

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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## Harpur Palate, Volume 4 Issue 2, Winter 2005

Harpur Palate .  
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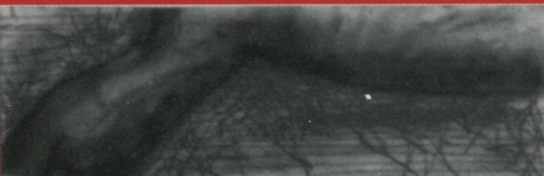
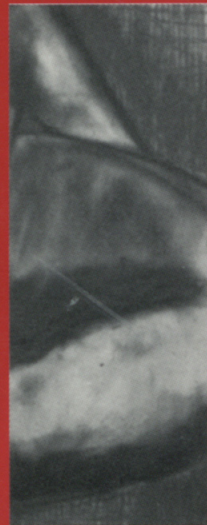
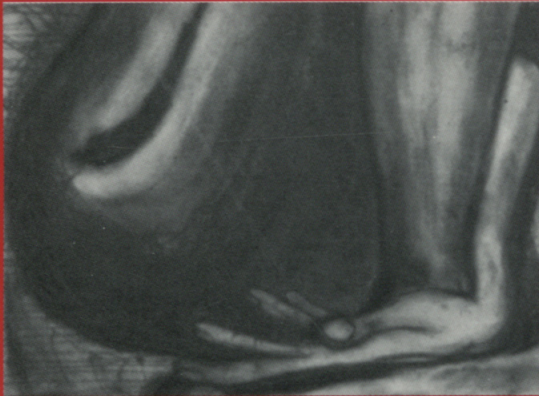
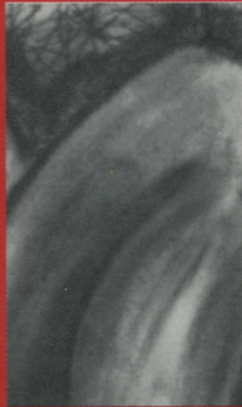
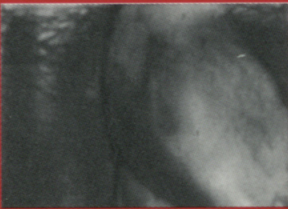
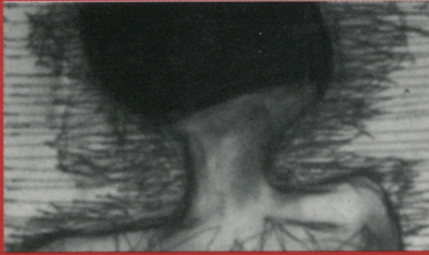
## Harpur Palate, Volume 4 Issue 2, Winter 2005

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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 4 Issue 2, Winter 2005

# Harpur Palate



Volume 4 Issue 2

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# Harpur Palate

Volume 4 Issue 2 Winter 2005



Binghamton University  
New York



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U.S. bank and is made out to *Harpur Palate*.

## 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Short story submissions should be: 1) 8,000 words or less, and 2) previously unpublished.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 \$15 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

<http://harpurpalate.binghamton.edu>

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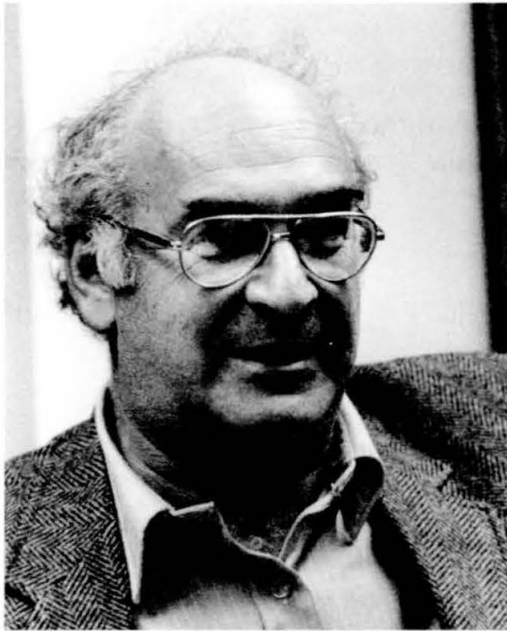
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THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



WINNER

PRAYER FOR THE LIGHT BABY

Gail Waldstein

My Pilates teacher says *think*  
*of sleeping babies, how heavy*  
*they feel*        dead  
weight.        *Tense those glutes*  
*pecs, abs, make them work.*  
I squeeze even eyelids        see light  
babies from my medical practice  
years I did post mortems  
bad days    up to five.  
My breath draws  
                         her instructions        in.

*The awake baby is light.*  
I remember mine  
writhing    squirming    seeking  
to get down    *keep those butts up*, she commands.  
The heft of them from the car  
late nights        how easy in the morning  
arms stretched    up    from the crib.  
*They weigh less*    and I believe her as if it's true  
scaled, verifiable.        All those autopsies  
you'd have to pace yourself  
because the morgue was hot  
or cold, your bent back strained  
into dark cavities.  
Small torsos flexed:  
preemies don't get    rigor mortis  
muscle mass too small



to stiffen. You need breaks  
to keep records straight, the hair: texture  
pattern on scalp, eye color, ear  
anatomy, skin hydration. You need  
time to summarize charts, call clinicians  
gather notes *keep going engage every muscle*  
*they'll hold your body up.*

We weighed each organ, took  
tissues for chemistry, blood for  
chromosomes, cultures.  
Gross malformations named: major and minor  
preliminary diagnoses scribbled  
as if a baby could be cubbyholed.  
*Lift, she drones.*

You and your secretary trade: your notes  
the next chart, which you skim. The day thins  
the morgue's clean clorox and steel light  
flood stainless tables. Another  
naked body, too little food, too much coffee  
your hands tremble. *Pull in*  
*with each exhale belly to spine* she shouts.  
Exertion shakes you  
bone saw vibrates tiny vertebral columns.  
All too automatic sterility cloaks the room  
like an infection.

By day's last post I'm exhausted  
my children's dinner  
late. It's en-block evisceration the very  
word the world *curl tighter, harder.*

Night: refrigerate      organs  
release body to mortuary.  
By morning *you'll be fresh*      though  
corrosive fixatives will chew  
nasal nerves like leprosy  
all meals tasting tin      even your baby's  
powdery bottom tainted  
till midweek.              Sorrow  
seeps through gloves  
                                 a firm handshake  
                                 grip unyielding

until one Saturday night      around eleven  
grandparents      from Wyoming  
want to hold their son's newborn  
before embalming, want to touch

baby flesh.              In the morgue  
you place  
                         fresh cotton batting in the skull  
clean white pads in chest and abdomen      weeping  
blood-soaked originals removed.      No baseball  
quick stitch      in black cord tonight.  
Fine catgut, hair wet-combed over scalp seams.  
A kimono on the body  
limp arms pushed through.

                         She's inactive  
in her pink blanket  
and you think how to explain      lightness  
to these ranchers      *why*  
                         *she's feathery*      as down.

HONORABLE MENTION

MR. BERTEL POEM #3, OR SMART-ASS-LOGY 101

Ryan G. Van Cleave

Dustin Bertel, a.k.a. "Bertie from Room 30," was originally the shop teacher, but cutbacks made him my seventh grade science teacher, then later, my English teacher, where our first project was writing letters to our elected representative of Illinois, Sen. Paul Simon. The purpose of the exercise: to demonstrate that our opinions matter. To this date,

none of those letters received a response. We didn't hate Bertie, not really, but it was me who slapped bumperstickers onto his brown Plymouth Duster one night: "So many cats...so few recipes!" and "Don't piss me off! I'm running out of places to hide the bodies." I admit that he had a sense of humor about being forced into a roomful of teenage freak shows,

but all bets were off when he said one afternoon that, "A narcissist is someone better looking than you are." He adored jazz, often playing Coltrane tapes in the background while we read poetry he assigned, usually frou-frou stuff like melancholy bouts of madness and leaves that turn red and golden then ease to the ground on their own quick wings. When

we switched out his Satchmo cassette for Van Halen, he erupted, flinging himself onto his desk and hooting like a barn owl. The next day, we had Mrs. Chow instead, who didn't speak English well but read us real-life headlines from a joke book all period. "Body Search Reveals \$4,000 in Crack." "April Slated as Child Abuse Month." "County Wants Money

for Taking Dump." Time is the great equalizer, my father told me, and he's right. Being a teacher now, I understand Bertie's pain, having recently received essays with lines such as: "One of the causes of the Revolutionary War was the English put tacks in their tea," and "Writing at the same time as Shakespeare was Miguel Cervantes. He wrote

*Donkey Hote*. The next great author was John Milton. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then his wife died and he wrote *Paradise Regained*." After a long day of teaching, I sip Sahara martinis and listen to Maynard Ferguson wail old Charlie Parker tunes.

The night softens into a blouse of dark, and I think often of Bertie, how he had the brown eyes of a good-hearted

beagle and told us that it was through the imagination that we twist over the wet rocks of the world, an idea I only remember now as the geese are slanting south again. Bertie returned after the Coltrane thing, quieter perhaps, but game enough to reroute our interest by telling us, "Tears are made up of almost the same ingredients as urine"

and "In Yukon, Oklahoma, it is illegal for a patient to pull a dentist's tooth." Still, we poured green food dye in his classroom humidifier and called him Dirty Bertie when he started dating the hot-mama lady janitor. Just today, though, I found an entire banana stuffed in my Blazer's tailpipe, and a bumpersticker on the windshield.

"As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in public schools." My wife thinks it's funny. My father, knowing the rap sheet of my juvenile years, says it's karma. But in the brisk and shallow restlessness of mid-autumn, I come to terms with the weed-choked shore of my life: if Bertie did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.

## HONORABLE MENTION

### CREPUSCULE

John W. Evans

Hidden where the bend  
silvers into rock and cloud,  
the frozen prairie knot  
etches white tips  
against a lowered sky,  
bares the tops of trees.

Summer rages north  
above our rented house—

In bow-tie aeronautics,  
across a tall pole,  
it yawns: long,  
aimless tail  
of green and glass.

HONORABLE MENTION

SUNDAY

J. Lorraine Brown

The wonder of Sunday:  
Brenda Starr and Prince Valiant and Apartment 3G;  
pizza in front of Ed Sullivan, The Toast of the Town.  
My mother unpinned her hat,  
the one she wore to Sunday mass.  
*Have you ever had a gnawing  
in your stomach?* She asked.  
*A yearning without a name?*  
The pulse quickened in her throat,  
in that soft indentation.  
*It's your soul longing for God.*  
She stabbed the crown with her pin.  
I didn't understand that Sunday  
could be a lonely day—  
all that blessed sameness.



## HONORABLE MENTION

PROOF

Maria Fire

I remember the weary dock  
hovering over a yellow lake.  
Muddy water hid things better unseen.  
When my youngest sister says  
she remembers a certain day there,  
I believe her.

What she can't forget is our father laughing  
as he heaved his pasty body onto  
rough boards by her sunning towel  
and pranced back and forth waving  
my blue bathing suit top, before  
laying it at the edge of the pier and saying,  
*You want it, come get it.*

What she can't forget is how I refused to swim nearer,  
keeping silence at a distance, treading opaque water,  
my chin tucked in while our mother  
read her magazine, smoked her cigarette,  
and our other sister and the one brother sprayed  
water in my face, while laughing, too,  
as people in boats motored by.

