglected cuticles, her salmon-pink polish bitten. He noticed as Susan laid her hand on the collection of Rossetti that Cutty had edited; but how he loved those torn salmon nails on the olive green book, and he would remember this.

"Am I beautiful, Cutty?"

Cutty hesitated. It was the game: a quick flicker of false doubt, then the casting off of it. "Like rain. Like a dove."

"Bring a girl home, Cutty. Some girl whose heart you've wounded."

"Yes. That's what I do. I wound. I inflict wounds."

"Oh, don't."

There was someone. Karen. But she wasn't his. She

was swift, pony-like, with a black ponytail. She coached the college's lacrosse squad. She taught geometry and made it popular. Cutty sat in Karen's class once. She wrote formulas on the chalkboard and drew a cylinder, a cone, a cube. She hooked her thumbs in her pants' pockets, coolly paced, coolly talked the jargon of geometry. She invited Cutty to a get-together she was giving. She had a cottage near campus similar to his. Cutty took a bloody merlot to Karen; she hugged him and pulled him in. There was too much of a group. A wrought-iron rack with potted ferns, a blue zigzag of neon: Cutty stood between these. Two cats (mist-gray: Bill; calico: Lulu) inspected ankles and eluded cuddles. Karen drifted from guest to guest. Cutty hurt; the night was bad. "I like you, Cutty," Karen said the next Monday as he sheltered her under his black umbrella and walked her to her red Civic in the faculty lot and asked her out. "But no." She didn't offer why. The rain drummed hard on the umbrella.

"Guess who I came across a while ago?" said Cutty.

"Who?"

"Theresa. Remember Theresa?"

"Jim and Dee's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Of course. Pitiful girl. Mousy. Is she still mousy?"

"No, I wouldn't describe her as mousy. She's grown up now, obviously. She seemed sewn up. I really didn't recognize her at first. At first glance. Outfit, hair, voice. Self invention. And she confessed to me, weirdly. She came up to the house once, with Dee I suppose, and she went into your bedroom and she stole a powder puff from your vanity. She claims she needed it."

"It was bleak for her. There was bleakness."

Since the airport lounge (vodka, peanuts, Guatemala, frazzled Brits, boarding calls), Theresa had invaded Cutty, brusque flashes in his mind: as he laced up his boots for the season's final blizzard, as his students untangled the Brownings, as he crashed to his knees in his office after Karen had denied

him. But it wasn't the woman Theresa had become who occupied him, it was the girl she had been, the girl who gathered candies into the lap of her ugly blue-and-white dress. Had she smiled at Cutty in that moment? Yes, and he had mirrored that smile.

"What does Theresa do now?" asked Susan.

"She travels. She's with a fiber optics firm. A consultant."

"Imagine."

"And Dee and Jim?" said Cutty. "Jim's eyes?"

"Worse. He's almost blind. He can't hunt with your father now. But we keep him on the payroll. My idea, of course. It's terrifically hazardous. Pump toggles on or off, wrongly. Irrigation channels flooded. Accidents. We had a fire in the east barn recently."

"What happened?"

"A generator overheated. Minor damage. Your father scorched the edge of one hand, but he's okay, he's so Irish ruddy, nobody notices. Jim was wild. He was so sorry, so ashamed. We've just given him a fake job: security chief."

"Security?"

"He takes it seriously. He wears a crisp blue work shirt, a policeman's shirt. Dee even irons them. And he carries a black billy club and he patrols the perimeter of the farm. Jots notes in a memo pad. Reports anything suspicious."

"Suspicious citrus?"

"Don't fun, Cuthbert."

Worlds pivoted on a pinpoint, pulse points; the circuit and random punch of finding himself here or there, with fancy in his heart or prudence. Cutty mulled this, let it in, gated it. In the blank gaps, he welcomed tumult and sun.

"Help me here, Cutty." They'd reached a canal of pretty water, clouds in it; a narrow plank lay across its banks as a bridge. Susan got in his arms, a W of skin, bones, lavender. And as he lifted his mother into the next parcel of the groves, Cutty imagined Theresa flying across the sky in a sleek jet while her blind

father below bludgeoned into pulp an orange that had fallen  
criminally—plop!—across a boundary.

## Milton Kessler Memorial Poetry Prize Winner

Malaria

Lexi Rudnitsky

In Guatemala I remembered the dead.  
Friends no longer friends  
insisted they had survived.  
My mother smiled from her hospital bed.  
Those were light-skinned dreams,  
where all my pasts were sanguine:  
the wine did not stain, the driver  
swerved in time, we all understood  
the reasons I came here.

This is a different decadence.  
Mosquitoes gather by puddles  
on the dirt floor. Rain warps  
the splintered board I sleep on.  
Outside: explosions or thunder,  
murder or disease.  
A doorless knocking into night.

Border  
Ruth Stone

Driving through Indiana,  
creeks wriggle along the highway,  
incidental,  
like, "Oh yes,  
someone used to wade there."  
A knot of deformed trees,  
almost too old fashioned,  
remnants of a farm, discontinued merchandise.  
But it's mostly lost streams,  
weed-trees and a loneliness that hints  
of automatic two car garage doors and zoyossa grass;  
small, well kept lawns and sudden streets,  
and identical houses around a factory  
that sprawls the way small colleges used to spread  
themselves out:  
lawns, flowerbeds, groundsman with mowing machines.  
The quiet authority of culture.

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## The Gift

Margarita Engle

I assumed it would be the perfect gift, worthy of an exile's nostalgia. So when I traveled to Cuba to visit relatives, I brought back a pair of vials containing the island, one filled with blood-red clay from a sugarcane field, the other with finely beveled crystals of sugary-white beach sand. My grandmother wasn't pleased. She took my gifts of soil and sand, set them on a table, and glared at them as she reminisced with dismay. "*Ay, esta tierra roja, esta tierra maldita*, this red dirt, this cursed dirt, how I hated it, *mira*, look, it's the same color as the devil's forked tail, I grew up with this evil red mud stuck to my feet, and then, when they sent me to the fields to do forced labor..."

My grandma looked up and noticed me standing there. By then, we both knew I'd chosen the worst possible gift. "The sand," she added mercifully, "is pretty." I was never one to enjoy toasting my skin in the hot sun on a beach, but every year there was a season when the whole family went to the shore. I always sat in the shade, on a blanket, because I didn't like getting sand in my clothes. But we were together, that was something, always a big picnic, everyone swimming or eating, the children playing games. "*Gracias*," she finally said. "Thank you. This is a strange gift, very original, but thank you."

"*De nada*," I replied, "it was nothing." Nothing to her. Everything to me. From that moment on, I became the one with an incurable nostalgia. We'd traded places. I spent my days dreaming of red soil and white sand. She spent hers giving thanks for paved streets and a roof to shelter her from the sun.

Willing

E. Evans

In my sleep I dream endlessly of birds,  
the mathematics of jazz.  
Grey-winged finches in a fan kick.

Rain shutters the morning.  
The dogwood closed,  
their buds in a lockbox of limb.  
The azaleas, like children,  
climb onto anything that stills.

The showerhead drips onto the tile,  
almost a song.

Let this, all this, be a lesson, it hums.  
The waking,  
the distance,  
the bluebird

crushed in the polished parking lot.



## Tenderloin

Jenny Dunning

The cookbook lies open on the granite countertop. "Tenderloin," she reads, "the pampered inner muscle at the small of the back." Pinching the soft flesh behind her own waist, she is again, for a moment, inside her body; she feels so light today, as if she might float away. Close the book. With all the meals she's prepared—the family suppers, formal dinners for Roland's clients, the holiday feasts for twenty, twenty-five, his entire family—there should be no need to consult a recipe. Sear first, to seal in the juices. She sets the oven to four hundred degrees and lights the burner beneath the cast-iron skillet, the one thing she refused to discard from her life before Roland swept her into his and instituted his sanitized version of domesticity (he objected to her not washing it with soap). As the pan heats, she considers the sauce. Shallots, she decides. None of the more pungent alliums. Only the mellow shallot. Perhaps sautéed with *duxelles*, the mushrooms minced tiny with the liquid squeezed from them.

Send Haley to pick oregano and basil from the sunny pots on the patio. No, Haley's not here. Haley and Eli both are with Roland's mother Vivian. "You'll want some time to yourself, dear," Vivian had said—the dear part of the lace she trimmed their relationship with, though little love was lost between the two—and hustled them into her leather-upholstered sedan. "Don't give us a thought. We'll be fine." Vivian has an old-fashioned view of children: they should be seen but not heard. Usually, Roland took them for Sunday afternoon visits. Uncomfortable with the way Vivian pulls and fusses at their clothes and continually wipes their hands with washcloths, Leah found excuses not to go. Once, when Vivian took them to the Children's Theater, Haley didn't make it to the restroom in time. But now Haley is seven, and Eli five. Leah hardly knows who they are any more. Her own life is half spent.



She had worn the navy dress with the quarter sleeves and the buttons at the neck, the top fitting trimly around her slim waist like a short jacket, the skirt hem modest at mid-calf. Instead of the showy pearls, a hand-dyed scarf, blended greens beneath a batiked blue trellis. The scarf hid her small breasts that, lately, Roland complained were more girlish than womanly; she needed to eat more. In wave after wave, the sympathizers approached her. "Oh, darling. You poor thing," one said, patting her shoulder energetically. Another reminisced: "Honey, I was in your boat. Two children. Their father hung on three days after the explosion. Korean War. You'll make out all right, though," she went on, wagging Leah's arm the whole time, "we do what we have to do, we women." The next hugged her, oblivious to her brittleness, and said, "He was a good man, darling. You can take solace in that. A good man."

Their touch made her draw back. They didn't know. These were the old lady Chamber of Commerce volunteers, women he humored and flattered by treating them like they were still young. His gift was to be whoever people wanted him to be, a different person for every occasion. Was that what you called charisma? It's what got him elected Chamber president, what made him a man-about-town. But he wasn't good, and she wasn't like them; he had suckered her into living the wrong life. He had charmed her as he charmed them, only showing his true self after their marriage when she was already pregnant.

The men came too, with their wives. They squeezed her palms, lay their hands on her arm. These weren't the men Roland entertained at their home, the brokerage clients who complimented the meals she prepared and later, loosened up from Roland's single malt scotch, slipped their hands beneath her skirt, squeezed the inside of her thigh and, in the hallway, pressed their erections against her belly.

Like a banquet laid out for guests, the casket sat at the back of the room, table height, the blue satin of the lining plump

and fresh, the raised lid its frame. Haley wouldn't leave his side. Ahead of time, the funeral director had taken Leah and the children on a tour, showed them the room full of new caskets and the collection of swords mounted on the walls of what he called the consolation room, explained they could come here if they wanted during the viewing hours. On the table he left partly-crayoned Sunday school coloring books—line drawings of Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus at the last supper, Jesus on the cross and then, Jesus ascending through geometric shards of would-be light, these already colored in waxy, garish tones; Leah flipped through the pages as he explained to the children that in death the body was just an empty shell left behind. She should have stopped him, offered them her concept of good or bad karma extending to eternity. But she felt only a circumstantial connection to these children that as babies she never put down. The pregnancies created a hollow within her, a space she could not fill, this need to be needed that grew more insistent as they became separate selves, their touch no more than a brief pressure against her hand. She stood there turning the pages. Then, in the so-called chapel—a large, sparsely furnished room—he told the children they could touch the body, that it wouldn't hurt anything. All through the viewing, Haley, in the gauzy pink dress she insisted on wearing with her blonde hair pulled to the side in a lace-covered barrette, stood sentinel at his head, her hand against the ceramic cold of his cheek. Curious, Leah touched him herself, but turned away, unwilling to step between Haley and her father. When Vivian cajoled her granddaughter to say hello to all the nice people who had come to say goodbye to her daddy, Leah snapped, "Let her be." Vivian had never thought Leah good enough for her son—too thin, too quiet, he'd be able to run rough-shod over her, and what was it her father does for a living? She had not attended their wedding, had called Leah a whore once on the phone, a night her speech was slurred from too many martinis. Only after several years had they come around to a tenuous peace, brokered by the children. When Vivian was hospitalized, something to do with her

thyroid, Leah had even taken the children to visit. Now, Vivian jumped back at Leah's uncharacteristic remark, but left Haley alone.