What she can't forget is our ages, 14 and 6,  
how she inched over behind our father, slid  
her hand slowly towards the blue top until  
he put his foot down on the strap and said,  
*Touch it, you'll regret it.*

I don't remember her story—the details.  
We have children of our own now, and  
our father lies a mummy in his vault.  
Sister waits, studies my face for a reply.  
What I can't forget is my father's hands.

## BLIND SPOT

Roy Kesey

It's early, just barely light, and driving to work I get the feeling again, a car hanging right in my blind spot. I whip around but the street is empty as far back as I can see. That's always how it happens. Things go bad sometimes.

A few minutes later the feeling comes again, and I check my mirrors, catch a glimpse of a dented grill. I've never gotten a good look at the car, so I'm not sure how I know it's a blue convertible. I've never seen the driver, no idea who he is, but he's been showing up more and more often, cutting it closer and closer. I whip around again and the street is still empty and you don't have to tell me how weird this is. I know how weird it is.

I get to the warehouse, shut off the engine and just sit quiet until Goat pulls up alongside. Yesterday Old Red sent Goat and me to the docks to see about a crate; it went a little rough, and Goat got his arm broken, and now he's wearing one of those fiberglass casts, only this one's bright orange, so I hassle him a bit.

We go inside and say hi to Vid and Marty. Nobody wants poker or rummy this early, so we just sit there and smoke. Something's happening, no question, but we never get told until it's time to go, and for the moment we're twitchy like spiders.

We watch seagulls for a while. We watch tugs and scows. We tell stories and ask each other what about lunch, and then Old Red comes out of the office, waves me and Vid to the Cutlass, tells me to drive.

- I got a thing in my eye, I say.
  - What kind of thing? says Vid.
  - I don't know, maybe some sawdust.
  - You got a hankie, so use it, says Old Red.
  - Vid knows how to drive too, I say.
  - If I wanted Vid to drive, I'd have told him to drive.
- I take out my hankie and pretend for a second, get in and

start the engine, and we're not ten minutes out when that fucker in the blue convertible slides into my blind spot again.

- Take a right at the light, says Old Red.

I nod, signal, catch a glint off the convertible's windshield, look back at the empty lane, look again fast and there's still nothing there. I ease over, make the turn and speed up.

- Since when do you drive like a hundred years old? says Vid.

- Leave him alone, says Old Red.

So he knows something's wrong, which isn't what either of us needs; Old Red always has things on his mind but lately it's been worse. He points us down to a Chinese restaurant with dirty windows and peeling paint. In the back there's fifty or sixty small boxes wrapped tight. Then there's some kind of problem, and before things get cleared up I take a shot to the nose, gives me a real gusher, but it's mostly stopped by the time we get back to the warehouse.

- Nobody teach you to duck? says Goat.

I look at him, and he goes back to watching seagulls until Old Red comes and tells us to unload. He leaves with Marty and Vid, and it takes Goat and me almost an hour to put all the boxes away.



I get home around nine, and my boy Angus is sitting on the floor in the living room, staring at the sofa. He isn't wearing his hearing aid which means it's broken again. I put the bag on the shelf in the closet, shut the door hard, and he turns right around. The thing on his chest is infected again and leaking through his shirt, and again there's this watery white stuff dribbling out of his eyes.

As soon as he realizes it's me he starts slinging his arms around. It's the same fight as always getting him out of his clothes and into the bath; since Janey left things have been harder than I'd have thought. Usually the warm water calms him but tonight he's still at it with the arms, swinging and swinging, trying to tell

me something. It's not until I look in the mirror that I see what he's getting at: there's still some dried blood in my moustache.

I tell him it looks worse than it feels, which of course he can't hear. I rinse the blood out and he quiets down, but it takes me ten minutes with a washcloth to get the thing on his chest clean. It looks like a chunk of bad lung sticking out, all mottled pink and gray, but it feels more like rubber, hard and smooth.

Angus is the only one I've told all the stories to—I don't imagine too many details stick in whatever he's got of a brain, and he can't talk anyway. I wipe his eyes, pull him out and dry him off, cover the thing on his chest with cream and gauze and tape, get him into his pajamas.

I heat up two turkey dinners in the microwave and carry Angus to his special chair. We eat and watch some television, and then Angus wants something but I can't tell what. He doesn't make any noise, just flaps his hands, opens and closes his mouth. I take down his pens and some paper, and that's not it; I take down his model F-16 that I did for him, and that's not it either. I carry him room to room, trying to get him to point, but skinny as he is he weighs maybe a hundred and ten, and I can't keep it up for long. Finally I leave him on his mattress on the floor, get into bed and listen for hours to his hands slapping the wall.



There was a dream, something big and white and pointy but now it's gone and I'm late for work and Angus is still at it against the wall, slap slap slap. I grab his wrists to make him stop, carry him to the bathroom, wash the blood off his hands, more cream, more gauze, and ask him real loud where his hearing aid is. He doesn't understand or doesn't want to. I draw a picture of it, ridiculous, looks like a cashew but he gets it, points out the window. He gets angry like that sometimes, throws stuff around, and there's nothing you can do. I go and look. It's a long way down to the alley.

The thing on his chest looks better and his eyes are clean.

I get his breakfast on a tray on the floor, do up a sandwich for his lunch and stick it on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. He looks at me, and I tell him I'm sorry, prop him up against the sofa, grab an apple, hit the stairs.

Everybody's waiting. I tuck my shirt in and tell Old Red that I'm sorry for being late. He nods, cocks his head kind of funny, asks me to tell him about it—first time this has ever happened, and something's not right. I tell him, Angus again, the hearing aid again, and Old Red smiles.

- Tell me more, he says.

Goat and Vid are staring at the floor, and Marty is fooling with a butterfly knife, clickety-click, back and forth. There's nothing to do but start in about Angus's eyes, but then Old Red cuts me off, says he doesn't want to hear it. I say I know and I'm sorry and he points at the wheel of the Cutlass.

It's a pawnshop this time, only a couple of blocks away. We all get out, and Old Red passes crowbars around. The owner sees us coming and heads for the back, and we swing and swing until everything's in pieces.

I hang back as we leave, hoping someone else will get the wheel for once, but they're all just standing around the car, and Old Red nods at me. I shrug, get in, put on my seatbelt.

- What the hell? says Vid.

Old Red shakes his head, tells me not to waste any time. I pull out, and the blue convertible is already tucked in tight behind us. I try not to look, not even at the mirrors, but at the intersection there's a nudge and I wrench the wheel, sideswipe a delivery truck, and now we're on the sidewalk facing the wrong way, a crate busted open and oranges rolling everywhere.

People gather, point, argue about what they saw. Old Red grabs me, makes me look in his eyes. Vid and Marty are yelling, and Goat tells them to shut the fuck up. Old Red reaches across me, opens my door, tells me to go straight home and stay there until he calls.

I take off my seatbelt and get out. Old Red slides over and guns the engine, pulls away. There's a siren getting closer. I



keep my head down, pick up a couple of oranges and push into the crowd.



Saturday I take Angus to the clinic, and there's mildew on the ceiling, a roach in the bathroom, the sound of rats in the walls as we wait. I've brought his pens, pull wrappers out of the trash for paper; he picks a red marker, holds it like an ice-pick and I move his hand in circles. This is maybe his favorite thing.

We wait an hour and then get told the ear doctor didn't come in today, not that it matters with what hearing aids cost, but still. So we go to another waiting room and draw more circles and get his chest looked at, and his eyes. The nurse has a piece of old lettuce caught in the pocket of her uniform. She tells me I need to be a little more careful with basic hygiene, and I say that one bath a day is the best I can do. She nods and says that's not enough, and she can't give me any more cream unless I pay for it, which I do with most of this week's food money. I steal half a roll of gauze from a cart, and the receptionist waves as we leave, says she hopes everything turns out okay.

On the way home the convertible slips into place. I drive a perfect line, keep a constant speed, then swerve left and brake and spin for a look. Of course the lane is empty, and I've wrenched Angus's neck, and there's stuff in his eyes again.

Back at the apartment there's nothing in the freezer so I make rice and a packet of gravy. This is fine with him. We watch the news, and then I take out the Twister; he loves the colors, and we've changed the rules to make it fair. I do all the spinning, take position, and wait for him to reach. Finally I get an impossible left-foot yellow, collapse on top of him but soft, and he laughs and laughs and laughs.



Right at kick-off the phone rings, and I wait to watch

the run-back but the kid gets stuffed at the eighteen. I answer, and it's Old Red. He says he needs me, says there's extra money in it. I look at Angus, and he's staring at the cheerleaders. I tell Old Red I'll be there in twenty minutes, he says ten, and I look around for my shoes.

Everybody's there. Old Red tells Vid to drive, and I end up squashed between Marty and Goat in back. Nobody talks. I crane my neck, pretend to watch the scenery—street-dogs, winos, trash. Finally we stop at a chop-shop we've worked with for years, and something's coming but it's hard to tell what. Goat has the key, gets the door open. We walk in, and when Old Red shuts the door it's too dark to see.

Vid nudges me forward, and I put my hands out, crack my shin on maybe a muffler, and Vid nudges me again. All the way to the back, and here there's a window, not much light but a little. There's a big metal barrel and a bunch of plastic jugs. Marty opens a jug, pours it into the barrel, and the smell takes me a second but then I know: acid.

We watch Marty pour maybe ten jugs, and Vid and Goat are tight against my shoulders. Old Red stares out the window. A last few jugs. Old Red asks me what I did with the box.

- What box?

- Quit fucking around.

- We put them in the—

- I know. And one is gone. You thought maybe you could set up a little business on the side?

- I don't have the faintest—

- You're the only one in bad enough shape to do something that stupid. Conversation's over. Marty?

- At least let me call my wife.

- You fucking hate your wife, says Vid.

- I never said I hated her.

- You never said you loved her.

- No, but she'll take care of Angus if I ask her.

Old Red waves us quiet, shakes his head, looks over at Marty and nods.

- Then let me call Angus instead.
- He can answer the phone?
- I rigged it special for him.

Old Red thinks this over, tells Goat to give me his cell phone. Goat says it costs a dollar a call and there's a perfectly good regular phone right there on the workbench. Marty picks up the receiver, listens, hands it to me. I dial, wait, drill Marty in the temple, pull him in tight and spin. He catches Old Red's bullet, and I'm up on the workbench and through the window, glass jagging deep into my arms, and I'm scrambling and up and into the street, heavy traffic both ways, a little red pick-up skids and spills me but I'm up again, haul the driver out, and there's maybe a chance I'll beat them back to the house.

I'm bleeding all over the seat but there's no time for any of it, tunnel and dark, bridge and light, hitting all the seams, a couple of stoplights but only the last one goes red as I near and I gun straight through, dodge some kid on a bike, hard left and up to my building. My fingers aren't working so well and it takes me five tries with the keys, finally in as the Cutlass slides up, rams the pick-up, and I get the door locked behind me but of course it won't hold long. Up and up and up, I kick down my door, and Angus is curled on the floor, so much stuff in his eyes he can't even see.

I pick him up, grab the box out of the bag in the closet, and head for the window. I bang it open with my elbow, no fire escape but a drainpipe, Angus wailing and swinging under one arm and the box tight under the other, and we slide, down a floor, another, dark red stains all over the wall. I feel my hands start to go, cinch Angus to my chest and then there's nothing left and we're falling, a strip of sky above us going thin and then we hit.

There's no sound, and I can't breathe, can't feel anything. Then I hear a car engine, low and smooth. A moment later the blue convertible pulls up. It stops, and a door opens, but now Angus is writhing on top of me, and he seems okay but I can't move my arms, can't hold him tighter or let go.

TO DOROTHY, AGAIN

Marvin Bell

It is not terrible to be old, said the geezer.  
Back when I lived like a spider in the toe  
of a shoe, fearing the step of a god,  
taking a sentimental journey day after day,  
afraid of the nails, fearful of a pinecone,  
I was still empty of death, I weighed nothing.

And the years of radical action, such clarity!,  
arched between life and death, while I stood  
apart in the middle. I was already enamored  
of the inscrutable, oh yes!—I thought the rain  
too heavy for the high pitch of charity. I  
thought madness a distillate, god-given.

I love you like the salt in salt water, the sugar  
in the fruit. I love you like the glaze layering  
a clay urn buried long at sea—our vessel.  
A kiln at cone 9 liquefies everything in it.  
Its heat holds the clay in strict suspension.  
It is easier to be old when you're in love.

CROSSING THE CHEVIOTS

Marvin Bell

To the Memory of Poet Jon Silkin

The grass, the ground and the fence posts were tan.  
The hills rose and fell, the land undulating ahead.  
It must have been the undulating hills that jiggled us into laughter.  
At Mary's Loch, we stopped to lay a causeway.  
Hauling large stones into the lake, humping them into a bridge.  
The sky was as calm as an amused teacher.  
Yes, the sky was tranquil, pacific, unruffled and still.  
Under it, we were messy, jaggedly capsizing our stones.  
As we worked, they sucked the laughter out of us.  
We carried them lower, we plodded into the great Scottish lake.  
And the clear day turned into steam around us.  
And the air bristled, and futility blanketed the hour.  
But our failed causeway would have to be long enough.  
Stubbornly, we laid down headstone after headstone.  
Some will say that men work to find God.  
We bore the jagged stones of our bridge without faith.  
Jon worked the hardest at it, and he died first.

## FURTHER EVIDENCE YOU ARE A CHANGELING

George Tucker

1. Possums are surprisingly large rodents with greasy buzz-cuts and have sharp snouts full of glass-splinter teeth—really, they look evil up close at night, eyes glowing demonic green in the scattered yellow headlights, hissing, puffed up to the size of a small dog and showing every one of those evolutionarily implausible 168 razor-teeth—you're not at all tempted to strike at the beast with what suddenly seems a rather feeble and not sufficiently lengthy stick to get it to "sull up" so you can grab that ropy pink tail that from this distance looks scaly and remarkably unpleasant and swing the cataleptic beast around your head a few times to build sufficient momentum to fling it away into the dark, hopefully far enough away that it won't be able to find you when it wakes from its coma—no, faced with that spectacle you'll back away into the safe cone of Mom's flashlight and say to the woman who interrupted the late-night drive home when she saw the hairy little beast shamle across the road to introduce her child to authentic Ozark fun, "I hit him, sure enough. He just didn't sull."

2. This is the same woman who encouraged you to amuse yourself on summer evenings with a large wicked-sharp treble hook, twelve feet of fishing line, and a piece of small cloth: cloth affixed to hook affixed to line, swing around your head—odd recurring pattern, this—to attract bats, which, as we all know, are basically rodents with wings—and when bat becomes affixed to the hook's triple barbs, pull him in and—

"And what?"

"Well, you know, kill it. Those little bastards bite."

3. By the time you're home from school, half the nightly case of Busch (Head For The Mountains!) will be gone and her face, oddly swollen now, will be pressed into the phone receiver and



her slitted eyes won't notice you as you walk by. Dad's in the Persian Gulf, sister lives at Grandma's. Those long warm damp nights of interminable phone calls and her voice a slur like canola oil on plastic and odd disjointed syllables. Nights she falls asleep that way, beer can and phone, you'll take the receiver away and hang it up. You'll wonder if there was anyone on the other end. Pour the last of the beer into the sink, watch the shampoo froth and smell that ripe yeasty stink. You draw the line at putting her to bed, throw a blanket over her as a compromise. Her bloated face oddly shiny, slitted eyes so like the possum's—the word sull occurs to you, and the word bastard. Then you'll kiss her goodnight.

GARDEN

Stan Sanvel Rubin

(after Rilke)

*...guide him/close to the garden...*

*—Third Elegy*

Those who believe they have  
a lot to offer  
offer only their hungers

Those who believe  
they can trust themselves  
trust shadows

In sex, it is  
as in love  
you are heedless

of cautions, pain  
pleases you  
your pleasures

grow like must  
under the fingernails  
a dark stain

obliterating both  
silences but not  
ending them

*—furh ihn / nah an den Garten heran—*

he urges  
the quiet girl  
twisting her braid

HAND

Stan Sanvel Rubin

(after Rilke)

*Suppose there's a place we know nothing about?*

—*Fifth Elegy*

The trapeze of love  
makes us all acrobats  
in too many galaxies at once

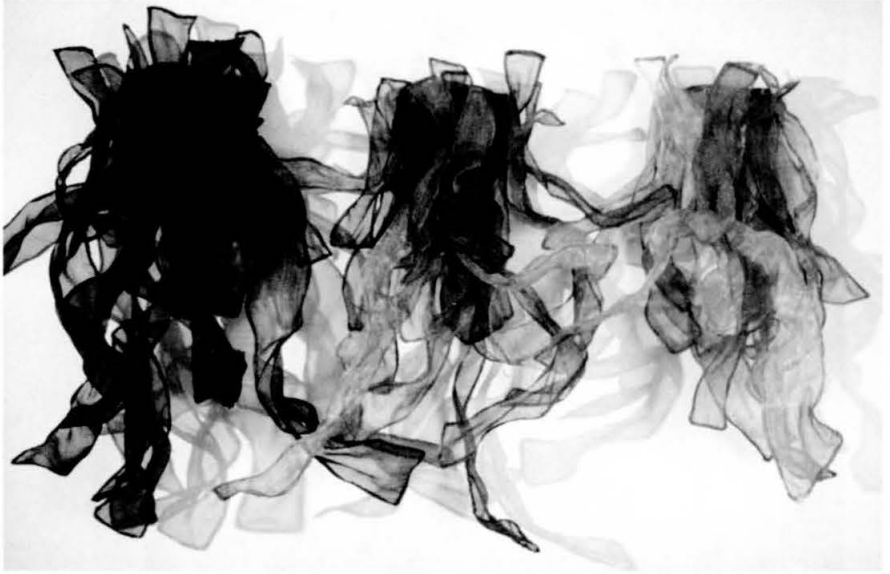
and what counts is not  
what is under us but  
what is not

as we tumble headlong  
toward each other  
or twist willful as

a child with a hoop  
And still we dream  
of another place

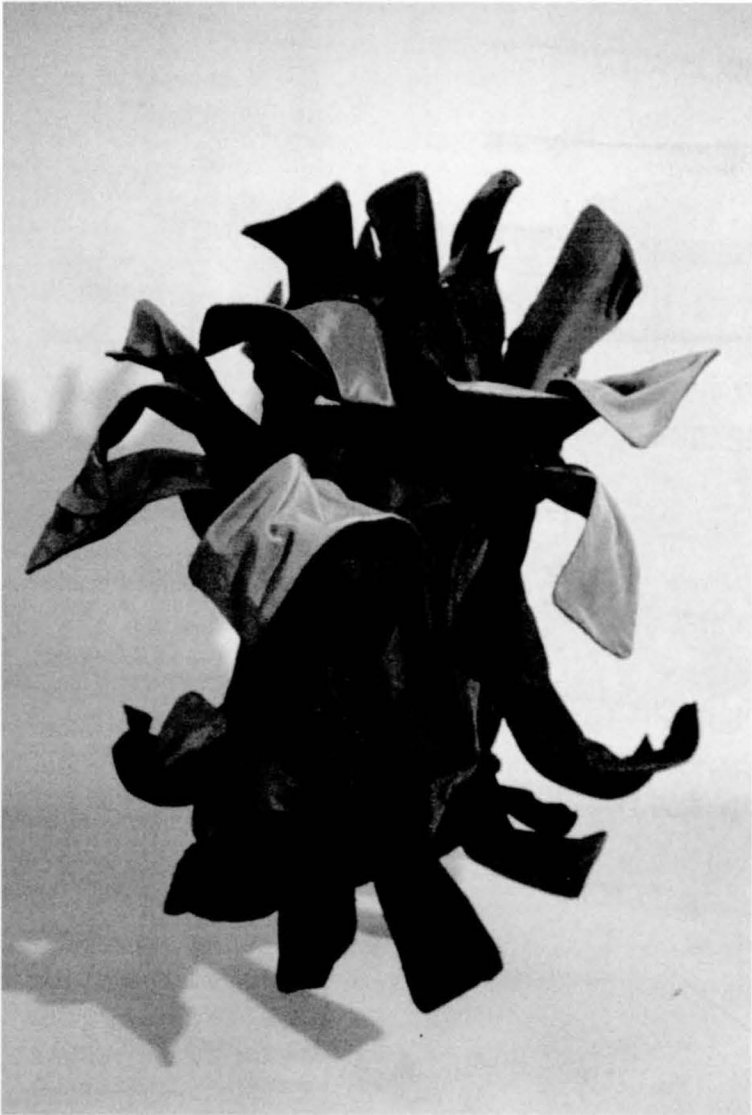
—*es ware ein Platz, den wir nicht wissen*—

where, when you lift  
your hand, the other's  
hand is waiting



*"Skirt Relief"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart



*"Coat"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart



*"Unforgettable Act of Growing Up"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart



*"Female Dressing in Thread"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart

## WRITING BY DEGREES PORTFOLIO



Photo by Kathryn Henion

### WRITING BY DEGREES

Binghamton University's graduate creative writing conference is now in its ninth year. Once an on-campus event of local colleges and universities, Writing By Degrees has expanded to host panels with writers from all over the globe, with readings taking place at the Decker Arts and Cultural Center, a restored classic revival mansion near downtown Binghamton. Recent guest readers have included Lee K. Abbott, Sascha Feinstein, Lydia Davis, B.H. Fairchild, M. Evelina Galang, and Neil Shepard. Panels include topics such as creative non-fiction/memoir, creative writing pedagogy, jazz poetry and prose, and the business of literary journals, as well as exceptional readings of graduate fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. The next Writing By Degrees conference will be held on September 22, 23 & 24, 2005.

For more details, please visit our website at:  
<http://writingbydegrees.binghamton.edu>



## ONE OF STAR WARS, ONE OF DOOM

Lee K. Abbott

The slaughter hasn't started yet. Tango and Whiskey, in fact, have just left bowling class at the Mimbres Valley Lanes off Iron Street. No one knows about the Intratec DC 9 or the Savage sawed-off double-barreled 12-gauge. No one knows about Little Boy and FAT MAN, the propane tank bombs set up with egg timers and gallon gasoline cans. Even Mr. DeWine, who's famous for believing he knows everything about anything any kid does, doesn't know that right now, nearly nine in the morning, Tango and Whiskey are parking their cars, a black VW Golf and a blue Camry, in their assigned places in the student lot across from the gym. Sadly, Mr. DeWine can't even guess that in several minutes—maybe ten—Tango, Marlboro in hand, will stop Mike Richardson outside the cafeteria.