The pan heating, she goes to pick the herbs herself, out through the French doors of the house behind the gate that swings shut like a cage door, kitchen scissors in hand. The August air is heavy with night coming, the chance storm. In the dimming light, the blue house looks gray. What kind of house is this, this walled monument? What kind of life has she led here? She should never have married, nor had children. To cultivate plants would have been enough, the nurturing touch that passes between her fingers and the green tissues. She imagines: light flecked through age-clouded windows, filtered by the multi-shaped layers of leaves, the room a Victorian glass cathedral; heavy-limbed, hundred-year-old trees buttressed by vines, epiphytes crowding the branches and strange flowers bushing below, the whole a weaving together of tropical life that surges roofward, as though the northern winter weren't just beyond the glass; the space, incongruously, an aviary as well—the birds not exotic-plumed species, but rather drab sparrows that sought warmth through a broken pane and could not find their way free. Here Leah would traipse across stone footpaths to prune and shape, feed and water, her hose a fountain spray. But, on her Southern patio, she has only these few herb pots to tend. With one finger inserted into the loose grains of soil, she reaches for the nearby watering can, floods the pots until the water percolates through and bubbles out the bottom. Now she crops the herbs, her small, sustainable harvest and, in the kitchen again, rinses the leaves, lays them on the counter to dry.

She dribbles oil into the heated pan, then turns to the chunk of flesh resting on the butcher paper before her. A vegetarian since her teens, not out of political or health convictions so much as a repugnance to taking flesh inside her body, she is accustomed to preparing meat for others. It is something she

does without allowing herself disgust; but now, she tells herself, this will be the last time. Season. She dashes salt across the meat, then grinds pepper from the wooden mill taller than her forearm. He gave it to her. Roland. He would have her stand tableside, offering the spice like a servant. How often she imagined hitting him over the head with it. She stabs the tenderloin with a fork, flips it over, seasons the backside. Water flicked in hot oil flashes to steam. Leah lifts the meat, feels the weight, the freshness of it in her hands; blood, thin as wine, pools below. As she sets it in the pan, the oil hisses at the intrusion and sends up a spray of sizzling droplets, but she barely registers the pricks against her arm.

For a time, when the guests flowed relentlessly toward her, stalled her with their sympathies and stories (the idea occurred to her that they were here to mourn parts of their own lost lives, nothing at all to do with Roland), Leah lost track of Eli. As people dispersed, she found him: stretched out rigid on the sofa. She didn't need to ask to guess he was in his own casket, the stiff yellow brocade his imagined final bed. Enough was enough. Twining through the hangers-on, she went first to Haley, pulled her hand from the corpse, warmed it between her own two, pushed hard against the flesh so that her blood might flow in the child as it once had. "Come, time to go," she said. Bundling Haley's slight frame before her, she approached the sofa where Eli lay. She reached for her son, fully a mother for that instant, lifted the resistant form to the breast that had nurtured his pliant baby body, held his face in the crook of her shoulder so that he might smell her milky skin.

They left, walking hand in hand, three across. The older part of town centers around a square green, the funeral home on the north side, St. Mark's Episcopal Church on the east. Their progress seemingly haphazard, Leah and the children passed the church where already people lapped at the doors, turned down Main Street and pulled up short at the ice cream

parlor. "Come on," she said when the children, looking back toward the church, hesitated at the door. They ducked as they entered, perhaps to avoid Vivian's imagined oh-no-you-don't as she plucked them by the collar. Leah heard Roland's voice as well: "What the hell do you think you're doing here?" When the door fell shut, the sugary smell overwhelmed her; her stomach cramped.

Eli's face was so serious as he stood before the heavy-set man in the white apron. "My daddy's getting heaven ready for us."

Leah pictured Roland making beds in a sunny room, arranging a vase of flowers on the nightstand, the disparity of the image amusing in the moment before her anger reasserted itself: surely he would go to hell if there were such a place.

The man was staring at her. "Whatever they want," she said.

"Chocolate sauce *and* sprinkles?"

That would have been Haley. "Anything." For a moment the store went wavy and dark, then resolidified.

Haley ordered bubble gum ice cream with chocolate sauce and rainbow sprinkles. When her mother didn't protest, she added gummy worms.

Unimaginable. Leah couldn't think of eating.

"The little boy?"

She prodded Eli with a pat on his shoulder.

Looking at her rather than the man, Eli said, "Cookie dough. And Oreo's." Then asked, "Can I have a cone?"

While the children ate, Leah sipped water from a paper cup. She ignored the mess of Eli's ice cream melting down the sides of the cone and dripping out the bottom. It was Haley who, playing the mother, blotted the cream globs from the Tasmanian Devil on his clip-on tie and brushed cookie crumbs off his lap. Leah was replaying the faces at the viewing, wondering if anyone had known she had filed for divorce a week earlier. He had said she would never make it on her own; he would see to it that she didn't.

Eli rubbed his mouth on his sleeve and asked, "Where did they get the man that looked like Daddy, that man in the box?"

Leah rotates the meat, using the fork and a wooden spoon, oblivious to the splattering oil. While the peripheral flesh crusts deep brown, she strips silky skin from the shallots. He wasn't good, only a good actor. Those people didn't know the Roland she knew, the Roland behind the gate, within the walls. The man who couldn't be outwardly ruffled but would go through the house in the middle of the night turning on the lights, the music, the televisions so that she would have to settle the screaming children. The shallots set out on the wooden cutting board, the one he specified only be used for vegetables because bacteria might lodge in the scratches (his voice again, grilling her, *when was the last time you bleached this?*), she reaches for the chopping knife. Under the heel of her palm, the knife's mincing rhythm chips at the small bulbs. She despises his voice that speaks from within her. She must excise it.

Charry meat smells fill the kitchen. Her hunger is inside out—the odor both draws and repulses her. Again, she turns the tenderloin so the last remaining section of raw flesh contacts the heated surface. More chopping, the rhythm soothes. Scrape the shallots onto a small plate. Now the herbs, their pungent flavor released to the air: tiny green specks hilled beside the shallots.

Innumerable times she had imagined his death: his car veering off the road as he raced to some meeting in another city, or returned home after too many drinks; the improbable plane crash. Always, herself blameless. She wipes the debris-mottled mushrooms with a damp towel. Chops them also, collects them in a cloth and wrings the moisture from them. Her gut cramps again. She couldn't eat in the ice cream parlor, sweet as death—he smelled like nothing in the casket, faintly chemical. Nor later, at the reception, all the little cakes and cookies, the plates of

crustless sandwiches, which had appeared from who knew where. Only the routine of herself in the kitchen, the familiarity of tasks, grounds her. Now she lifts the tenderloin, so heavy her wrists dip and strain, onto the broiler pan. Setting the pan into the oven, her grip almost gives way. She swoons at the rush of heated air that escapes from the oven's gaping mouth. But then, closing the door, she regains some strength. *Stupid bitch*, she hears him call her—in front of his friends, the children—*stupid bitch*.

The sauce again. She mounds the shallots, mushrooms, oregano, basil in the pan where tiny browns of meat pop in the oil. Too hot—she adjusts the flame, then stirs with the wooden spoon. Quickly, the shallots grow translucent, the herbs limp. Heat is no more than the speeding up of time. And what is death? Leah believes in no god, no medieval layers of afterlife. The only judgment is regret, the impossibility of undoing what has been done or of regaining lost years. She scoops flour into her palm, lets it snow from meshed fingers onto the sauté. She stirs the roux. From a bag in the freezer, she takes several ice cubes of rich vegetable stock. Her kitchen is well-provisioned, as if advance preparation could protect her. She adds them to the pan singly, stirs to incorporate them with the sauce, then sets the pan aside.

She sorts through the foodstuffs on the shelves of the refrigerator, in the drawers, looking for something to accompany the meat course. There is a little potato gratin readymade in a lidded glass dish. When had she prepared that? Two days before, could it be only then? She had made it for him, the two of them going on with things as if the dissolution of their marriage were not underway, as if she were not to move to a house on the other side of town with the children—a house on a quiet street of similar houses, the yards flowing into each other without barriers, not even picket fences. It had been easier for her to go on as usual, him asserting that she wouldn't go through with it and her, as for so long now, letting the anger gestate. She extracts the casserole, places it in the oven beside the roast. Then,



rifling through the vegetable drawer, she selects a sack of green beans.

The cold water streaming over her hands as she rinses the beans shocks her a bit, reminds her she is still muscle and veins, nerve and sensation. She glances up. To the left of the sink, finely ground carbon steel knives gleam dully from their magnetic rack. When they designed this kitchen during the first year of their marriage, when she was still awed by Roland's assumed expertise, he had instructed her on the importance of the working triangle: supplies and implements, sink and stove, should be at arm's reach from a central pivot. But after all, he had not been able to plan it out, not the part she would play in his life, no more than his death. She can see him still, his slumped body at the kitchen table. Water continues to rush from the faucet. "Gran says something's not right with you." Was that how Haley put it at the ice cream parlor? Perhaps Vivian would sue for legal custody of the children; the thought hovers but evokes no response. Leah reaches for a paring knife and trims the stems from the beans, several at a time, cuts against her thumb, presses the edge into her skin, and, feeling nothing, pushes harder. Red mixes with the flow of water. It is so easy to penetrate flesh. Then, with her thumb bandaged in a paper towel, she fills a pan, lights the burner to boil the water.

The service had already begun when Leah arrived with the children. Pulling them so their feet skimmed the marble floor, she made her way up the aisle to their reserved front-row seats. The robed priest was chanting, his song the voice of centuries: "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself..." Leah had deferred the arrangements to Vivian, but here, in the midst of the old-fashioned liturgy, Vivian's choice seemed ridiculous. Roland had believed in nothing but himself. If he occasionally attended church services, it was only to garner political support. At the front pew, Leah pushed Eli ahead of herself and pulled Haley behind. They brushed past Vivian,

who reached out in passing to retuck Eli's shirt, then to straighten the bow on Haley's dress.

Aware of the demand for an explanation in Vivian's gaze, she stared straight out at the priest, at the sway of his white robe visible beyond the lectern. "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God..." A lone shaft of sunlight illuminated a rectangle of marble floor beside him.

Next to her, Eli squirmed. "The top's down. Is the man still in there?"

Leah shifted her focus to the coffin heaped with flowers in the center of the platform. "Hush," she said, laying her hand over his in his lap. The congregation was sing-songing the psalm, their tones rising at the line-ends; Haley sang along with made-up words, a birdsong that diverged from the congregation when the phrases ascended. Leah could only make out fragments of text: "My tears have been my meat day and night..." and, "Where is now thy God?"

Again, the priest's voice filled the sanctuary. A passage from Revelation: "The Lamb... They shall hunger no more..." Leah couldn't make herself attend. The words flew like swallows between the pitched, dark-wood rafters of the hall. Leah would be the words, would draw in flight the calligraphed forms.

Then drumming, close in. But no. That was only both children's feet hitting the pew base. She stretched her arms across their legs to still them.

So familiar were the words now, they carried only rhythm, no meaning. Of course, Vivian would have specified a communion service. Leah pictured an antediluvian stone altar. Standing, placing herself behind Eli, she steered the children toward the rail. They knelt in a row and Leah's hands formed a cup to accept the wafer. Haley shook her head no; she protested when the priest marked the sign of the cross on her brow. Eli spat his out, wiped it on his pant leg.

The meal sits before her on the cream-colored plate with

gold rim—the beans in sheaves tied with carrot twine, the bubble-crusted gratin spooned alongside, the meat sliced and sauced, the dun of the sauce pooled with the meat's running pink. Wine too, a fruity red, translucent in the fluted crystal goblet. A cloth napkin, gold-handled silverware. Take, eat. But she doesn't know if she can, or if this will be enough. If she ceases the effort required to remain in this chair, at this table, she will transform into a bird. A white bird, the kind whose feathers were once sought out for hats.