"Richardson, I like you," he will say. "Now, get out of here. Go home."

No, Mr. DeWine knows only that it's too early for lunch and that he has a mountain of civics exams to grade before seventh period. His gut is churning—too much coffee too early, he guesses—and, come four-thirty this afternoon, he'll be in his Jockey shorts in a room at the Red Roof Inn off I-10, listening to Ms. Petty—Ms. Leanne Elizabeth P., late of Tularosa—crying in the bathroom. Before or after—hell, often both—she cries in the bathroom: no one is listening to her, she sobs, no one values her opinion, she's a fireplug for all anyone cares. Just a truck or a root or a box of rocks. She'll be wearing a garter belt and seamed hose, the fetish wear Mr. DeWine drools over, and she'll be sitting on the closed toilet lid, sniffing and boohooing that even Mr. DeWine, the guy she's been screwing for the last ten months—Christ, probably the only heterosexual in this goddamn Land of Enchantment who can get from one to ten without using his goddamn fingers, a guy who regularly made her laugh right out loud—even he doesn't listen to her. No, that crumb just climbs

on and hollers “Whoopie!”—not a “yes” or “no” or civilized phrase to go back and forth between them until, at 6:30, he says adios so he can hustle back before Sue Ellen, the wife, gets home from Pioneer Realty, Associates.

So there is Mr. DeWine—Frank to his pals, Francis to the Social Security Administration and the DMV, shitbird to the likes of Tango and Whiskey—in the hall, for eight minutes merely another cop-slash-cowboy obliged to herd Brianna (all forty of her) and Jason (the fifty or so he is) and Niki (the dozen she’s turned out to be) into the right holding pens-slash-classrooms, to prevent them from stampeding over one another. He’s got the “Declaration” to teach, for crying out loud. And attendance to take. A zillion announcements to make, plus homework to hand back—No, Tiffany, not on the curve—a whole briefcase of ideas he’d like to tell the world about if only the natives weren’t so damn pimply and tall and loud, if only they didn’t dress like lumberjacks and toddlers and thugs, if only they had more on their minds than Friday night and Duke Nukem and where to barf up that turkey sandwich.

The world? Fuck the world, he wants to say. Wants to stand in the center of the hall—right there, in fact, right where Colin is messing with Trisha who’s messing with Erika who’s messing with Misty who’s probably wishing that Joshua were messing with her and not that skanky April May Lester—yeah, stand right there in between Mr. Geller (History II) at his door hither and Mrs. Fletcher (History I) at her door yon, and shout that it’s the millennium, for God’s sake, that there’s got to be something else to do for forty-eight thousand two hundred and sixty-one dollars a year; that he was once young, too, a skinny Virgo with an acceptable jumper from the top of the key, and an expert way with power tools, in addition to a singing voice that didn’t pain you too much to hear in St. Paul’s version of youth choir. “Hey, look,” he wants to holler, “Mr. Masters-degree-himself can burp the entire first verse of ‘Silent Night!’” Yeah, Frank Round-Yon-Virgin DeWine, you moles. Frank you-just-would-not-get-it, don’t-you-wish-you-did DeWine.

So, okay, it's crowded and noisy, the air thick and institutional, the air smelly and damp and bad for learning, rotten for anything except virulence and nightmares, and right now, while Rammstein and Nine-Inch Nails and Creed and Tupac and Little Fascist Panties and the Holy Modal Rounders are on that Walkman and that CD player and between those ears, and someone—Fishboy, maybe, he's the type, subtle as a circus clown—is bellowing “ho-ho-ho,” and while all of the Mountain Time Zone is getting stupid and cranky and old, Whiskey and Tango are unloading their duffels.

Jesus Lord, they are in possession of some seriously impressive ordnance—hand grenades and pipe bombs, all homemade with glass and nails and jacks and BBs—and these guys, breathless and teary-eyed, are practically punch-drunk with glee. The plan, amigo. Everything's proceeding according to plan, approximately a year in the making. Months and months downloading the data from the Net, the only other shit keeping you sane being Buckhorn specialty knives and natural selection and seeing white trash wreck their brand-new cars. Nearly a year, man, of putting up with jerks who mispronounce words, plus O. J. Simpson and weathermen and slow people in line in front of you and paying for car insurance. So it's now time for five—and five more, bro—and five on the dark side, too. The time, motherfuckers, is nigh. Oh, sweet Jesus, is it ever.

Which is ten on the dot, and the bell is ringing, the tardy bell, and the doors are closing—*boom, boom, boom* echoing in the hall—and soon Mr. DeWine, the image of Ms. Petty on all fours fixed like a photograph behind his eyes, takes roll. Surprisingly often of late, he's imagined the room with a Ms. Petty in each of the twenty-six seats. A Ms. Petty in a tiger print corset, growling. A Ms. Petty bound hand and foot, duct tape over the mouth, hands down the naughtiest wench in the area code. A Ms. Petty on her knees, tears dripping from her cheeks, her lower lip trembling, hers the grunts farm animals make. *Ugh. Baw. Eef.* A Ms. Petty laughing, then choking because, hell, if you didn't laugh, really bust a gut, you'd just end up banging

your head against the nearest brick wall—the government, for starters, and the freeways, *Friends* and the hopeless porkers at the free weights in Gold's. Oh, man, a Ms. Petty in the back of the room, pulling down the map of the Gadsden Purchase, her fanny shiny and smooth and broad, the ass of a former rodeo queen of Otero County now with unspeakable credit card debt.

But today, no. No frills to fondle. No silk or satin or whatever the dickens it is that brings his blood so quickly to boil and makes his thigh muscles twitch. Today, seat 6A, we find Amanda, too sparkly in the eye, busy as a hamster. And Chelsea, 4F, with earrings and bracelets in industrial quantities—probably couldn't get through an airport with all that hardware. And Todd, his best citizen, A's on everything, including his high-dollar hair. They're all here, it seems. Tarika? Yes, as usual, about as far from Mister Teacher as she can possibly be without leaving the room altogether. Tyson? A simple "here" would do, but, Christ on a crutch, this drama club president and his "present," a response that under his care and feeding seems to have eight—possibly ten—syllables. Bethany? Ah, practically under his feet again, eye shadow like poster paint, but a rack you wouldn't mind warming yourself against during the next ice age.

"Anybody know where Kathi is?" It's the *i* that kills him, hanging off the end like a tail, a smiley face above it on all her written work. A letter like a lollipop. "Kathi? Anybody?"

"I saw her in physics." It's Harrison, Todd's foot slave, a junior with the fertile imagination of a Dumpster. "That was second period."

"Thanks, Harrison," Mr. DeWine says. "Anybody else?"

They're studying the floor, every blessed one of them. Or the ceiling. Maybe that fascinating crack in the drywall. They don't look at you anymore, these kids. They mumble, they shrug, and they cough. Eye contact? A new social disease.

"She's on the Spirit Committee." That's Suzanne—not Suzy or Sue, if that's all right with you, Mr. DeWine—and she possesses a smile that all but blinds him: more teeth than Jaws, pearly as the path to Paradise itself.

The committee, he mutters. A second later, shazzam, it hits him. It's Free Cookie Day. The cafeteria. All the chocolate chip and peanut butter and ginger snaps you can eat. Fight, Wildcats, Fight.

"All right, then," he says. "Turn to page 194."

And so that's the way it goes—"When in the course of human events" blah-blah-blah—time a drip to torture yourself with, time the stick to poke into your eyes, time you wouldn't want to meet alone in an alley. Until it's time—no matter the ifs, ands, and buts—to serve up generous portions of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of ever-loving Happiness, precisely as Master Tom described it. Time, in fact, to turn the page, please.

"...appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions," Todd is saying—*intoning* is more the hell like it. Good Lord, the kid is a senator already. A justice of the Supreme Court. King Todd is straight out of the Charlton Heston edition of the Old Testament, the words raining down on Room 144B like murrain and flies and frogs, and, while Ben Franklin and John Hancock and the rest of the Colonies' ruling class are mutually pledging their lives and fortunes and sacred honor, Mr. Frank DeWine is doing his damndest to concentrate, to keep his eyes open, to hold himself upright and not, weakened by boredom and surprisingly epic fatigue, to lay his impossibly heavy head in Marcy Hightower's fetchingly ample lap.

"Mr. DeWine?"

Our hero finds himself looking straight at Harrison, eyeball to eyeball. The boy has spoken. He has brought Mr. Frank DeWine, our one-time recording secretary for Lambda Chi Alpha and full-time yellow dog Democrat, back to the here and now. Evidently—and this, DeWine thinks, is truly alarming—he was somewhere else, a there and a then well distant from the rhetoric of revolution, a place and time you most assuredly did not want to visit in the company of humanoids as aggressively disinterested as these.

"Page 208," he says. "Manners, Query XVIII—for man is an imitative animal."

They're good, these children. They appreciate knowing what to do next. They appreciate knowing what's to be done in, say, November—even in a November a decade from now. They're big fans of clean laundry and recreation rooms and pool parties. They like pizza and keggers and Old Navy. Oh, they get goofy over all the goodies FedEx can hand deliver to their doors. Not like Whiskey and Tango—code names, in case of capture behind enemy lines. Whiskey and Tango don't like people who bump into them, or country music or freedom of the press. Especially Whiskey, who wants to haul all those who are against the death penalty and who dig commercials and who cut in line and—well, he doesn't know exactly where he'd haul their sorry asses, except that it would be forever, the outer darkness and way beyond here, beyond even time and God and any idea that can't be made plain in four words.

It's the Luvox, Whiskey sometimes thinks. The shit gets in him deep, soaks his bones. It blasts him out there, really out there, where the stars creak and the slop drips off the sun and the angels dress like Baron Frank'N'Furter. But that's no reason, never has been. Instead, the reasons are Fishboy calling you “pussy” and “pansy” and Clinton—the fucking president—blowing his wad on that intern, that Monica. Yeah: Kellogg's and lard-butts and the crap they're spraying on your food. And against that, in opposition to all that stupefies and enrages and disappoints, stand himself—the Whiskey man—and his loyal sidekick, the Tangster. Hi-ho, Silver, you dipshits. Hi the hell ho.

Which is more or less what Mr. DeWine has come to think in the last ten minutes. He thinks to tell them he was in a rock band once, Dr. Filth and the Leather Cup—neat, huh? They specialized in Vanilla Fudge covers, Iron Butterfly. He played drums—the perididdle, the flam, the rim shot—no Ginger Baker, sure, but Ringo enough. Nineteen, freshman year at State, and he's on the stage at El Patio bar in Old Mesilla, pounding out the beat for “Hey, Joe,” and urging the unwashed to shake their tail feathers, joints the size of cigars going back and forth, the singer—man, what was his name?—humping the air, humping the organ,

humping the Peavey amp, humping the bass player one time. That's what he wants to say, here, out loud, from atop the desk, having dropped an atlas or two to focus everybody on the present. "Once upon a time," the speech would go, "in a world far, far away, Mr. DeWine, no kidding, had a topless ZTA from Roswell ride him pony-style while he, the selfsame son of a gun huffing and puffing before you, kicked over a cymbal and generally wreaked havoc on the stage décor." Here he would look around, taking stock, with that celebrated pregnant pause. "Ended up on the floor, ladies and germs, a pair of Bermuda shorts between the teeth."

But he won't. Can't. A line, you see, lies between them—a Maginot line, practically. You are the teacher, the incarnation of decrepit, laughingly out of touch with cool, yours the clothes that even Larry, Curly, and Moe said "yuck" to. You all but wear your hair in a comb-over, you've gone spongy in the belly, and you gobble goddamn Lipitor and Prinivil because your body—some temple it is, Bunky—has turned on you in outright revolt. And they are the students, the rulers of the wasteland, the tribe yattering in Martian.

And then, thank God, the bell has rung and, only a moment short of a moment that doubtless would have shamed you eternally, you have not told them anything actionable, haven't told them anything at all except that they should know, with the same certainty they know their names, Jefferson's September 25, 1785, letter to Abigail Adams—yes, Tiffany, this will be on the test—and, instantaneously of a single mind, they rise, legs and arms everywhere, backpacks strapped on, their chatter a noise that becomes a roar, then insensible as static, then nothing for the next few minutes but elbows and ball caps and ponytails, nothing except time diving at you like a missile, you just something else goopy, slow, and warm-blooded that can talk.

The carnage? Still an hour away.

Erika's in orchestra, third flute, trying to catch up, her foot having found a rhythm for some fa-la-la that, duh, there

isn't ick to like. Misty's pretending she's not in English, at least not in any English that demands you read such brainless typing as *The Bluest Eye*, not to mention all the footnotes and commas and infinitives they make you use. Todd? He's in the library—study hall—doing math homework and another scholarship essay. The Kiwanis, the Optimists, the Lions—all the do-gooders. They're all looking for heartfelt words and a winning way of saying squat. Harrison, sitting across from Todd, seconds that opinion. Suzanne would as well, but right now she's trying to figure out why Mr. Hart, Latin (fourth period), hates her so much. After all, forty kinds of ablative, ninety noun cases, never mind Horace and Virgil and Cicero—who are these mush-mouths anyway? *Mehercle, qui dies!* Which sentiment Alicia would understand were she present, but she's gone to the cafeteria to help Kathi, who's managed to get rid of all the sprinkles and the butterscotch and who's made—sorry, Ally—a sizeable dent of her own in the gingerbread men. Which leaves April May Lester, who's not really a skank but just wants one of the cool kids—Bethany, for example, or that prep Tyson—to like her, to ask her a question she can say “sure” to.

So back we are to Mr. DeWine. “Francis Michael,” his mother used to bark, a genuine drill sergeant. “Francis Michael, you have been a profound frustration today.” He can imagine her here, at attention beside his desk, a switch or a flyswatter in her hand. Her plastic hairbrush, more likely. “Francis Michael, I trust we'll have no more of such tomfoolery.” Yes, ma'am, no more. No foolery of any kind, Mother. At which promise, she disappears, and Francis Michael finds himself with little to imagine but what, in the first place, his father, not a saint himself, ever saw in her—the former Mary Cobb, of Silver City. Her hair maybe? She had great hair, a thundercloud of it, hair to spare, all of it fine as cotton candy. Plus, she could take shorthand, did so right in front of the TV—one January the pages that were reportedly a faithful transcription of *Guns smoke* piling up beside her armchair. *Bonanza*, too. She liked the rough-and-tumble, sodbusters blazing at each other with pistols, dust swirling, horses



going to panic in the eyes. But other than that—the bang-bang and the frenzy, and, okay, modest expertise in the kitchen arts—what? Oddly, Mr. DeWine can't conjure her now, not a single feature. Just the hair, floating in midair, atop the head of a ghost maybe.

A vision which would scare him if, without warning, he hadn't been distracted by whatever hard and sharp thing that's settled in him—a bone, he fears. Something small and heavy has tumbled to the flat bottom of him, the thunk like a bolt in a bucket, and right now, before Jason appears to discuss his overdue research paper, Mr. DeWine would like to smoke a cigarette, the first in, oh, ten years. A cigarette. Menthol. Nothing at this instant (and for the several to follow) strikes him as a finer idea. At the very least, business to occupy the hands. An activity to keep them from banging here and there on the desk before him. Another flaw in character, albeit tiny and common, to lie about. And, magically, just when Francis Michael needs him, there he stands, Jason, the most earnest Caucasian youngster since Johnny Appleseed.

"Come in, son," Mr. DeWine says, startled he sounds at all like himself, relieved as well that he speaks any language other than Urdu.

"Something wrong, sir?"

Mr. DeWine, most recently of planet Earth, sneaks a peek at his watch. Eleven on the nose. T minus Tuesday and counting.

"I'm fine, Jason. Why do you ask?"

The boy knows everything, Mr. DeWine has heard. The periodic table, the succession of England's kings and queens. Who kicked hindmost in the Tang Dynasty, how law is made in Kafiristan. So what now?

"It's your face, sir," Jason begins. "It was like you weren't here."

All right, Mr. Frank DeWine thinks. They know he hollers and the comely Ms. Petty from mathematics weeps, and that old Ben Franklin has helped himself to all the tarts in Paris. They gab among themselves, these creatures. They know his dog,

the pound-bred Rex, and his weakness for bourbon. They know the sorry state of his socks, his wayward heart. They know the rusting piston in his chest, the sump above his shoulders. They have, indeed, found him out.

“Let’s begin, shall we?” Mr. DeWine gestures to a chair and, a minute later, time with shape and density and hue, they have begun.

As have Tango and Whiskey. It’s a pop quiz, right there on the hill overlooking the cafeteria. One Stevens pump-action, sawed-off shotgun? Check, Tangster. One Hi-Point 9-mm semiautomatic carbine with the 16-inch barrel? Double-check. One of this, one of that, one of everything they started whispering about the summer before. One childhood of *Star Wars*, one of *Doom*. They’re wearing their outfits—the flannel shirt, the camo pants, the lace-up boots, the ghoulish smirk. They’re about to engage hostile forces, the fitness fuckheads and those geezers who don’t use their turn signals. Whiskey has done what he needed to do. He’s washed his hands, he touched his ear six times when he got out of the car, prayed to the four corners, touched his other ear six times—the hocus-pocus you do on Tuesday so that on Wednesday you won’t find yourself naked in your closet begging the pardon of an audience of Klingons and druids and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. In his room, he identified everything that began with the letter *c*—his carpet, his cat, his cap, his Cap’n Crunch, his cudgel.

And now, goddamn, there’s more to inventory. The ammo, the Molotov cocktails in the Piggly Wiggly bag at your feet, the notes that tell the civilians you’ve morphed, you’re about to jump through the only open seam in the universe to join the master race, and so here you are, Attila himself, a BFG 9000 in hand, decay dust in one pocket and in the other a potion from the Wicked Witch of the West, warp speed the means by which you hurtle from A to B, you and your buddy now Knights Jedi and Errant and Black, you and your buddy now the most special of special effects, founding members of the ninth circle, the inner sanctum, the grave, you and your buddy now specters brought

into the full light of day by rage and by the heartening prospect of a prodigious volume of gore. Oh, Tango, it is April, the cruelest month. Oh, Tango, it is seventy fucking degrees. Oh, Tango, it is the end of the world as you know it and you feel fine.

"You ready?" Whiskey says. "I am go for liftoff."

To which, for the longest time—a century, it feels like—Tango says nothing, his mouth chewing crazily at the air. His eyes have become narrow and dark, his ski cap down over his ears like a bank robber. He could be thinking about heaven, about saints to goose step with, nectar to sip. He could be thinking about crows that tap dance or storybook Apaches to send on the warpath or a feat impossible to do like carry the ocean across the desert in his hands.

"I'm scared," he says. "Really scared."

Yes, it's springtime, the bell about to ring, a few kids on the lawn, smoking, a few walking in from the lot. Schoolmates, they are called. Peers. Whiskey loves them. No kidding. He must take their lives because he loves them, which fact they will comprehend when he walks among them. This is his lesson. They have been shallow, these Wildcats. They have been arrogant. They have given offense. And now, lo and verily, he will smite them.

"Afterward," Whiskey says, "we'll get nachos."

Tango knows this is not true, can never be true. Afterward is not in the plan. The before has already ended and nothing will follow but smoke and blood and debris and dreams never to wake from.

"Tango," Whiskey says, a question.

*Foot.* It is the only word Tango can utter, the only word he remembers from a lifetime of words. Wait, there's another. *Tree.* Which he says and says again until enough minutes have passed for him to say, with nearly incredible relief, *insect.* Then: *wolf.* Then: *night.* Whereupon Whiskey touches his shoulder, and, miraculously, Tango has other words to say, all of them big and new and remarkable as the day itself.

"Pizza, too," he says. "Pepperoni."

The world has already turned red and swirly at the edges,

an arctic cold settling at their feet. The world is about to tilt, to wobble out of its groove, about to shrink. The world is cracking, a splintering you can hear in heaven.

“Ready?” Whiskey asks.

This time Tango can answer. His shit is squared away. The epic wind has left his mind. He’s copasetic. He salutes, stiff-armed and urgent.

“Heil Hitler,” he says.

And now the doors are near, a handle for each to grasp. They have only to pull, which they have done, and they have only to march past several classrooms, Ms. Petty’s among them, and toward the library like soldiers, which they are doing, and they have only to arrive at the circulation desk, which they have, and they have only to squeeze off a round, which each does into the ceiling tiles, and at last, the clock ticking toward 11:45, to the dozens of now thoroughly why-faced Wildcats in front of them, those trembling like Todd and those not, those like Harrison wide-eyed with awe and those thinking they ought to be able to claw through their notes for the answer to this unreasonably complicated question, the warriors Tango and Whiskey have only to speak.

“Here we are now,” they say. “Entertain us.”

He’s got a half-hour, Mr. DeWine does.

He could eat. Mystery meat in the cafeteria or the tuna sandwich in the refrigerator in the teachers’ lounge. He could pay a bill or two, maybe. He’s got his checkbook, a week’s worth Pay Up in his briefcase. Instead, he puts his feet on his desk, rocks back in his chair. Why not visit Leanne, a surprise? She’s got this period free, too. He could sneak up behind her, grab her at the waist. He’s done it before, though only once. The whole time, not more than five minutes, he was overwhelmed by the fear that somebody—a student having forgotten a book, or a teacher searching for the new calculators—would walk in on them. His skin had felt too small, his head too big. He thought he might fall over, his heart like a squirrel in his chest, all claws and climbing.

Besides, she was herself spooked, slapping at his head like a spaz, hissing—Honest Injun—hissing like a goose or some such. Fucking fowl, for Pete's sake. No, he'll stay put. He takes his deepest breath of the day. He'll do a push-up or two. Work on that spare tire. Tend to the mind and body both, he thinks. Your familiar heart-and-head imbalance. Man, is it quiet. Eerily quiet, only the AC cycling and the clock and the creak of a middle-aged middleweight hauling himself to his feet. It's the quiet from the moon, the quiet where time ends.