## When the Palm Reader Sees That You Have Two Life Lines, He Says You Must Choose One

Jennifer Perrine

I

Like the road  
more traveled by,  
your future has a use.  
You will be tamped down,  
firm as footsteps,  
stretches of you littered  
with loose change and leaves.  
You will be paved with prints  
not yours, marked by  
what you have carried,  
the dry dust of you  
kicked up every time.  
Subtle, silent,  
faithful, you will be worn  
with habit, or else  
abandoned, weeds  
growing through  
your body, the cracked  
surface of you. But  
underneath,  
the touch of roots,  
work-hollows, complex  
vessels of under-skin.  
Like the road  
more traveled by,  
no one will write poems  
about you.

II

The road ahead  
is not a road at all  
but a river, silt-strewn  
rock-rub of your belly.  
No birth but a fall  
from the sky, you pool,  
pouring over, sliding out.  
You swallow fish whole,  
spilling them in your wake,  
ridges of sun string out  
on you. Electric, your current  
floods every time  
it rains, your body  
rising up like a threat,  
like a glorious wet  
hunger. You freeze,  
you thaw, you fuck  
the dead things buried  
inside you. You trickle  
sickly in your dry spells.  
You carry filth  
the same as you carry  
bronzed bodies.  
In the end, you disappear,  
absorbed, atomized, diffused  
into one great body  
more turbulent than you.

## I Inhale My Lover

Jeff Walt

Seduced back to smoking on the stoop—although I vowed  
to give it up—wasting my days lusting after the sinewy

strength of glistening boys without shirts shooting hoops  
across the street. A cigarette lounging between my lips, pulling

the first hit deep, kind smoke uncurling in my throat—  
my heart stained yellow from yearning. So much craving

in life; each of these boys in baggy jeans and gym shorts  
dunking, charging, cocks flopping; and this sweet release

of streamers, Os, tiny tornados, a smoky desire I can't  
put down or live without—don't want to come back from

slow burning that fills me completely as peace. The radio  
says things we can't see kill us a little every day, poison

in everything—the ozone, Comet, Mennen deodorant, the violets  
outside my window; I could drop dead any minute from radon

slithering silently out of the basement, so I give in, continue  
lighting up back to back—charmed by romantic greed, knowing

the statistics and myths as each slim stick takes a minute off  
my life. I bless this half pack of Marlboros, the boys' sweat

that I want to lick from their slick, sweet bodies, E. coli  
crawling on the kitchen counter; these warm cement steps

and the chips of scattered sun buried in the sidewalk, kids batting  
rocks in the street, shadows sneaking into alleys, cats crying

for food, and this adrenaline rush: knowing it's legal to sit in public  
on a stoop and kill yourself slowly as you fall in love.

S.S. Pierce

Alice Stern

It could have been a ship. An English ship if the letters had been H.M.S. But it was a truck, and the letters on it were S.S. It came thundering along the highway by our house. Such a start it gave me, seeing an S.S. Pierce truck go by! I hadn't seen that name for the longest time, not since we'd moved upstate from the city. Not since the times I'd decide to take the elevator instead of the escalator in the now defunct B. Altman's department store, which meant walking all the way to the back where the elevator bank was and the specialty foods department, past the S.S. Pierce cans stacked in pyramids and the cellophane-wrapped gift baskets tied with big red bows.

Old ladies—not that old, still vital *elderly* ladies with lovely orderly gray hair (never dyed) and good tailored tweedy clothes who walked nice dogs—ordered S.S. Pierce from the B. Altman's catalogue which arrived in the mail regularly. They'd order quality canned goods and household tissues—facial, bathroom—and Altman's own, private label cold cream soap, by the case twice a year. “Such a sensible thing to do, not having to run down to Broadway to the supermarket, saves the bother and ignominy (oh I get out of there as fast as I can!) and when you count up the number of trips to the store, well, it really pays to order in quantity by phone, and have it delivered to your door.”

These vital, elderly ladies were careful, cunning, but by no means poor. They lived, and still do, in old rent-controlled apartments with thick walls and thick doors, and from out of those thick walls and doors seeps the reassuring smell of brisket and leg of lamb, filling the elevator vestibule at six o'clock in the evening. They walk their dogs and agree: “Oh S.S. Pierce, of course, it's the best,” and “I always...” etc. Did they really say these things, or do I imagine it? There are no women like that up here in the country.

I always wondered what was inside those cans to make them so special. Children wonder: what's inside? I am married but I'm still a child. I even have children, but I'm still a child. So I wonder, what's inside? Is the quality really so much better? the freestone peaches? the young, the early, the *baby* peas? Or is it just canned after all, with a you-can-count-on-it-tasting-canned taste?

Once I decided I would try something by S.S. Pierce. And I did try. I tried so hard! The memory of it pierced me as that truck went by. I tried so hard to please him, but it hurt. It hurt terribly. He said: "After awhile it won't; it will stop hurting." But it didn't. We went to a doctor. A friend recommended one, the kind of doctor neither of us would have known about, or had any reason to visit before this. We both felt humiliated. In the waiting room we couldn't bear to look at each other. The doctor examined me. He questioned me. I said: it hurt terribly. He said: "After awhile it won't; it will stop hurting."

I always went for externals, outward symbols, because inside I was such a failure. Circumstances didn't allow me to have a real wedding, so I didn't get to wear a veil and gown, and I missed these very much. I needed them, because I myself was so lacking. The real thing that mattered wasn't there. Its absence hung in the air. His disappointment hung in the air. It hovered over us years later as we ate S.S. Pierce rum cakes by candlelight.

We were alone together in the house, for the first time since the children were born. Every one of them was out of the house—a combination of grandparental visits, sleep-overs with friends. All five at once—quite a coincidence! Almost a joke—it would make a good sitcom episode—and a cause for celebration. What couple wouldn't celebrate? Alone at last! Dinner for two at a card table set up in the living room before an open fire; lace cloth, candlelight.

"It doesn't count," he used to say. "Window dressing doesn't count."



He doesn't say that anymore. He said, "How nice!" about the lace cloth and the candles. And when I brought in the S.S. Pierce rum cakes in fancy glass dishes, he said: "*Quelle supris!*"

"You clever thing, surprising me like that. When did you get them? You must have hid them."

I had. I'd ordered the rum cakes from the not-yet-defunct B. Altman's and hidden them away for an occasion. They came two in a can, and as I opened one of them I thought of the company's name, *Pierce*, as I brought the little steel triangle of our Swing-Away down into the top and punctured it. The cakes were tiny and there was a lot of syrup, really a lot. What a gyp! Pretending to be so fancy and then filling up their cans with a lot of liquid, just like the so-called inferior brands did.

"How fancy of you," he said about the cut-glass dessert dishes, and he lit a match and held it to the rum cakes so they'd *flambe*. But they didn't. They refused to *flambe*.

He tried again and again and they wouldn't. That was a gyp, too. And then we tasted the rum cakes and they were bitter. Not delicious, not yummy—bitter. He said it was probably because of the rum not catching fire so the alcohol didn't burn off.

Too strong, I thought. Not like the rum cakes I remembered from my childhood—which weren't little, or plural, but big and singular, a bundt-shaped cake from a bakery that filled the whole white cardboard box. You untied the string, lifted the lid and there it sat on a paper doily, all plump and golden and gooey; you could run a finger around the edge and then lick your finger. Lots of syrup but not floating in it. Soaked—impregnated with syrup. And so sweet you always wanted more. "More rum cake, please!"

These little S.S. Pierce rum cakes didn't taste like more. A fancy name to cover up what wasn't delicious. We did our best to finish the too strong, bitter cakes and to pretend that we were enjoying the evening, because not to be enjoying it was too humiliating. A special occasion—our first night alone, with all the children out of the house, and everyone knows what that

means! or should mean (time to play hanky pank or is it *poon tang?*), but we knew we weren't going to. And the knowledge lay heavy between us—that after we finished trying to finish the not good rum cakes we'd look to see if there was anything good on TV that we could watch for awhile, and then he'd excuse himself and go out for a spin in the car while I went to bed, sad, ashamed of my failure, my lacking, and read myself to sleep.

## Précis of Three Summers

DeAnna Stephens Vaughn

### I

The summer before I knew you, I knew this shore  
as a bed of sand amid blackberry thickets  
where older boys lit cherry bombs  
before wrecking cars or leaving town,  
a stratum of warmth and cigarette ashes  
and paper shrapnel the color of  
their girlfriends' toenails and fingertips.

### II

You emerged from the water, halfway,  
sunlight fastened to your lashes  
and after you pulled me in, my legs encircled  
you hips and my hair became a tangle  
of water moccasins lapping at your throat.  
We held each other in mid-transfiguration.  
Had I let you go, you would have stayed,  
you would have fought weightlessness to feel  
the knives of shale against your soles.

### III

Evening tricked us.  
Above the canebrake, the hemisphere of  
blue was our own creation,  
a silk scarf draped over reeds,  
with a hole that fixed the sun in place.  
But the sun crept from its chamber,  
lay frozen in a field we could not see,  
and our arms and legs grew cold,

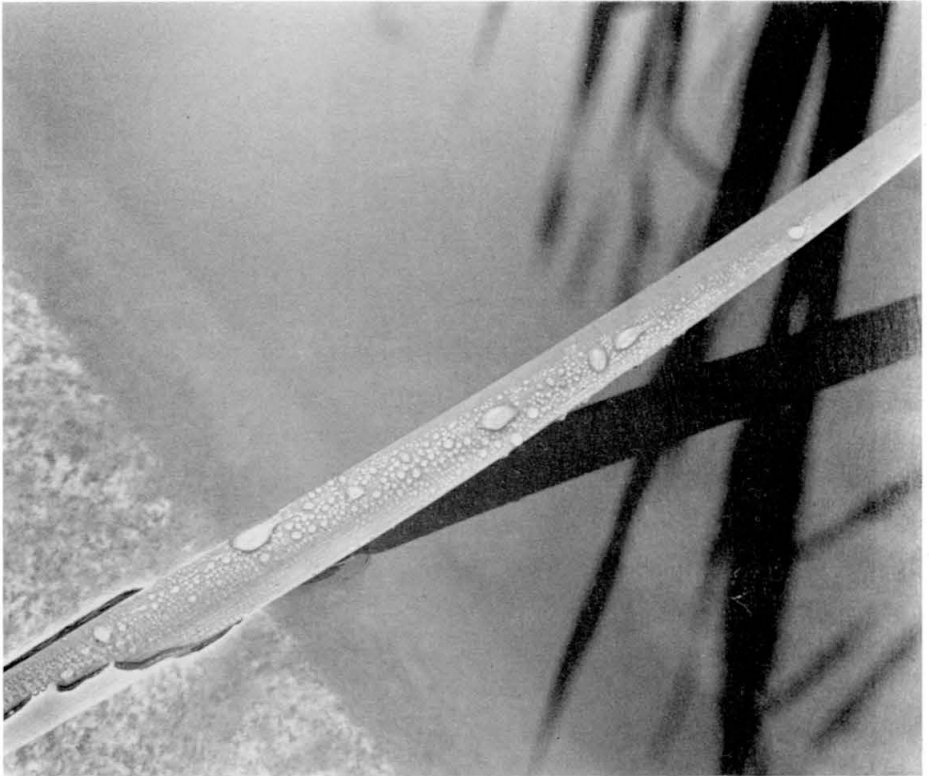
were barely warmed by the engine  
that you started beneath us and opened  
full throttle. Dusk drove us home  
while the headwind  
tore my breath from your ear.

## About Slavs

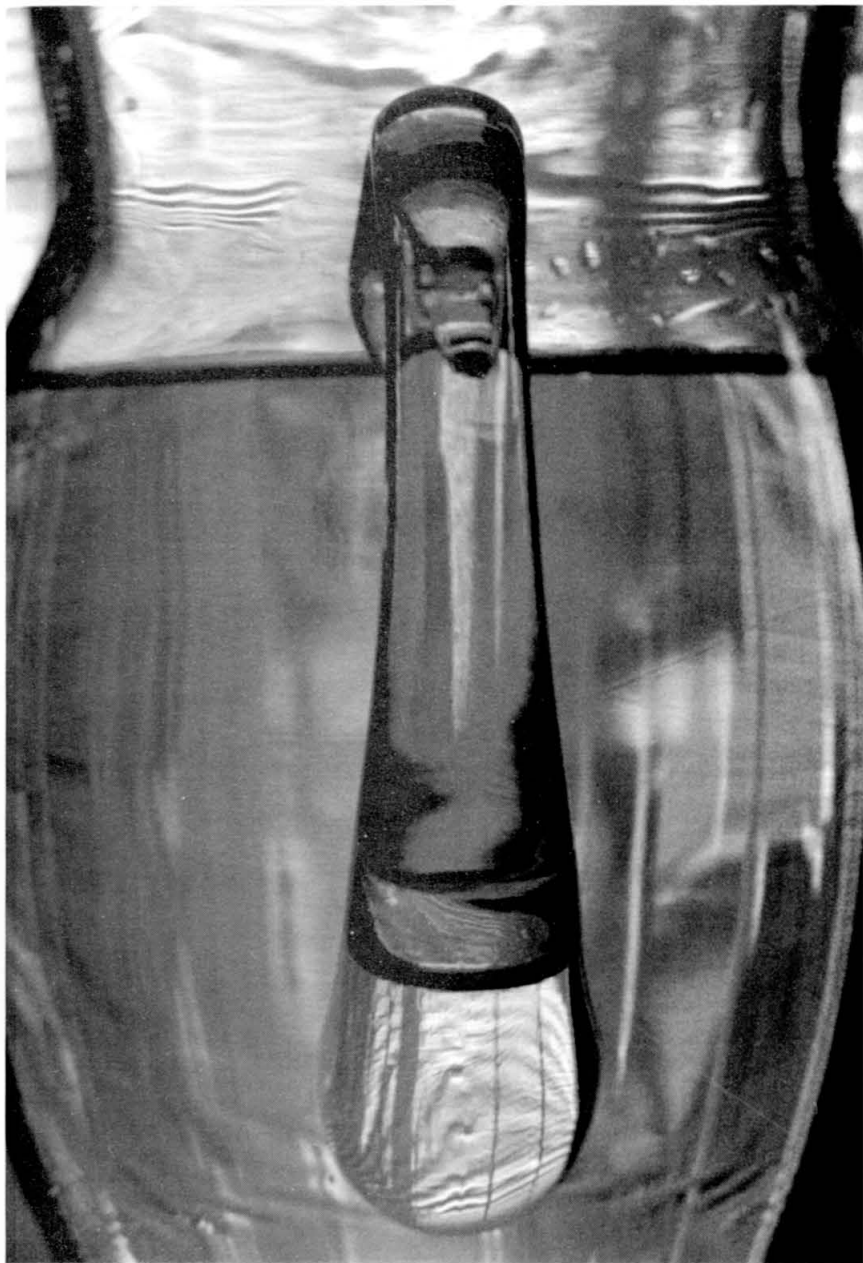
Joanne Lowery

Ask any British or French soldier  
who'd been on the front lines of the Crimea  
and he'd tell you that once you got close  
you could smell the Russkis: a smell  
like leather. And when you saw them

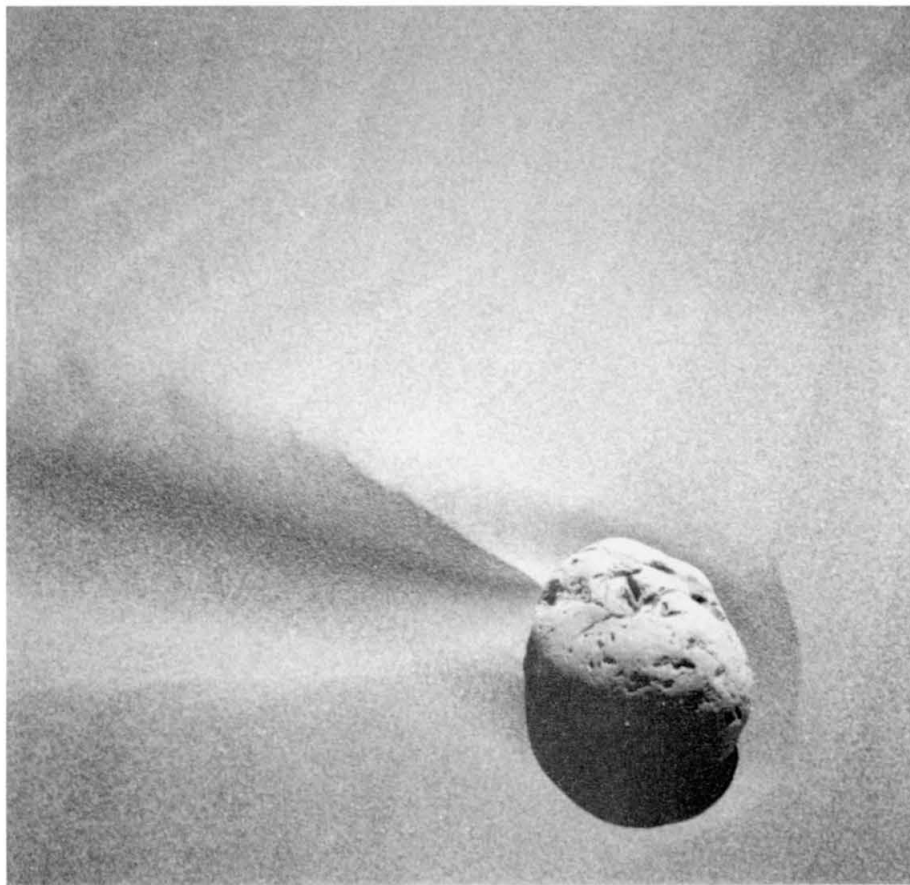
they all had pug noses like lap dogs,  
clumsy lips and small piggish eyes.  
So many people couldn't be wrong  
about how a good bayonet went in  
just like slicing boiled cabbage.



















Antigua  
Lexi Rudnidsky

We would only go there  
when we were homesick:  
the bars had electric fans,  
the vegetables were clean,  
no one tugged at our skirts  
or hissed as we walked  
through the marketplace.

One night I met an engineer  
who installed potable water  
in the outlying villages.  
He was fat, but newly so;  
an American with bad knees,  
he said he'd show me  
where the water came from.

We rode his moped up a hill.  
I held him around the waist.  
*Tighter*, he ordered.  
The hill was strewn with lovers  
feeling their way in the dark.  
We could see the stars  
and the lights of the city.

He said he could take me  
further. There was a courtyard  
and chickens. He'd make me  
fresh eggs for breakfast;  
I'd pick oranges from his tree.  
I knew not to interrupt, the way  
you never wake a sleepwalker.

## Phone Calls

Alan Brich

For a while                      I lived in the room of echoes.  
It wasn't so bad.              Bare walls and no windows  
   but        it had a couch and a lamp  
   and a three-legged table with a phone.  
The phone was old and black.  
   I was sitting on the couch  
   in the room of echoes  
   when the old black phone rang.  
I wasn't surprised.  
   Phones ring. That's what they do.  
   I sat and watched it ring for a couple years  
   before I decided to pick it up.  
I put the receiver up to my ear.    A voice cut through the static.  
   I recognized the voice.    It was mine.  
It was a bit strange to hear my voice  
   from this old black phone  
   but        I have seen stranger things so  
   I went along with it.  
This is what my voice said:  
   It's going to take some time.  
Then a pause.  
A mythic pause full of static.  
   I waited for one of myselfs to say something.  
   Nothing came. Static.  
Finally one of us said good-bye and  
   I hung it up and sat there on the couch  
   in the room of echoes.  
There was nothing else to do with the blank walls  
   and no windows  
   so I called myself back.    I knew the number.  
   It rang and rang.  
I knew I was on the other side

trying to decide whether or not to pick it up.  
This was going to take some time.  
I would tell myself this  
when I picked it up  
from the other side.



## A Gentle Man

Mary Anne Mohanraj

“Let no one cherish anything, inasmuch as the loss of what is beloved is hard. There are no fetters for him who knows neither pleasure nor pain. From affection arises sorrow; from affection arises fear. To him who is free from affection there is no sorrow. Whence fear?” – Gautama Buddha

Suneel wakes up hours before his family. This is normal, although today is not normal, today is a special day. Most days he makes tea, reads the paper, eats some toast without butter before going to work at his store. Sushila, his wife, never wakes until after nine. She likes to stay up late, talking on the phone with her friends. When the children were younger, he was the one who woke them, who ironed their Catholic school uniforms and put out milk and cereal. But now the children are able to wake themselves, and only Riddhi, his youngest, still sleeps at home.

It is Riddhi's birthday today. Tonight all of their friends will gather to celebrate his youngest daughter's seventeenth birthday. She has just finished high school, and plans to start at the local community college in the fall. Not as smart as her older sister, no. His sweet Riddhi will never join Raji at Harvard. Just as well, considering what Raji is doing there, running around in public with white boys. It turns his stomach.

He drinks his tea, savoring the taste of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, with shreds of ginger so fierce and strong. He's tasted the tea in American stores—weak, sugary brews. Diluted, adulterated. Pathetic. His wife claims she likes it that way, but she still makes his strong, the way they drink it back home. She knows that his standards haven't changed, that he still believes in doing things right. When she is with him, she drinks tea the way he does. But when she's on her own—who knows?

Sushila is still asleep; she has stayed up late, cooking for the party, making curries that will taste better the second day. She has made beef curries and pork and chicken for their friends, who are all Catholic like her; vegetables for him, the lone Buddhist. He has sometimes been tempted by the smell of her meat curries, but the thought of actually eating meat turns his stomach. He has not had meat since he was twenty, back in 1946. Two years before they married; thirty-four years ago. He has held firm to his convictions. If he ate meat now, it would make him ill.

He can taste already her brinjal curry, savor the spicy coconut sambol and the pungent pickled limes. His mouth is almost burning, though the fire is wholly imagined, and he takes a long drink of tea to soothe it. He chokes on a piece of ginger, and coughs for a few moments, his whole body shaking. Then it's gone, swallowed down, and he is at rest again.

His wife is an excellent cook; none can deny that, at least, though he can guess what else they say about her. She won't be awake until eleven at least. But there is a lot to do between now and then. He washes the cup, dries it, puts it away.

He calls the store; no problems. His assistant is a solid man, his cousin's friend, and reasonably trustworthy, although he wouldn't give the man access to the store's bank account. He knows that you can't really trust anyone here, in America, not the way you could back home, in Ceylon. It's just not the same; family and friendship don't mean the same things here that they did back there. He has learned that the hard way. Still, the man works hard, and the store takes a lot of hard work.

The store has fed and clothed him and his family; in it he sells saris, lengths of shining fabric in silk and chiffon with bright gold threads. Suneel started the shop with money saved up from work in Colombo, the capital, back when they were newlyweds. He had saved enough to bring his wife and young

children to America, enough to buy a partnership in a new sari store, one of the first in the country, and then worked hard enough to buy the store outright a few years later. He's proud of the store, and it's doing well, but who knows for how long? When they first arrived, it seemed that their white neighbors shared their values; knew the value of hard work, the importance of family, of decency. He'd thought it a good place to raise children, a place of opportunities. But in recent years, America has changed, changed completely. Nothing here is as it was, nothing lasts. In this country, everything looks bright and beautiful and substantial, but it is so often a sham, with nothing real supporting it. Not like back home.

Time to start cleaning. Sushila does the light cleaning—she looks lovely wandering around the house in a simple green sari, feather duster in her hand. But ask her to scrub the bathroom tiles, or even move the furniture to vacuum behind it...But he brought her here, after all; against everyone's advice. The first man in his village to go so far from home. It was his vision—America, land of opportunity, a shining bright future for his family. How could he have known that in America, you had to be fabulously rich to afford even a single servant? They are not fabulously rich, and his wife prefers not to think about the dirt that gathers in the corners, under the carpet.

He does not force it on her, though sometimes he is exhausted, coming home from the store only to find the house is so filthy that he cannot stand it. Sometimes he stays up late for nights on end, sweeping and scrubbing and mopping, while she talks on the telephone to her friends. She has so many friends, and they have so much to talk about. Sometimes he wants to take her face and push it down in the bucket of scummy water, just for a moment, just so she knows what she is forcing him to do—but he would never do that. He doesn't even raise his voice when he asks her what she has been doing all day long; he is not that sort of man. The Buddha counsels calm in the face of the vexatious; restraint when in the presence of troublesome souls. He tries to follow the teaching.