Outside, there's nothing, just the school flag, all that Disney-worthy blue. He walks among the desks. "Abandon all hope," someone has scribbled. Dante—what a bozo. Blame the whole fiasco on Beatrice. At another desk—here is where the lovely Sherry parks her lovely butt—he finds a hair. Blond. Not Sherry's, though. No, this is the blond of a practicing Protestant. This blond drives an Explorer. Doubtless, this blond aced the ACT. Red would be something else, he guesses. Honest work to be done on a ranch. A career on the stage. He turns on his heel, Mr. DeWine does. And brown, Sue Ellen's color? He doesn't want to think. That's a smart mouth, a wiseacre. Brown's a story with an unhappy ending. Brown is boredom. Brown is a mannequin that drinks vodka gimlets.

Now he's really curious. What have they left behind, these kids? Last fall, he found a spiral notebook with writing in it so peculiar, so detailed and figurative, it could have only come from the hand of an egghead's egghead. Squiggles gave way to squares and those to bouquets of dashes and those to a series of capital *L*'s, the whole of it bizarrely architectural—the castle of a dark-minded wizard, he thought, or a Byzantine metropolis of gnomes and haunts, or a low country in ruin. Yeah, it was a civilization to dig up, you and ten thousand other zombies looking for the reason you can't sleep. He wonders now what happened to the notebook. It might have led to treasure. Jesus H., if only you were fluent in runes and glyphs and smudges and symbols, it might have led you out of Deming, New Mexico, and right to the golden threshold of Shangri-La itself.

Gracious, there's so much to know about Mr. DeWine, especially now that elsewhere the shooting has started. That topless Zeta Tau Alpha, for example, at El Patio those many years ago? That was Sue Ellen, his wife. Sue Ellen Bates then. Older by a year. A sophomore business major. But she wasn't really topless. She wore a Moby Grape T-shirt. He likes to embellish—makes the real realer, he thinks. The Bermuda shorts? Those he didn't invent. He didn't invent Roswell either, or the cymbal, or the wreckage in his wake. Nor, later that night, at his apartment off Solano Street, did he invent the clumsy sex he and Sue Ellen had, or that hour, toward dawn, when he felt that he'd been dropped on the planet for all the wrong reasons. He didn't invent Catherine either, the baby who died six years later. A miscarriage, actually, the first of two. Eons ago, it feels like, when beasts ruled and we were but fish or flesh that crawled.

What else should we consider before he makes up his mind to drop in on Ms. Petty? He was runner-up in the fourth grade spelling bee, *terpsichorean* the word that got between him and the silver trophy Kay Stevenson bragged about. His first girlfriend? Michelle "Mickey" Barker. Went steady the whole summer the Beatles came to America. Behind Timmy Bullard's house, in the onion field, she let him touch her breasts—"For a count of five, Frankie, no more"—the surprising weight of them something he swears he can still feel. Oh, this as well: He wrote a whole book in high school, in Las Cruces. Well, eighty-some pages. But hand-illustrated, lots of forest scenes and a mountain range that looked like eye teeth. His version of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Lots of derring-do in that. Nick-of-time stuff, too. An alluring maiden in distress, of course. He was the Sir, naturally. *Vanquished*—man, he loved that word, that and *dispatched* and *woe betide he who*, all the fancy talk you nowadays don't hear much at Del Cruz's Triangle Drive-In—yes, he vanquished a dragon. Slew the sucker silly. Afterward the Sir found himself bedecked—right, another word stuck-up Kay Stevenson wouldn't know the up from down of—with a sash and more medals than Bayer has aspirin, the king (the maiden's

father) the most grateful potentate in all of Pip-pip, Cheerio, and vicinity. Got some serfs out of the deal as well. Mrs. Chew let him read a chapter to his English class, Mickey Parker right under his nose. Made it all the way to the part where Sir Gawain and his friends—the vaunted Sir Fitzroy and the steadfast Sir Palmetto, mainly—lay siege to the manor house of the dastardly Archduke Fussface, before the bell rang. Yeah, dastardly. “I think,” Mrs. Chew said to everybody, “there’s a lesson in this for all of us.” It was this event, he still thinks, that made him want to become a teacher—to find lessons everywhere, even in his own needy heart.

Not terrible lessons, though, like those being delivered right now a hundred yards away in the library, where Whiskey, clomping through a tangle of overturned chairs and scattered papers, has announced that he is the Lord Humongous, the Ayatollah of Rock’n’rolla, and Tango has discovered underneath a reading table a girl, Tiffany, to play peek-a-boo with.

“You like me, don’t you?” he says, his the rictus grin you carve on a pumpkin.

What a silly question. Of course she likes him. He has the gun. Dark and greasy-looking with May Day streamers hanging from it and maybe actual human ribs, gobbledygook like Arabic or graffiti scribbled with Marks-a-Lot on the stock, the gun is pointed at her.

“So,” Tango begins, “if I asked you for a kiss, you’d give it to me, right?”

Another asinine question. He can have her purse, her hair, her hands.

But now it appears that all he wants is for that noise—an animal howling in pain, Tiffany thinks—to stop.

“It’s a cat,” she says, trying to help.

The gun goes off again, another boom wrong for books and study hall and Free Cookie Day, and Tiffany understands that it is she, the only daughter from the house of Hudspeth, who is crying. She is the cat, howling.

“Do her,” Whiskey is shouting. “Do the bitch.”

But she can't be done, she thinks. After all, she is home, under the covers. She has her pj's on, in her headphones Jack Diesel's greatest hits. A novel lies in her lap, a tearjerker Oprah wanted her to read. She can't be done. No, she certainly can't.

And, mysteriously, she isn't. Instead, the boy—she's seen him before, James or something, from the soccer team—crouching behind a desk chair is done. He has a cute haircut, close at the sides, then he doesn't. Unmoving only a moment before, he is flying—snatched by the collar, it seems, and hurled against a bookshelf, the reference section crashing down to bury him.

"Targets of opportunity," Whiskey is calling them.

He's firing into the floor—*pow, pow, pow*—his shotgun like a pogo stick bouncing him through the room, real astonishment in his eyes. The firepower. The fucking firepower. He's hanging on to the smart end of a contraption that spews out blood and justice, cordite and delicious disorder.

"Dance, tenderfoot," he orders, now Billy the fucking Kid and Triple H and Prince Jericho and Mr. Blue, and immediately one unlucky gomez—gee, Harrison, fancy meeting you here—is dancing, snot smeared across his lips, clearly the loneliest fellow in the hemisphere.

"It's the hucklebuck," Tango says, delighted to be the new host of *MTV World*. "Shake a leg, dude. Trip the light fantastic."

Arms spread as if in ecstasy, Harrison dances, knees higher than a desk, nothing beneath him now that the floor has disappeared, now that Whiskey, giggling, is keeping promises. Now that the present, simple as Simon, is giving way so easily to the even simpler past.

"The hokeypokey," Tango has said. "Turn yourself about."

Events are moving swiftly, many at the same instant. Todd intends to rise, to dash for the door. He's thinking it, yes, but a moment later he's not thinking anything at all, the organ to think with having unexpectedly gone mealy and cold. The world smells sour and sulphuric. A blizzard has roared through here, dust



roiling, shreds of paper falling like snowflakes. The floor is pocked and pitted, as if gouged by jackhammers and the picks of giants. Shattered glass lies everywhere—in your hair, down your shirt, in your Nikes. Wood splinters have stabbed you in the arm, the neck, the backs of your thighs. Remarkably, you've heard not a single sound. The muzzle flashes are unmistakable, a spray of wadding and sparks, a window pouring over a desk like a shimmering waterfall, but, huddled behind the body of a girl whose misfortune—thank you, Mr. Hart—was to need the Latin for *Never cut class again*, *Miss Suzanne Winters*, you can't hear anything. Except your own heart, its fitful thud-thud the rhythm vampires are aroused by. Yes, Tango is speaking—his mouth is working, his awful tongue—but the audio is on MUTE. You want the remote control. But the instant the sound thunders over you like a tidal wave and you have glimpsed Miss Petty at the door, you don't want anything except for time to snap backward so that you'd have a century to warn her, nasty old DeWine's girlfriend, not to come in here, that she can read this week's edition of *Time* tomorrow or the next day. Please, Miss Petty, don't come in here for anything.

But she has. And Tango—his shirt off, his birdlike chest glistening with a war paint of blood and paste and ink—has already, with the formal bow of a Beau Brummell, welcomed her to his intimate get-together.

"You're just in time," he says.

For Whiskey, there's too much to account for. The wall, the floor, the wall again. At this point, he had hoped to be well into Beta phase. The main event. Little Boy and FAT MAN themselves. But his ear has to be checked, and his wrist, followed by his boot and his ankle, before he can move on to his knee and his eye socket. "Say the words," he tells himself. And, soon enough, from his prepared list, he does: "Reason, virtue, plenitude." He glances around. Evidently, he has been shouting. "Being," he hollers, "is not different from nothingness."

"Put that down, James Crawford." Ms. Petty is addressing Tango, stern as a movie actress. "What do you think you're doing?"

What lunacy. Which can't be helped, unfortunately. Ms. Petty is, figuratively speaking, beside herself. She's watching herself stamp her foot—yes, actually stamp her right foot—and put her hands on her hips, a school marm from ancient America. She should shake herself, slap some sense into her pretty head, but she can't because Leanne Petty is not really there. Instead, dumb and foolish and proud, standing not a giant step from the barbarian with the rifle, is a lunatic female using her name and wearing her clothes and saying what would be said if the universe had not so completely melted.

"I said to put that down, Mister Crawford."

He can't, he says. He's committed. Totally.

Committed. It's an expression she's heard before, that fussbudget with the wagging finger and the profound respect for propriety.

"I mean," Tango is saying, "fifteen minutes ago, maybe. But, now? Jesus God, Miss Petty, we're, like, in the second act here."

Against the far wall, still wringing his hands as if scrubbing them in air, Whiskey has almost reached the end of his speech. "Give us this day our daily bread," he is reciting. "The horror, the horror. One if by land, two if by sea. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night."

Ms. Petty slowly surveys the room. If only Frank could see this. These kids worship new gods now. They speak a new tongue. They will eat a new food in a new world and grow old in the new way.

"Miss Petty?" It's Tango, his the shrug of youthful impatience. He has work to do now, okay? And little time to do it in.

"What's that on your forehead?"

It's sandpaper, he says. To strike matches on. For the fuses, you know?

"James, you were such a nice boy. I can't believe this."

Another shrug, this one of eighteen-karat sadness. "I still am nice, Miss Petty. You just don't know me, is all."

She's desperate to return to herself, to step into the person still staring at James Crawford, nice boy. The situation demands organization. She should be telling that girl—Misty or Jewel, something perky anyway—that she can leave now, poor thing. She should be calling the authorities, the principal at the very least. A thousand tasks need attention, if she could only climb back into her own skin. But she can't. Never will. For James Crawford has finished his work, Whiskey having hustled over to observe, and the old self of Ms. Leanne Petty is collapsed on the floor, one leg twisted under her hips, the last of her dribbling out of the shockingly ragged hole in her head.

Whiskey squats down, lifts her limp hand. "Goodnight, air."

The plan. It's Tango's turn to talk. "Goodnight, noises everywhere."