An hour later, Suneel is still cleaning, but Riddhi has woken up. She comes down the stairs in her purple pajamas with sleep still crusted in her eyes, hair falling tangled down her back. How many times her mother has told her to brush it with oil and braid it before sleep? She always forgets, like a child. His little one, his delicate angel. She looks just like her mother did when he married her; much the same age as well. So lovely. They sent her to a Catholic girls' high school; both of them had agreed that it was best, after what had happened with Raji. But soon the boys will be swarming around her; even tonight, at the party, the sons of their friends will be drawn to her. His sweet innocent; if he could only keep her a child, safe, forever.

She wraps her arms around his neck as he bends over the bathroom sink, scrubbing at a stubborn stain. "Good morning, Appa." Oh, good morning, my daughter. Happy birthday. I hope you have a very happy birthday today...

Then she's off to eat cereal before starting to help with the cleaning. Dutiful child, not like her sister who had always found some excuse to be out of the house when there was work to be done. Even today—where is she? Has Raji come home to help? No. She'll take the late train from Boston, waltz in the door at four o'clock when the guests have arrived and the work is done. And he'll have to count himself lucky if she comes alone.

So far, Raji has at least kept her shameful behavior with her at college, not brought it home to their house. He's not sure how much it matters, since she isn't discreet enough to keep it a secret. Running around in broad daylight; holding hands and kissing. All of their friends know what she does at night, when her mother calls at eleven o'clock and she isn't in her dorm room. One friend called them from *Australia* to tell them what she had heard—oh, how troubled she was, how concerned about their Raji. Sushila has pleaded with him to do something about it, has raged at him. But what can a father do? Raji has made

her own choices. He will educate her, that is his duty; then she will be on her own.

The heavy cleaning is done. Now there is just a little straightening left. Though soon Sushila will be up with an endless list of errands for him to run. He turns the sofa cushions in the family room, his fingers digging deep into the fabric, threatening to tear. She always has lists for him, and never mind what else he has planned; she never asks—that's yet another of his jobs, after all. To run around after his wife. He deliberately relaxes his hands, breathes deeply, releases the cushions.

He pulls open the curtains to let sunlight into the fading room. Suneel straightens the photos on top of the TV; so many of them. His beautiful wife, laughing at party after party. She likes parties, where she is always surrounded by her female friends. He can imagine the others not in the picture, the ghosts surrounding her. He is standing behind her, there to hold her up, catch her if she falls—the good husband.

There is Raji, so tall and straight and serious. His studious one, always busy alone in her room with her books and paper and paint. He had such hopes for her...all gone, now. And Riddhi, his angel girl, like a flower. Riddhi dancing, like her mother, a twirling burst of colored flame. After her Arangetrum, her graduation dance performance, she stood up on the stage so seriously, and thanked her teachers, her sister, her amma and appa most of all. You could see in her face her sweetness, her love for her family; it was clear from the light shining out of it. You can see it still.

There is a face missing from the photos as well, his son's, Raksha's—but the boy abandoned his family, and all the photos which contained him were thrown out long ago.

It's almost ten—time to wrap Riddhi's presents. Sushila has chosen most of them. Pretty dresses, and one of them not

to be wrapped, since Riddhi will wear it today. A white hand-bag. A dark green sari.

Sushila wore green, the day after they were married. Sitting at the table with him, his mother, his sisters—he remembers how beautiful she looked in that green, how she smiled and blushed when one of his sisters teased her about the night before. His young bride.

He had been so nervous the night before. His friends had been full of coarse advice; he was the first of them to marry; they knew nothing. One of his aunties had pulled him aside—he can't remember now which one it was. She whispered to him: "The girl's more scared than you are." Then she stuck a chicken roll in his hand and went away. The older relatives never remembered that he had given up eating the flesh of animals the year before, when he became a Buddhist. But it was good advice. It had calmed him down, and let him be very patient and gentle with Sushila that night. She had been so vulnerable, so sweet and still as he unwrapped her crimson sari. Afterwards, he had fallen asleep with her small hand held tightly in his own. When he woke, it was still there. Suneel aches even now, at the memory of it.

His fingers continue wrapping, creasing the delicate paper, tearing it, folding it over each gift. Lipstick. Blush. Eyeliner. Small gold earrings. He does not approve of the make-up. His daughter does not need to paint her face to be beautiful. But it's not worth arguing with his wife. He learned that long ago.

The earrings are good; a girl should have some nice jewelry, for beauty and security. He has been saving money; a little here and there put into a special bank account. He started when Raji was born—money for his daughters' dowry, for their jewelry. Now who knows whom Raji will marry, if she ever does. Running around with American boys. Taking them back to her dorm room for anyone to see—and they run and tell her shamed parents, of course, and all their friends. Sushila screams at the girl, hits her, but it does no good. Violence never does. Raji will find her own path, away from her family, and the jewelry

will go to Riddhi instead. It is just as well. A girl cannot have too much security.

One present left, but he will wrap it later.

At eleven, Sushila wakes. He brings her tea, and sits by the side of the bed while she drinks it. She has a list of instructions for him: buy chicken for the rolls, wine and beer, some large prawns; she's decided to make another curry. It will be expensive, more than they'd planned to spend, but he can work late tomorrow and make up the difference. She does not ask what he thinks.

She finishes her list, and gets out of bed. Sushila wears a thin white cotton nightgown. Her heavy breasts show through the sheer fabric, her waist and swell of hips, the darkness at the juncture of her thighs. Her long hair falls thickly down her back. He stirs at the sight of her; he often does.

Riddhi is working in the front yard, trimming the roses, mowing the lawn. He can hear the roar of the mower through the open window, and knows that if he were to close the bedroom door and pull his wife back to the bed, Riddhi would not hear them. He considers it—if he did draw her to the bed, Sushila would not protest. She never protests; she is always willing, always available, the accommodating wife. But she will lie still beneath him, with her head turned away and her eyes closed. She will be still like a statue. It is the only time she is awake and not in motion—when he is moving in her, above her.

On that first night, their wedding night, Suneel had been so gentle with her, but had not managed to coax a response from her. He had told himself that it would get better with time, that she hardly knew him, that he was a stranger to her. But it had not gotten better, and so only rarely had he let himself sink inside her. Once was a night when Sushila had gone shopping with her friends, and had come back late—so late! Nine-thirty at night, and while it was true that the mall

was open until nine, he had not been able to believe that she had only been shopping.

His anger had risen up in him then, and he had almost dragged her to their bed. He had wanted to hit her, wanted to hurt her, and he had come so close...Yet he had remembered the words of the Buddha, and had restrained himself. He had taken her fiercely, but without causing her pain. He had stayed true to himself, to his beliefs, and she had never known how angry he had been. Sometimes he wondered if that anger had infected Raji, conceived on that night.

Sushila raises her arms, stretches, displaying the dark thatch of hair under her arms, and he bites his lip, drawing blood. He wants her. She is his wife, and he has every right to take her. But he knows that if he takes her back to bed now, she will not want him. She will not want him. He lets her go to her shower, undisturbed.

He drives too fast on the highway. His family depends on him, he has a duty to them, and so he wears his seat belt—but he still drives too fast. A car speeds up, cuts in front of him, and he resists the urge to shove his foot down on the gas, rush forward and crash...that would be an extremely violent act.

Suneel forswore violence thirty-four years ago, and since that day he has not eaten fish or meat, not killed a spider or crushed an ant. He has never raised his hand to his wife or children, even though there was a time when Sushila begged him to discipline their son.

At sixteen, Raksha had fallen in with a bad crowd, taken to disappearing at night, climbing out windows and down trees, meeting with his friends. Eventually they'd heard about it, learned that the boy was spending his time smoking marijuana in a dark room with other teens, having sex with one girl or another, listening to music that preached revolution, revolution and sex, sex that they called "love." Those children had no idea what love was, but they were everywhere that summer, smoking



and drinking and running around late at night, singing. America had never seemed as alien as it did that year. Then came the rumors that Raksha had gotten a white girl pregnant, that she'd had an abortion or a baby, that she had disappeared or died—but maybe they were just rumors. No one seemed sure.

They had confined Raksha to his room, they had argued with him, his mother had screamed and wept—but for nothing. Raksha had grown sullen and silent. Finally he'd left, just disappeared into the night like a thief, without even a note. Sushila has never forgiven her husband for not being harsher with their son. She hasn't hesitated to discipline Raji, bringing the slim bamboo cane down on the girl's back, but it has done little good.

He has never hit anyone. He avoids harsh speech, and animosity of thought. All the Buddhism he knows he learned from a friend in school so long ago, and from what he can teach himself by studying books. He has learned at least a little after years of study, and knows that refraining from violent thought or action is essential if one wishes to reach the calm of enlightenment.

He removes his foot from the gas pedal. He strives for a peaceful state of mind, though he knows it will not come.

When he comes home, she screams at him. Sushila is a woman given to screeching, though he could never have guessed that when they married. He knew she had life and passion in her, but it seemed so joyous. She was sparkling then, like sunlight on river water. Laughter bubbled out of her. She even got his littlest sister to laugh once or twice, ugly Medha who had never managed to find a husband. Medha, who has ended up alone, living in a sad little house on the beach, battered by salty ocean winds, with only a maid for company. Without children.

Perhaps Raji will suffer the same fate, since she has apparently turned away from their society. Perhaps she too will end up ugly and alone. Once the thought of his daughter in

such straits might have tormented him, but he has been hurt too many times, betrayed over and over. His heart is closed to her; he cannot bring himself to care.

The first step to enlightenment, perhaps, to serenity. *When touched by happiness or sorrow, the wise show no elation or dejection; the wise become serene like unto a deep, calm and crystal-clear lake.* He suspects that he will never find it, but he longs for that serenity.

Serenity is difficult to find when Sushila is shouting that he has brought the wrong kind of chicken. Does he do this to her deliberately? Is he trying to torment her? His neck is taut with tension, his shoulders tight, but she cannot see that—he is much taller than she is. He bows his head until she is finished. Then he goes out again, to get the right kind of chicken.

When he comes back a half hour later, with the chicken, she does not thank him. She is busy cooking again, and two of his sisters have arrived as well to help. Their husbands are working, and will arrive later. The women are laughing in the kitchen, gossiping and trading bits of cooking wisdom. They ignore him, but he is used to that. The house is clean; the food will be ready on time; she needs nothing more of him. He goes to wrap his daughter's final present.

He takes the photo from a manila envelope he's kept hidden in a drawer. He arranged for it months ago; his wife has no idea. It's a good photo. There is a frame for it as well, heavy silver. He slips the photo into the frame, attaches the back, tightens the screws. It will not slip away. For a moment, he hesitates. This is home that he is holding in his hands—but he has not been back in so long, and sometimes he hears disturbing news of strange events. There had been the riots, in '58. And since then, scattered violence, here and there. Even some deaths. His gut twists for a moment, but then eases again. The violence is transient; it must be. It will pass. He knows what home really is, and what it isn't. Suneel wraps the photo with

steady hands in white tissue paper and places it in a box; wraps the box in shining red foil paper. It will glow from among the other presents in their decorous wrappings. Perhaps Riddhi will open it first—that would be a nice surprise.

Riddhi knocks on the bedroom door, calling to him—“Appa!” He is startled, and calls to her to wait. Just another minute securing it with scotch tape—there. It’s done. He puts it with the other presents and goes to open the door. His daughter grabs his hand, drags him to the dining room window. “Look, Appa—it’s raining!”

It’s true. The rain is slanting down over the lawn, spattering against the circles of metal folding chairs; it will be a large party, perhaps a hundred people. Too many to seat comfortably all in the house. He had spent at least an hour mowing the back lawn and setting up the chairs yesterday, and now his daughter is panicking because they are getting wet.

“It’s just a summer shower; it’ll pass. Don’t worry. Go get dressed; people will be here soon.”