For weeks and weeks afterward, Sue Ellen DeWine will wonder what Frank was doing near the library. She's visited his classroom and it's—what?—a good hundred yards, could be more, from where the murders happened. The papers—*The Headlight*, even *The Journal* from Albuquerque; TV, too, Channel 4 from El Paso, and CBS—have called him a hero, running in to rescue those students that way, but all Sue Ellen will puzzle about, when she goes back to work a week after the funeral, is what Frank was doing there. He should have been on lunch break, the other direction exactly, but he was headed toward the library. In June, admittedly embarrassed to be obsessed with such an inconsequential detail, she will nonetheless phone Dick Spivey, the assistant principal, to ask him, but all he will be able to tell her is that he hasn't the slightest idea. "Maybe he had to return a book," he'll tell her, and, okay, that will be her answer—a book to return, another mystery solved—until the following August when, steering her Camry into the lot of Zia Title for a closing, a merciless logic of curiosity and intuition and suspicion still hard at work in her, she will say "Leanne Petty" aloud, and Sue Ellen DeWine, the widow of a hero, will know. Francis DeWine, the

son of a bitch, was on his way to see Leanne Petty.

Which is no more than Frank himself knows as he yanks open the door to the math wing. He's got his tie loose now and he's making good time, bum knee and all, more or less skipping, in his mind a dumber-than-dumb image of gimpy Chester shouting "Mr. Dillon! Mr. Dillon!" in the middle of a Dodge City street. Sir Francis has a personal matter to attend to, a furtive and private concern, so more than several seconds pass before he notices that he's the only person heading toward the weird banging noises. Everybody else, students and grownups alike, is scrambling to get by him. It's an honest-to-goodness fire this time, he thinks. It's not a drill, not a bomb scare like last Halloween. Adjacent to the men's toilet, he spots a kid he recognizes, one of the Goliaths from the lacrosse team, April Lester tugging on his arm.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "Richardson, what's going on?"

The kid's head goes back and forth. It seems to be the only part of him that works. The rest of him is frozen, seized.

"Well?"

Richardson needs a second, clearly. He has the expression of a landlubber crawling out of shark-infested waters.

(A moment will arrive, soon, when Mr. DeWine will remember this Q and A with greatest sorrow. How boneheaded he has been, he will scold himself. What a stone. How could he not have known?)

"April?"

Mr. DeWine grabs her arm, gets her attention. Good Lord, she's thin, like a ballerina. What, he wonders, is she doing with a behemoth like Richardson. It's like finding Tinkerbell keeping company with The Incredible Hulk.

"The library." She's whispering, as if she has to tell the whole school the dirty word some creep in homeroom yelled at her. "They're in the library."

Somebody is smacking a wall somewhere, Frank thinks. With a bat, sounds like. Really giving it the business.

"Who's in the library?"

She shakes her head, her tiny head. She doesn't know. All

she can do is point, another of the species with seemingly only two or three moving parts.

(And this, too, is another instant he will regret when his moment comes.)

"Go on," Mr. DeWine says. "It's a fire or something. Go outside."

So they go, April practically dragging Richardson, the two of them replaced by five more and three more after that, and here charge a handful more, all of them with crab legs and flying arms, the last kid—Tyson, his orator!—missing a shoe. This is like the end of a period but at fast-forward and without the grab-ass and ha-ha-ha, students appearing from everywhere. One girl he's never seen before—she resembles Marisa Tomei, but chunkier—runs by him screaming "John" over and over. "You can't do this," another girl is saying. "It's just not fair." That's all. Just those two sentences, like a chant, the same sentences he will shortly find himself saying. But right now here are more kids bearing down on him, the short fellow—Fishboy, is it?—with the shiny Penn State jacket tripping and knocking two look-alikes down with him, all of them having the devil of a time getting up off the floor. And, shit, here are those goofy noises again, but louder this time.

"You seen Ms. Petty?" He's collared a boy lugging a bass fiddle, the instrument bigger in all dimensions than he is.

"Who?"

Mr. DeWine pulls the kid to the side. Down the hall, the litter is incredible. Books. Purses. Backpacks. Baseball caps. A blouse is there, too. And a pair of coveralls. Christ, what were all the fire drills for? He expects zoo life next. A giraffe would not surprise him one whit.

"Ms. Petty?" he begins. "She teaches junior calculus."

"I don't take that till next year, sir."

So Mr. DeWine asks the next kid—a doofus from student council possibly; he has that squeaky look about him. Another *no*. And another, this one from the dorkier end of the food chain. Nothing but *no*, *no*, *no* until, interestingly, there's no one left to

ask, the hall having become as still as deepest space. Which means that, despite the jangling of the alarms and sirens woo-woooing in the distance, Mr. DeWine can hear, with phenomenally stunning clarity, what he dares not believe is gunfire.

(That moment? When he at last apprehends how monstrously dimwitted he's been? When he learns how far up his ass his head has been? Friends, it's now. Right now.)

"No," he says, as much to the brickwork as to himself.

But there it is again. A shot. Like a cannon, he thinks. Shit.

You'd think he would run now, wouldn't you? You'd bet that, knowing what he knows, he'd turn the other way, scam for the doors he came in through. You'd think, because he's read the papers and watched CNN and has heard about those psychopunks in Arkansas and Colorado, and because he possesses the same instinct for self-preservation we all have, that he'd know what to do. At the very least, his body would react independently, right? His muscles, his fist of a heart.

But he does not move. No, Mr. DeWine—get this—sits, leans against the wall. It's a fire, he tells himself—not the last of his wishful thinking. He's no hero, that's not in dispute. And violence? Christ, the only fistfight he had was—when?—maybe in junior high, in the days when they had junior high. Instead, he tells himself again that the smoke in the air, bitter and grainy, is from a fire. Faulty wiring probably. Or some butt-wipe setting off M-80's in the restroom. But, all along, Francis Michael DeWine has known better. It's just like TV, friends. How sad. You go to a movie, A bona fide shoot-'em-up, and it's boom-boom-boom, just like now. Gangsters, terrorists, invaders from another galaxy—God, they're all in the library. It's astounding, really. His lungs have gone slack, the air in here too thin. The knee is seriously hurting now, the throbbing like a tom-tom. Skiing. What a dumb-ass sport. And here it is that he considers his lap, specifically the damp spots on his trousers, and realizes that he, the dumb-est of the dumber earthlings, is crying. He's weeping. Silently, without a heave or a tremor, tears are falling

from his chin. Tears.

"They didn't work."

Someone—a boy of wicked angles and rattles and marvelous heat—has sat down next to him.

"FAT MAN and Little Boy," the kid is saying. "I must've fucked up the timers."

The kid seems to wobble under a halo of fireflies, a buzz constant as ocean noise.

"Are you John?" Mr. DeWine says. "A girl was asking after you."

Whiskey, the boy says, his voice not at all the snarl a villain should have.

The emergency sprinklers have come on now, a fierce shower drenching the hall, the walls slick with running water, the floor shiny like a postcard of a stream from a world where the outside is weirdly in.

"You can't do this," Mr. DeWine says.

Oh, but he can, replies the boy.

"It's not fair. Really."

Time has unraveled. Yesterday, Frank DeWine was a Cub Scout stealing LifeSavers from the Stop'N'Go. Only a month ago did his voice change. He was born with a full beard and a three-pack-a-day habit.

"You cold, Mr. DeWine? You're shivering."

Yes. So cold. Between his ears, a glacier has ground through the center of him, the fissures and folds of his brain jammed with ice.

"You want to say anything?"

"Like last words?" Mr. DeWine asks.

Whiskey nods. He takes no particular pleasure in this scene. Business is being conducted, that's all. The "therefore" and "whereunto" pages of the contract. The paragraphs in which the who's who and the what's what become the *ipso facto* and the hey-diddle-diddle.

"I'd like to say something about my father," Mr. DeWine says, though for several breaths he can't think of what exactly he

might mean. "He had big hands, like paddles."

Again Whiskey nods. Mr. DeWine is being a good sport. Not like some you could name. Not like, oh, Bethany with her forgive-us-our-trespasses bullshit.

"I don't think he ever struck me in anger," Mr. DeWine is saying.

"My dad, too," Whiskey says. "He just sends me to my room, or takes away the car."

Whiskey has raised the assault pistol and placed it tenderly against the vein pulsing at Mr. DeWine's temple. The boy has an interest, keen but thoroughly professional, in this moment. He wonders what we will make of his own last words, those typed on the page folded in his pocket, after he, at the muzzle velocity of 1,230 feet per second, has transformed himself into liquid and light, meat and whitest bone.

"Anything else?"

Yes, Francis DeWine thinks. Yes, there is.



POST SCRIPT: READ THIS BACKWARD, OR AT LEAST  
REMEMBER THE BEGINNING LIKE YOU WOULD THE END

Kristin Abraham

I

Imagine Mom  
wringing her hands, but  
this is the '90's version; women  
don't wring anymore. Not even  
dish towels, really.

Yelling, *this is important*. Lives start as one word, two. It was a  
mother who didn't listen, or worse, didn't respond. Changing  
language became the movies you weren't allowed to watch: *sex*  
*words / bad dreams*. Twisted white. Poems and lies laid down.  
We knew to keep driving would always be one day ahead of the  
weather.

II

The—*oh, I think I have a broken arm*, the over  
and over of your own wrist / a pair  
of your father's pliers, or pushing  
yourself down and riding  
your bike to the doctor.

Even though you're standing in the cold, everyone's forgetting;  
you don't make time. *Someone else will*. And your cousin eyes  
you over the up and down; he can't stop your chest from rising  
and falling. Your teeth click *great-grandchildren and new green  
grass*.

III

Your father never yells  
with hands, but he  
is your father.

*There are things we forget.* Orange reminds you of listening;  
the eye in the Plexiglas box. *Then there are things we distort.*

IV

Okay, and bedtime.  
A little girl, book to read, a lot of  
*be quiet* and *no nightmares*.

When the birds got  
into her head,  
she was / wasn't.

V

Creed: *This is how you  
use language. The rules of  
this is how we are sorry.*

In the end, he was a long clench, a pill like stain, a stain like ocean. He had just finished lunch. Your words were a string of beads: *Our Father / Hail Mary*. The priest couldn't say his name right.

It was clear: to pull the wool was taking God right over eyes.

VI

She fell down the stairs two weeks ago;  
she has the cast to prove it. She has  
to come and get you with crutches, is yelling  
at you in the waiting room:

*This is important.*

Another warm something. *You give him words; he gives you the Word.* That and a thin white piece a bit like bacon. All the time paper like smoked meat, like tonguing a piece of her blessed breakfast sweater. More that than body. More body than blood.

VII

*A story more exciting:* the loose hand  
of a T shirt. Underneath, she is  
the sore bounce of breasts  
or a movie and she is running.

(Mom wringing  
and offering herself  
in the form of a sandwich, a re-heat, a  
*can I try again* in every breath.)

Lucky she knows  
the doctor or you look  
like an abuse case.

VIII

*Not a lie; a story more exciting.*

Rooms like burning butter.  
The little girl had already  
learned sex, had taken  
the young priest out of her  
mind to the hole in the wood  
behind the altar. She learns  
*death words / prayer.*

The shadow of blue green  
behind you: lines where neck and foot met wall.



IX

*Your stories in boxes, your language  
little bones on the hillside.  
Little bones made of—.*

There's one dry pot, one faded and cracked plastic baseball player,  
sour knot, hips and shoulders cocked in a ready-to-swing pattern.  
Grave: a hand, a three-legged dog, and a field of dry, winter wheat.

X

Some days just the fear you'll fall down  
and be her. Her face loose  
and covered in flour, wet eyes out of  
flour, almost pink.