Raji would have argued, would have wondered if they should make plans to bring the chairs inside somehow, would have at least pointed out that it was still two hours until anyone was due to arrive and that their friends were always an hour late in any case. Raji had never agreed with him; she had always argued. Once, he had thought that was good, a sign of a strong spirit. Now he knows better.

Riddhi smiles in response to his words and says, “Okay.” She goes upstairs to get ready; she trusts and obeys him. He would do almost anything to preserve that trust.

Suneel showers and gets dressed. He has trouble finding the tie he wants; Sushila has rearranged the closet again. He is looking for his favorite tie, the dark blue one with the thin white diagonal lines. It reminds him of river water, white foam on the darkness. He reaches back into the closet, and pulls out a handful of old ties, ties that he hasn’t seen in years. One of

them is bright red, shockingly bright, even after all this time.

His son was fifteen that day. Raksha had given him that tie on Father's day. Raji was only four then, and Riddhi was just two. Raksha had been born a scant nine months after their wedding; they had waited a long time for more children. Sometimes he wondered whether Sushila had actually wanted children, if she had been taking something to prevent them; motherhood had never really suited her. Maybe she had, and then had become careless as the long years stretched past, stopped worrying about it, and so he'd gotten his girls at last. She had her secrets, his wife. He'd never know the truth of it. Let it go.

Raksha had given him the tie on Father's Day. Such a bright boy he was, and yet already in trouble. Already running around with the wrong crowd, but they didn't know. His parents didn't know—how could they? Suneel was working seventy, eighty hours a week at the store in those days, and he was so tired at night. Sushila kept the family fed, and cleaned up a little, but she was busy herself with two young ones after so long without. She didn't spend much time on her son, who had already grown so tall. When Raksha had given him that tie, reached to hug him, had there been alcohol on his breath? Had there been marijuana smoke thick in his clothes? If so, neither of his parents had noticed.

When his grades started slipping, they had scolded Raksha, told him to try harder. Never doubted the boy when he said he was studying at the library late at night, trying to improve the grades. It had never occurred to the father to distrust his son. Adults could betray you, as he well knew, but children? Children were the light of life.

He should have paid more attention to the Buddha's example—the prince who walked away from his young wife and infant son to seek truth and an ending to false desire.

When Raksha ran off, they'd been frantic with worry, called the police, their friends across the country. The boy was found in Chicago, months later; he'd hitched his way across the country. Raksha lived with white friends for a while, then even-

tually found a job, but refused to come home or answer their letters. He never told them why he had run away. They had given him everything, and he had thrown it all back in their faces. Finally Sushila, enraged, had demanded that they cut him off entirely, weeping with her frustration. He had quietly agreed. They were only acknowledging a separation that was already final.

They still received reports from friends in Chicago. Raksha had settled down eventually, had even married a Tamil girl from a good family, a professional family. Married above him, actually; he had always been a handsome boy. There had been some trouble, but it was eventually sorted out. Suneel has picked up the phone to call him, a hundred times, but every time, he puts it down again.

Raksha has a daughter now, Chaya, a girl who will never know her father's parents. His son is lost to him. *For the sake of oneself, one should not long for a son, wealth or a kingdom.* He had never truly wanted wealth or a kingdom. He places the red tie back on the rack, finally finds the dark blue tie, soberly knots it around his neck.

Sushila has showered, is dressing now. He straightens the bedroom, pretending not to watch her, listening to her talking nonsense. She slips her arms into a dark purple blouse, and calls him to hook up the back. His fingers do not linger on the soft flesh exposed there; he is deft and quick, after so many years of practice. Thirty-two years of marriage. He married her when he was twenty-two and she was sixteen; he is fifty-four now, a good age for a man to ease back, to rest in the comfort of his family's love and affection.

She tucks one end of her dark green sari into her half-slip, and he takes the other end in his hands, holding it taut as she folds the fabric in front of her, making the pleats that will allow her to walk freely, to dance later. She will call him to dance, and he will gently refuse, as always. He does not dance.

She will dance with her friends, his sisters—not immodestly, of course. Only with women; never with men. But she will laugh freely, will be flushed with pleasure, will lean towards the women and whisper silly secrets in their ears, making them blush and giggle. Exuberant, yet unobjectionable, as always. But the public does not always reflect the private, and he has always known what really goes on.

Suneel is not sure when he first realized that his wife, his beautiful, innocent-seeming Sushila, was betraying him. The first clue was undoubtedly in bed, but he was so ignorant then; how long was it going on before he noticed? Before he realized that while she was willing, she was never eager for him? Before he realized that there was more than maidenly shyness in her lack of response to him?

In another kind of woman, perhaps that would have been normal, but not his Sushila, who laughed with her whole heart, who sometimes had taken the children out to dance in the rain, and who bit her lip and crossed her thighs as they watched the romantic scenes in American movies, the woman in soft focus, lips parted, clasped tight in strong arms. Somewhere in Sushila was a response, but not to him. Never to him.

He had never caught her at it. Never caught her sneaking out, or inviting someone in. He hadn't tried, hadn't wanted to. If he had caught her, he would have been tempted from the path. If he had caught her, he might have swung a heavy fist at her lying face, might have beaten her lover into a bloody pulp. And so he always called first if he were coming home unexpectedly early, or in the middle of the day. He had trouble sleeping at night, and so took pills so that he would not know if she ever slipped out of their bed. Suneel had done his best to never know the truth. He had no real evidence; he had tried not to know—yet he was sure. He knew.

He would have done better not to love her at all, not to desire her. *Let no one cherish anything, inasmuch as the loss of what is beloved is hard.* But after thirty-two years, he has not managed it. Sushila is still his wife, and beautiful to him, and

every night he fights his desire to reach for the woman who was the first to betray him.

She pulls the fabric from his hands; she is done pleading it. Sushila wraps it once around her body, and then crosses it up over her full breasts, over a shoulder to drape across her back and bare waist. He pins the heavy fabric in place at her shoulder, and she walks out of the room, still chattering about something, words which he can make no sense of.

The rain stops, and he goes out with a dishcloth to wipe the chairs dry. No one has arrived yet—they will start arriving at 4:30, 4:45. They will eat the appetizers, they will drink the wine, they will have a roaring good time. Eventually, they will go away, leaving a scattering of presents behind, and then the family will sit down with Riddhi to open them. It will be late—maybe eleven, or twelve or even later. Riddhi will be tired; they will all be. Their reactions will be muted, which is really a shame. He wants to see the looks on their faces as she opens his present. He wants it badly. He does not want to wait.

Maybe he won't.

By five, the party is going strong—all of their close friends have arrived, and only a few more people are straggling in. Riddhi is lovely in a pale cream summer dress, with slim straps baring too much of her skin. The boys cluster around her, and she tilts back her head and laughs, delightedly, at what they say to her. What are they saying to her?

Suneel cannot wait any longer.

"Everyone—everyone, can I have your attention, please?"

His voice is not loud—it never is. But the word is passed along, and slowly the crowd turns to face him, gathering across the lawn, brown faces cheerful in the sunlight.

"I have an announcement—but first, I have a special present for my daughter." They gather closer, drawn by the word, "present," wondering what it could be. Everyone loves getting presents. Riddhi comes to stand next to him, and Raji

and Sushila are near as well. Sushila looks puzzled, but not worried. Why should she be? He has never given her reason to worry.

He pulls the red foil wrapped present out from behind his back, hands it to his daughter. The crowd murmurs. Riddhi smiles and takes it. She starts peeling off the tape carefully, slowly, and Raji shouts, "Just tear it!" Riddhi continues slowly, though, slipping the foil off and then letting it fall to the fresh-mown grass. She opens the box, slides the frame out of it, unwraps the tissue paper. Riddhi looks at the picture of the handsome young man, bewildered.

Her father raises his voice now, louder than any there have ever heard it before. He wants to be sure everyone hears this.

"You've come to celebrate my daughter's birthday, and I thank you! Now, please, join me in celebrating her engagement as well!"

The murmurs have grown louder, and Raji is looking furious. She knows that Riddhi has known nothing of this, but the crowd is not so certain. Surely they would have heard something of this before? Some rumor? But he is a very private man, after all, and the family has had such trouble in the past...maybe he wanted to keep it secret until it was all settled. But how nice to have the girl settled so young; how lovely! The whispers fly through the crowd; he keeps talking.

"She will not be going to school in the fall; instead, Riddhi will be traveling this summer to Ceylon, where she will marry Ashok, the son of one of my good friends, a cloth merchant in Colombo. Ashok is twenty-two, just the age I was when I married my own wife. I know he and Riddhi will be very happy—so please, join me in wishing them every joy and happiness!"

The crowd is caught up in his fervor, his excitement, and they begin to cheer, to press forward and congratulate Riddhi, shaking her hand, exclaiming over the handsomeness of the photo. The noise grows louder and louder, and he slips



away in the confusion.

He sits alone on his marriage bed, drinking a glass of whiskey. It is the first taste of alcohol he has had in thirty-two years. He doesn't like it, but he drinks it down. His hands are shaking.

Later he will have to face Sushila, but he will convince her easily. Ashok's family is quite wealthy, and the boy is a very good catch. Riddhi would never have made a good student, and Sushila will be happy enough to be finally done with raising children, once she gets past the shock. Besides, all the agreements are made; the family is preparing in Colombo for the wedding. All that remains is to ready the bride and buy their plane tickets for the wedding. Sushila won't back out now.

Raji will rage, but she no longer has any power in this family. She gave that up herself. If Riddhi supported her, then perhaps, but otherwise...

The door slams open. Raji storms in, as expected.

"What do you think you're doing?" She is almost screaming, almost wailing. It is strangely satisfying to see so much emotion in her; to know that he has caused it. When Raji was younger, she was always bursting into the store, full of some scheme or another, but she has been distant for so long now, wrapped up in her life away from them. This is the passionate daughter he remembers.

"I'm doing what's best for Riddhi." He could chide her for her tone of voice, but chooses not to. Why bother? It has been a long time since she has shown any respect for her father.

"What's best for Riddhi? What's best for her is to go to school, to learn to support herself, to stop being dependent on you! Not to be packed off to Ceylon and married to a total stranger—she doesn't even speak Tamil!" Raji's hands are balled fists on her hips, and she leans forward, as if she

longs to hit him.

He weighs twice what she does; he could flatten her with one slap across her insolent face. He sits still on the bed, and keeps his voice calm. "She'll learn, and they speak English. She'll be well taken care of there." It's a good family; of course they'll take care of Riddhi.

Raji looks furious, as if she is about to explode. "She doesn't need to be taken care of, Appa—she needs to learn to take care of herself."

For a moment, he wonders if this is true, if he is making a mistake. Could Riddhi be happier with an education, with the ability to take care of herself? A few more years as a child... And yet, hasn't he seen what that leads to? If he doesn't take care of her now, won't she simply ruin herself, and break his heart in the process? For a moment, he isn't sure—and now Riddhi is quietly entering the room. She stops by the door, looking so pale, almost white. He could have been wrong.

But Raji keeps shouting, "You're just tired of taking care of her—you just want to get rid of her. You got rid of Raksha, and you're happy to be rid of me. All you want is your precious serenity—all you want is to be left alone!"

What nonsense. Doesn't she know that he has always loved them more than he has loved serenity and wisdom? Wasn't that his first mistake, and his last? "Be quiet, Raji. You don't know what you're talking about." Suddenly Suneel is weary; tired of dealing with this child, this stranger. What has happened to his fiery daughter, the girl who used to stretch her arms wide and say that she loved him *this* much? This girl in front of him—she understands nothing. "If Riddhi tells me she doesn't want to go, of course she doesn't have to." He gestures, and Raji turns to see her sister in the doorway.

"Riddhi, you can't let him do this to you!" She is shouting at her sister now.

Riddhi sighs. "Raji...go talk to Amma, okay?"

"But..."

"Please?"

Raji looks like she wants to stay, but what can she do? She casts one more angry glance at him, and then storms out of the room. Riddhi stands still, framed in the doorway.

"Appa?" There is a question in her voice, but he doesn't know what she wants to say.

"Yes, Riddhi?"

She doesn't say anything. After a short silence, he beckons her to him. She comes to sit at his feet, leaning her head against his knee. He strokes her hair, brushed smooth and oiled so that it flows like dark river water down her back.

"Do you trust me, Riddhi?"

She does not pause. "Yes, Appa." The others would have paused, at least.

"Will you trust me when I tell you this is for your own good, that I would never do anything to hurt you?"

"Of course, Appa. But..." She trails off.

"But what?"

"It's so far away..."

"Well. That's true. But we'll visit, and once Ashok gets established, you'll be able to visit us here. You've always enjoyed our summer trips to Ceylon. Do you remember—that summer when you were twelve, you said that you never wanted to leave. You'll see—you'll be happy there."

"Yes, Appa." She is a good girl. He had known that she would not fight him on this. They sit together, and he continues stroking her hair; after a little while, she presses his hand, gets up, and goes back out to the party.

She really will be happy there; he knows it. He would never hurt her, his sweet one, his darling daughter. He loves her more than is wise; he has never mastered the release of affection, of caring, that leads to true peace. He has to send her away, as far away as possible, perhaps to a place where she will not learn betrayal, if there is such a place left in this world.

## Rick on His Way to Rachel

M. Nasorri Pavone

Rick began this trip by getting  
dressed. He doesn't mind  
that it takes longer now,  
or that he has to think  
when he walks, or stroke  
more than his chin  
for the rough spots.  
When he touches himself,  
it's almost like caressing  
his wife who cries  
from across town.  
For a long time he felt  
what the gambler felt before  
placing a bet,  
*Now or never, now or never.*  
These days he trains  
with a gender therapist  
who delivers the practice blows  
and kicks as Rick  
learns how to shield  
his swelling breasts so he can  
take it, take it like a Rachel.

Dorothy  
Nina Robb

The moment I chucked the water  
At the wicked witch  
I began to love her.

Fairness immediately was beside the point,  
Revenge as an idea flew away  
On the vapors  
As she melted into broth and essence.

I was shamefaced, caught off-guard  
By her incontestably human fear.  
I was so surprised at her vulnerability.

She was much less surprised,  
She reached a hand out for help  
And for a moment  
I made a great, great hero of myself:  
In fantasy I rescued her,  
Pulling her back into the form of herself  
Out of her pool of rendered flesh.

Then she was so still and quiet  
She was a surface I looked into  
My reflection in her cells  
Showed her to me,  
Showed me myself.

Except from a Prose Poem Memoir  
Chapter 2: The Dark Soul of the Accordion  
Sean Thomas Dougherty

*For Joseph Kriesler*



My grandfather does not sleep among the roots. His ashes are in an urn. His ashes are hidden in my grandmother's downturned eyes. My grandmother sits and stares out at the garden in my aunt Nora's house. She is waiting for the crocuses to bloom. She is waiting for the tulips to open the palms of their petals to cup the milky light. What does it mean to die in winter?

My grandfather died in late summer and all winter was our own death. We walked among the scattered children shouting as they pulled their plastic sleds carving up the hillsides at Frontier park. Red mitten blossoms in the snow, hats pulled low down to eyes, able to sit at Avanti's over a dark cup of coffee, flip through a book of Spanish poems, arguing with the translation's inept understanding of the vagaries of Lorca's syntax. To die in winter is to translate the cold sorrow of the heart into the slumber of the grass, to hear its one note quiet breathing beneath the snow. To know the sailboats moored as hulls to part the water toward the line where sky becomes the world. Sailboats: palmed hands of wind. To heal in winter requires forgetting, the way the snow turns the landscape into sleep. For in winter the world forgets its grieving. For in winter, the world becomes a silence made of snow. A silence made of breathing, the crunch of ice and salt beneath your boots. In the falling sky, we are able to re-find our womb-shape, our shape of solitude against the noise and detritus of grieving. In that silence we are able to unlisten and so begin to live again in the simple ways that living calls, to get up each day, to break the eggs at breakfast. Boil a pot of black coffee and not begin to weep for the

sudden recollection of his hand, the black hairs brushing your face, and the strong coffee breath of his kiss as he lifted you as a child in the morning. Once again you are able to tie our shoes.

*One must forget to continue to live.*



The rain outside has increased and my grandfather has fallen asleep. We can hear him wheeze in his morphine laced utterances. I sat downstairs on the couch with my father randomly clicking the television with the sound off, getting up to stare out at the streetlight lit street, the sounds of traffic from Congress, cars in the rain, destinations under their treads. I stood in the doorway half a dozen times smoking a cigarette, watching the smoke spiral up into the rain. More than once my grandfather woke and was calling to a name I couldn't understand.

The snow of my grandfather's eyebrows, the passing streets, endlessly fenced yards and children who run in their own wilderness. My grandfather's hands are the edge of somewhere weighed by its own rage, a voice shadowed with the blue of saying goodbye. Abandoned lots. Where there is the weight of hunger, my grandfather is there. My grandfather's reaching hand is an answer to all the bitterness, to the tongue's eating, and the stone's fatal flaw. Where there is the dismissive, he is the stutter in their speech. My grandfather's hands are a dark dusting, the raw faces, the stumped.

For which rules are cages, my grandfather crosses out. Walking down Congress Street the men call his name. His face opens a city block, his face is a braid against the hours spent searching for loose change. His face is a cup of coffee and a place to smoke. A place to smoke is not much to ask from the world for a man's life. My grandfather worked his life to create rooms of light and smoke and bread. To lean into them against the splintered wind.

*If one leans against the splintered wind...*



In the summer the runaway children gather on the streets of Portland, Maine. Their torn jeans, their blue hair, their tattoos.



The day my grandfather died.

Birds. When I cup my hands over my face and try to remember that day I see birds in the blue distance. I am standing in the kitchen holding the receiver and my father is telling me I need to return. I am angry with my father because I was just back visiting with my wife and son and the visit went bad. Everyone was so grief stricken and sad that no one knew how to talk to one another. We had wanted to stay with my grandfather but ended up leaving because we thought there wasn't room at the house. So typical of my family, of my own life, this inability to say what we need, what we want. Even at such an important time.

And then my grandmother called and I heard in her voice birds. Such a far away sight, they were rising into the sky over the lake. And it was as if I could see myself outside myself. I was standing there in the kitchen holding the receiver but in my mind I was already returning, already returning to where I was from like birds flying over the Great Lake, headed towards the nesting grounds. I hung up and called the airline. The next day I was sitting in a small silver jet rising up over the Great Lake.



My grandfather's eyes are rain across countless coun-



tries. My grandfather's eyes are closed.



Leaning back into my seat, closing my eyes—what I remember most about that flight, no one sat next to me.



The nighttime is an endless August of sirens and rain. I am walking past the closed shops of Congress Street, the used book stores and dive bars. I am walking past the brewery and the shipyard, past the boutiques and the bathing suit models, the mannequins in their perfect gestures. I am walking past the yellow blur of taxis, and the last drunks, stumbling home, I am walking past the rain. I am walking because my grandfather is dying and I cannot sleep. The insomnia of the grieving. The insomnia of third-shift workers laid off now home watching TV. The insomnia of women walking to sell their bodies along the bay. The insomnia of old women whose husbands are dying, can you hear them as they rise to walk into the bathroom and run the water of the sink, hear them fill the glass and drink slowly, hear them flick off the light. Can you hear them fold their bodies like paper cranes beside their dying husbands? Can you hear them lying with their eyes awake through the night? Can you hear the insomnia of daughters who talk in their sleep?

Or this—the insomnia of the rain, how it loses its lullaby, how it calls the teenage girls outside to climb over the cemetery steps and sit smoking cigarettes on the tombs of the long dead. The insomnia of car tires in the distance. The insomnia of the rough betrayals. Of late night Laundromats. The shabby insomnia of hospital waiting rooms, of restaurant windows, smoky with human breathing, the insomnia of cars at stoplights, of bad girls and incantations. The insomnia of the doll's open eyes, out in the alleyway's trash. Of working and recollections. The insomnia of afternoons before the rain began. Before pawn

shops and Edith Piaf. Before the haunting metro of Hart Crane and Lorca's last laugh. Before a cigar store in Amsterdam and here in America the music of fears. Before his mother brought milk. And he couldn't move. Before the Angel who wrestled with Jacob, and the mountain, brilliant and frowning. The insomnia of the mountain. Before temples and photographs of W.C. Fields. Before Fritos. Before baseball cards. Before stumbling drunk without teeth. The insomnia of waking no one. The insomnia of awaiting the dead.



Golem, come to me tonight and save my grandfather. Lift him with your clay hands. Golem, how far have you traveled? Golem, you do not answer. Golem, you stand by the side of the bed. Your massive clay head, your Dutch boy haircut. Golem you have come but you can do nothing against Death. Death rides the razor'd rain. Golem, you are merely clay.



*I have come for you my child.*

*See me, my dark hair my eyes. Feel my hands across your rough cheeks. I will lift you like water. Into the cradle of my two arms. We will rock across the great ocean. We will fly through the palace steeples. Across the mountains and the rivers, the chaotic streets, the wars. See me, my dark hair my eyes. Hear my lullabies, let them lift you from the bed. Help me tie the sheets into a sail. We will fill it with our breathing. See it billow. We are sailing on the wind of our leaving. See me, my dark hair my eyes. Why do you cry? There is no more weeping. Let the ashes of our bodies become the Braille the wind spills. Let it spell the shapes of song. Touch the earth. It is a last leaving. Touch my hand. Find your name in my palm. Place your arms around my neck. You are my first child, my precious grieving. See me, my dark hair my eyes. We are never*

*leaving. Into the cradle of my two arms you are climbing. Through the window we are flying. Over the great sea, the wars, the palaces. The children are all finally sleeping. The rain is carrying us over the streets, the forgotten streets, I am bandaging your bruised shin, where I wiped your chin, where I nursed. Open your eyes and see me. My dark hair my eyes. My fever has broken. I am here. My child, I am calling. I was never gone.*



Wires and tubes. His body thin as wind. His collar a cave. It was hard to see my grandfather like that. It was hard to see him struggling to shape sounds, to make words work. It was hard to hear. The morphine stuttered. The pain eased, then gripped. He closed his eyes. As if losing his sense. His sense of tense. Then he was back. Beside me.

“Papa?”

“I don’t want to leave...I will miss everyone. She was smart you know.” I went to touch his arm.

“Who, Papa?”

“My mother.” He turned and looked at me.

“Regina, you mean—?”

“She traveled here alone...I don’t know. I can’t blame them. They were peasants. What did they know. They didn’t know anything. The village followed them. They brought the ways of not trying. There were no books in the house, you know only prayer books—”

“Wouldn’t your mother read to you?”

He mumbled something I couldn’t understand. His head nodding, his eyes closing again. I can’t help staring at the tubes, the oxygen tank beside him like a nightmare. I can’t help wanting to hold him and yet he looks so fragile, thin as paper. Thin as wind.



Hours pass and I can't remember my mother not crying.



Papa, why do they come to you at night?  
*They come to bring me black bread and holy wine.*

Papa, what do you hear when you close your eyes?  
*I hear her at the window singing Yiddish lullabies.*

Papa, why is the light of the dead yellow as a sunflower's face?

*It is the fields of the dead we walk through on the way to our childhoods. Each flower sways with the love of someone we are leaving.*

Papa, what does the rain spell for you?  
*It spells the lost name of my mother's mother. It spells why did you desert us.*

Whose voice is the rain, Papa?  
*It is my voice. It is the voices which carry me away from you. If you listen you can hear your voice. A chorus. The temple is full of sparrows, it is saying. It is the voice of every human, which is to say, it is the voice of every Jew.*

Papa, who is the woman pushing the cartload of bread?  
*She has no name, only an echo.*

Is she is coming to feed us?  
*She is awaiting all of our dead.*



All my life the dead have called to me. And now my

grandfather is among them.



Can you hear the accordion? Its golden keys. The opening wheeze of its bellows, and then the orchestra of its breath. There were accordions on the Death trains, that sewed the rain into a shawl to cover the dead. Smashed accordions littered the barbed wire ditches upon arrival. What were those last songs? Those last sorrow songs the people of Uzhorod sang? Did they already whisper Kaddish for the dead? Accordion of the dead children. Accordion of the gypsy and the gavel. Say can you hear the accordion this night on 6<sup>th</sup> street? Someone is stopped at a red light with their windows down, and a song in Spanish, Cumbia from Colombia, is filling the night with cabaret. An accordion is a kind of lungs that speaks the language of the dispossessed, the dead. This is why it is the instrument of Argentina, with its duende and atrocity. And in the Polish Polka there rises a joy against the dying, the occupation. With each step the room shudders and shifts. Once in a Polish bar in Buffalo, New York, I witnessed the accordion player lean into the keys, high on his stool, beside him the drummer's brushes shimmering the drum tops into rain across Ellis Island. We were all drunk and forgetting.

And here in the hollow hall at Ellis Island I hear the accordion begin to play and the Magyars spinning in their Bohemian dresses. See the beautiful girl posed on the wall in black and white, the billowing folds of hand-woven intricate thread. The accordion my grandfather heard when he was a child and rode the haycart through Uzhorhod. The accordions they played on the George Washington as it departed from a German port in 1912 on the edge of war, and Regina Moscowitz leaned on the rail to watch the Lutheran steeples and the dock workers fade into the fog. Was there anyone there for her to wave goodbye to? What did she carry in her hands? Perhaps she wore a new hat she had just bought in a little shop in Budapest, a dozen

blocks from the Imperial Palace. She kept it in its box all the way to Germany, carried it like a child, rested it like a lapdog on top of her black trunk. On the boat, in the fog of late summer, she closed her eyes and dreamed of pigeons eating bread from her outstretched hands.



My great-grandmother's signature on the Ellis Island website: its curvatures, swirls, its wrist whip and press. Its hand weight. This signing that signifies the arrival of a part of who I am here on this earth. I am the first one in my family to witness these words, this name. No one else has seen it. For a long time I sit staring at the screen, and then the tears fall for no reason I can name. The remembrance of my grandfather dying, and the unbearable weight of him as a child watching a room full of strangers weep for the death of his mother. And it is this weeping that I realize calls me to find out about Regina. How I watched my own mother weep uncontrollably, her body shuddering with grief for the death of her father. And in this: there is no solace, no consoling story for this grief. But there is a calling, and the calling is this name, spoken by my grandfather as he merged halfway between this world and the next, or nothing.

For the wind is whipping the rain tonight. And I get up and walk to the room of my sleeping son, the light from the hallway falling across half of his face, his eyes closed gently as doves.



Erika writes, "being a Jew is being an outsider—being a Jew is about suffering, yes..."



When a Jew dies, “he must die whole. Wrapped in a white cloth.” The family drops a handful of dirt to signify the finality of death. If there is a coffin, it is a plain one made of wood, so that the body can return to the earth.

My grandfather asked for his body to be cremated. He asked for no service. This was as far from a Jewish burial as could be requested. Only afterwards did I think of this of his final refusal, his final turn from his childhood identity.

Once, a good year before he died, for a reason I cannot remember I asked him, “Do you ever still consider yourself a Jew?” He didn’t hesitate. “What is it to be a Jew? Why not simply a human being?” Despite this, he was a committed Zionist. He was a believer in the “workings of the world.” He breathed Tikkun, and believed to live is to fight for Righteousness and the betterment of all others.



I leave my grandfather’s murmurous sleep, walk through the hallway to the bathroom. I cup my palms beneath the faucet, hold the cold water and stare into my hands. What has history eaten? In listening for who we are, we come to some decisions about who we are not. And the negotiation of what *I am* means...For some, that signifier of Tribe outweighs a more ontological presence, or makes itself manifest and obvious. I am a Jew. I am a Black Man. *Yo soy Latino*. But what in an assimilated culture are Non-Jews, Non-Blacks, whites whose identity of whiteness is a secondary concern. In my family the awareness of white privilege was manifest due to our politics. As a category of conception, or identity, even now after my grandfather’s death, even after 60 years of disjunctions and disowning by his Jewish relatives, it seems secondary. I have the privilege of seeing it as secondary by the value of my white skin, perhaps the value of my gender. But that is the easy academic answer. What I am most interested in is how assimilation is both necessary and antithetical. The lost silences and the gains.

And for my own family, it was not the assimilated who disowned, who unloved themselves from those who shared their own blood—but it was the Jewish relatives I have never met who denied a member of their own family, how even on his death bed refused to talk to him, to visit, to care because he had married my gentile grandmother. My grandfather's brother Milton carried an anger to my grandfather's grave, and this who can forgive or understand. And in my imagination I picture my grandfather's mother, the woman who combed the hair out of his eyes as a child, staring down at Milton, feeling shame. For all these years the lives that have become fragments. For in the dead, there are only two tribes. The living and the dead. And in my skin I feel her all around me, carrying the falling leaves for me to wear as a crown of red and yellow. Sometimes she speaks in a language I can never understand. For in her, in her story, I hear something resembling redemption. Something that moves me toward a history and people I know almost nothing about. To reclaim my story. And by doing so to try and understand how human beings can disown the people that they care about. And by doing so theorize how her death, the tragedy of her death, enabled them to do so. If she had lived, would my life be my life? In her death, I seek the childhood of my dead grandfather. I seek a blessing. I seek hallowed ground.



My wife and I have been fighting on and off all day. At the last moment, with both of us inches from each other's faces, I caught the sight of my five-year-old son Gabriel hiding beneath the couch.



Their: have you ever noticed how it includes heir? Heir:  
1. A person who inherits or is legally entitled to inherit another's property or title upon the other's death. 2. Anyone who inher-



its any part of another's property, either by the provisions of a will or by the natural selection of the law. 3. A person who appears to get some trait from a predecessor or seems to carry on in his tradition.

Heir (v): to inherit, to succeed to. Their: belonging to them. Theism: belief in God.

So here I have the three linguistic markers. These three simple words are a structure and form, the questions that I have been living with since my grandfather's death.



*Clocks and maps change to the falling rain. In the absence between things. The space between branches, as much the branches as the wood itself. One must listen. The armies rise and fall, the broken waves. The children crying on the starboard port. Bombs dive from planes, trains slow departure, the last callings. Can you hear? Can you see the rails now overgrown, see the yellow pages of the bureaucrat's handwriting? What lotus blossom wilts? What temple do we find overgrown with vines and weeds? The statues falter, the rain worn eyes of Emperors. Look for me in the absence between things.*



Evening came and he heard his mother calling. It is this intangibility of answers, a kind of awareness of presence that was evoked by my grandfather's dying speech that I cannot let go—a collage of fragments, almost felt perceptions, continuously unraveling threads that shimmer like rain. A novel of not arrivings. An autobiography of *absence*. *Not a memoir*. For without *absence* there is no *is*. This is *not* recollection. But transformation. A collaged history. The horizontal spatiality of memory that does not actually exist. The imagination's many mirrors: A brown button. A ripped ticket. A signature. A mass grave. An accordion. A lullaby. An ocean liner. A witness.



*The waiting, and the longing, the leaving, and the night's embrace. The last embers that rise from the fires, and the gathering at day's end. The women walking heads down from the textile shops, their heads wrapped in sweat and babushkas, their husbands' beards clean and swaying as they talk with their hands. The nodding and the translating, the bread and the bartered fish, the books in my small hands, my belly growing.*

## Contributors

Alan Brich's work has been accepted for publication by *The Anklam Road Review*, *Enigma*, *The Griffen*, *Medusa's Hairdo Magazine*, *Mobius*, *Monkey Wrench*, *Mudfish*, *Sandscript*, *The Silver Web*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Spleen*, *Transcendent Visions*, and *Urban Spaghetti*. He also received a recent *Pushcart* nomination.

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Ruth Stone has lived a life of poetry for over eight decades. A Bartle Professor of English at Binghamton University, she was recently awarded the National Book Award for her poetry collection *In the Next Galaxy* and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Ordinary Words*, and the Wallace Stevens Award. Her poetry books include *Simplicity*, *Who is the Widow's Muse*, *Second-Hand Coat*, *Cheap*, *Topography and Other Poems*, and *In an Iridescent Time*. Her most recent collection, *In the Dark*, comes from Copper Canyon.

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A Reader's Series brings writers to campus to expose students to a wide range of literary voices. Visiting writers supplement the program offerings by teaching classes. Past visiting writers have included Ai, Marvin Bell, Hayden Carruth, Robert Creeley, Mark Doty, Stephen Dobyns, Marilyn Hacker, Marie Howe, Galway Kinnell, Li Young Lee, Carole Maso, Heather McHugh, Molly Peacock, Robert Pinsky, Richard Price, W. D. Snodgrass, Henry Taylor, Tobias Wolf, and Charles Wyatt. Each year, the program sponsors the Binghamton University Milton Kessler Poetry Book Award and the Binghamton University John Gardner Fiction Book Award.

Our program encourages an active community of writers. Throughout the year, graduate students sponsor their own student readers series, typically held off campus at venues that attract a community audience. The Writing by Degrees Creative Writing Conference, organized by the graduate students, attracts participants from across the nation. The student-edited literary

journal *Harpur Palate* is produced on campus and attracts submissions from both well-established and emerging voices. In combination with our course offerings, these activities all lead to a vibrant and challenging atmosphere.

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Photo by Del Umbers



## Writing By Degrees

Binghamton University's graduate student-run creative writing conference is now in its sixth year. Once an on-campus event of mainly local colleges and universities, Writing By Degrees has expanded in recent years to an off-campus venue (the fabulously restored Decker Arts and Cultural Center near downtown Binghamton) and hosts panels with writers from all over the globe.

Panels include creative writing pedagogy, identity and writing, the prose poem, problems of translation, the avant-garde, as well as exceptional panels of graduate fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Well-known keynote poets and fiction writers come to give readings each conference and to sit on panels of our choosing. Past readers have included Bruce Bond, B. H. Fairchild, Lydia Davis, Jonis Agee, Neil Shepard, M. Evelina Galang, and John DuFresne. Please check the next issue of *Harpur Palate* for details.



## Submission Guidelines

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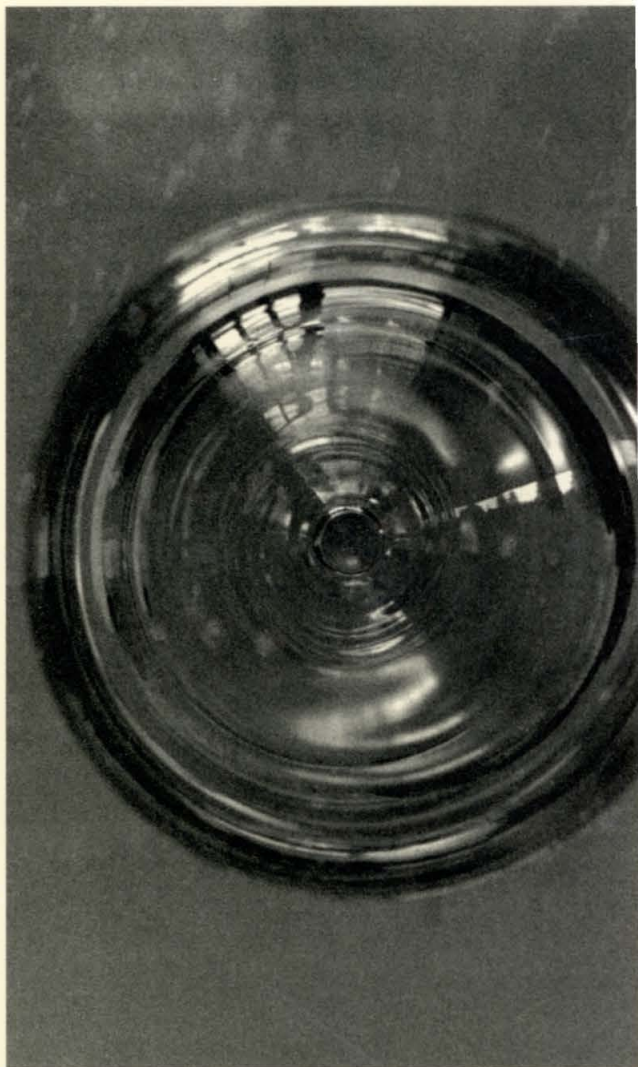
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