Phone hanging from its cord, dangling sound, and you know  
they're words, but all you hear is different tones, different ups  
and downs. This is a hallway, and walking is the same as standing  
and washing in the shower: you can't move, your arms hand,  
you're porn star dead-eye sexy.

XI

*Your remembering depends on what you forget. Wiping the small white worm out of everyone's eye; putting it back.*

The host was never paper or paper circles, but your mouth open: language. Teeth tight, the space in the back shaking. An absoluteness of silence *even in the act of telling*. You are wire screen, filter and distort. Tiny closet and ears. The most frightening dream: *either no one is listening or no one is telling*.

MULBERRY, MONKEY AND WEASEL  
Jonathan Crimmins

*"Horses died like so many flies on sticky fly paper. The more they struggled the deeper in the mess they were ensnared. Human beings—men and women—suffered likewise." Boston Post: January 16, 1919.*

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when he unbundled to the sun, settled on this curb. Two rolls and dark meat in a pewter pail at his hip.

Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears the sputter of an open-valve motor. Wheels chirp on tapered-leaf springs. Engine strain rumbles through a cast-iron muffler.

Across the street, coming to thaw: the broker's greasy window. Three gilded globes hang from the awning. Amid mantel clocks and microscopi, beside box and lens and silver-faced plates is a wicker bassinet. Dust alone beds in the white wicker. A child that never came forth. Double vision and apnea ending in eclamptic shivers. His wife flailing to her last shudder. Infant encased. The body of his wife the casket of his baby.

Further back, past andirons and joint-stools, past a hutch with folded silk vandykes, a clutter of egg-spoons, ipecac, a boot-jack and gaiters, past a piccolo and fiddle on a pine chest, there, hang his wife's day-dresses and her summer shawl, pawned for a plot of land and a lamb carved in limestone.

Each day he visits here. Conflating matrimony, memory, and weather. Bay breeze on his ear below cloudless clear sky. Or door-huddled in downpours. The seasons giving way: a union suit beneath trousers, neck wound with a scarf.

This curb is Charter Street below Copp's cemetery on the hill, a block from Commercial and the wharf. Wood-smoke air. Fish, vinegar, rot and brine. Here Boilersuits push past top hats and beards. Clerks in shirtsleeves share cigarettes. Handcarts

creak. Eight notes of the Old North Church ring noon in rounds.

Burtle eats. Thigh meat leaves grease on lip. Across the street, three gilded globes suspended in shadow, together as if in chase, as if mulberry, monkey, and weasel. Behind glass pane, a wicker bassinet, empty as made. Burtle wipes his fingers with a handkerchief. Uncorks a vacuum flask. Drinks cold beer between bites of roll.

Finished, he walks Henschman Street. Crosses to the Bay State freight yard under elevated tracks. Goes below shipping and receiving to the cask basement. Before his death, he will record the mark of two hundred cases.

This day is the fifteenth of nineteen nineteen. Purity Distillery on the Charles. A six-story steel tank holds molasses: two million gallons, fifteen thousand tons. Forty degrees Fahrenheit, this day wakes yeast. Essence turns to ethanol. Fixed volume increases temperature, increases pressure. Spirit growing strong bears on seam. Rivets pop staccato like bullets. Flung steel cleaves the girders of the elevated track. Walls of brick buckle to the explosion, spit window glass in collapse. Molasses, a wave of fifteen feet, floods thirty-five miles per hour. Heaves the firemen's depot from foundation. Some workers are dead, some workers are drowning.

Alone, below shipping and receiving, Burtle hears thunder. Feels the walls shudder then shiver. Crates, stacked beside the cistern, slide, tip. Slats and glass shatter on the stone. Shouts from upstairs. Heels knocking panic. Floorboards creek and groan to make him deaf. Burtle inhales. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Battered shoulders. Drops to his knees. Ankles pinned. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet.

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when he unbuttoned the pea coat, crossed it over knee. A rag-work lining his wife double stitched. Twin threads sewn down durable seams. Burtle traces the cuff hem as if her fingers still bobbed there. Still there, wetting the catgut with her lips and tongue, aiming it through the needle's eye. Out on the fire escape

to catch the thin breeze. Burnt bread and fish-fry on the air. Summer heat twice as hot with the added weight. Barefoot with her dress pulled to her thighs. A bed pillow cushions the iron grill. The coat lies open on her thirty-week belly. A long pull between stitch and stitch and she sighs. And Burtle smiles because inside her is a baby. Let it be a girl so that he can see in her image how his own wife grew. Burtle touches the sweat off her cheek. The seasons giving way: sweat to raindrops to frost.

Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears the sputter of an open-valve motor. Across the street, three gilded globes, a pane of glass, a wicker bassinet. Saturday at Houghton & Dutton on Tremont Avenue. His wife drapes three ribbons over her white-gloved wrist. Her fingers follow the flower brocade. Burtle says these are pretty. His wife returns the ribbons to the display. Why will I need pretty things when I have a baby? Up from street level, arm-locked past ash cans and roasters, past a telephone stand and tricorner pokes, past mercerized hose, Georgette waists and felt Juliets to the half-acre of baby shops on the floor below misses. There, his wife orders on account serviettes and safety pins, a muslin swathe, and castile soap. There, she takes a doll from the sulky, wraps it in her summer shawl, rocks it in her arms, kisses the cold head, and lays it in a wicker bassinet.

Eight notes of the Old North Church ring noon in rounds. Burtle walks Henchman Street. Boilersuits outnumber putter collars. Clerks in shirtsleeves share the Herald. Burtle goes below shipping and receiving to the cask basement. Hears a thunder. And the walls shudder then shiver. Crates slide, tip, shatter on the stone. Floorboards creak and groan to make him deaf. Burtle inhales. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Battered shoulders. Drops to his knees. Ankles pinned. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet.

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when he unbundled to the sun. Two rolls and dark meat in a pewter pail at his hip. Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears a motor pop and sputter. Across the street, amid mantel clocks

and microscopi, is a wicker bassinet. A child that never came forth. Double vision, apnea, sickness of stomach, and oedema. His wife flailing on the marriage bed. A soundless spasm save the creak and groan of springs. At a lull, the doctor finds a faint pulse. 135 in the minute. Skin a livid hue. He soaks a sponge in ether. Covers her nostrils and her mouth. She rubs violently at her nose. Shoves away a second application until Burtle prevents her by holding her arms. He pins them with his weight. In her hands a clutch of sheets. He squeezes her wrists until they fall slack. Until her head ceases to shiver with fear. Her tongue sadly bitten. Face flecked with spat blood. A last shudder. Infant encased. The body of his wife the casket of his baby.

This curb is Charter Street below Copp's cemetery on the hill. Here, shouts compete with hoof and wheel. Handcarts creak. A two-fingered whistle chirps awake a drowsy box-boy. Across the street, three gilded globes suspended in shadow, together as if in chase, as if mulberry, monkey, and weasel. Sitting vigil, Burtle by the bedside. Burning Camphor and lamp oil. A neighbor and her daughters wipe the skin with alcohol. They dress the body and comb the hair. A spool of thread, a needle for the eyelids. Otherwise she may take someone with her. But Burtle wants them open. The mother and her daughters offer prayers while the youngest tends the stove. Coffee and broth at a boil. Charcoal on the breeze. At night, Burtle stares into the eyes, dry as glass. Lids unblinking. Why do only the old wake from the dead? Bound in nested circles below the lens is his reflection. Iris and pupil and a featureless shadow.

Burtle walks Henchman Street to the yard. Goes below to the cask basement. Hears a thunder. The walls shudder. Slats and glass shatter on the stone. Shouts from upstairs. Heels knocking panic. Floorboards creak and groan to make him deaf. Burtle inhales. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet.

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when settled on this curb. Two rolls and dark meat in a pewter

pail at his hip. Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears the sputter of an open-valve motor, the chirp of tapered-leaf springs.

Each day, he visits here. This curb. Charter Street below Copp's cemetery on the hill. Conflating matrimony, memory, and weather. A sluice of melting snow at his feet. On the air, coal smoke, fish, brine, and rot. A child with a polio limp passes behind. A wagon of news pulled at a lurch. Above, a woman shakes a dust cloud from a rug. Shakes out a moth that catches itself on the air, flutters a gyre, and lands on a dry-barrel hydrant. Each gray wing jointed. Softly furred. Eight notes of the Old North Church ring noon in rounds.

Across the street, three gilded globes suspended in shadow, together as if in chase, as if mulberry, monkey, and weasel. Burtle wipes his fingers with a handkerchief. Uncorks a vacuum flask. Drinks cold beer between bites of roll.

He walks Henchman Street. Crosses to the yard under elevated tracks. Goes below shipping and receiving. Back past casks of butter and cheese, bags of flour and coal, past empty bottles going back like war-boys to the farm, past dry goods refused for illegible papers or overstocked or undersold, there, Burtle matches proofs of receipt to bills of lading. Jots down lot numbers. Surplus beer-barrels on four-by-four pallets. Confusion over whether to buy or sell. 35 of 36 for a dry nation. Last night, drunk to see Young McGovern fight. Tobacco spat upon the ground. Boots stomping fury on the bleachers. Arms folded, Burtle watches two boxers circle in a square ring. Soundless punches landed to a roar. The bout ends with Young McGovern dying. Laid on the judges' table. Beside him, a doctor and his kit, a ring girl, a bookie, and a grocer. Burtle sees the boxers face. Eyes already locked. At home, Burtle lifts his bedding from the floor. He dresses the naked mattress, vacant since her due. On the linens, he shakes a snow of talcum powder. Covers himself in her quilt. It takes a miracle not to die alone. Turning curled to his side, he sleeps in the talc scent.

This day is the fifteenth of nineteen nineteen. Purity Distillery on the Charles. A six-story steel tank holds molasses:



two million gallons, fifteen thousand tons. Forty degrees Fahrenheit, essence turns to ethanol. Spirit growing strong bears on seam. Rivets pop staccato like bullets. Flung steel cleaves the girders of the elevated track. Walls of brick buckle to the explosion, spit window glass in collapse. Molasses, a wave of fifteen feet, floods thirty-five miles per hour. Heaves the depot from foundation. Some workers are dead, some workers are drowning.

Alone, below shipping and receiving, Burtle hears thunder. Feels the walls shudder then shiver. Crates, stacked beside the cistern, slide, tip. Slats and glass shatter. Shouts from upstairs. Heels knocking panic. Floorboards creak and groan and sag between the beams. Molasses drips from every gap. Hot dark cables pouring on the stone. A rain of black beads. Burtle inhales. Bathes his nostrils and his mouth. A plum-mash odor burnt bitter. He wipes the syrup from his face. A scalded smear over eyelid and cheek and lip. Boot-deep and drenched. Walls black. Everything lost to the pitch downpour. Light only a dim amber. A caramelized darkness. Now voiceless now blind, Burtle gasps. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Battered shoulders. Drops to his knees. Ankles pinned. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet. Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound.

ARS POETICA

Anne Keefe

I can't write about the Russian crack  
whore because what would I know  
and because, you'll laugh, I only  
saw her tonight, some girl in a movie.

It's just that when she's cleaned up,  
dressed, and her back's exposed  
under black silk, I remember again  
how young she is. Her muscles cover

over her bones with the heaviest gray—  
an artist's gum holding her body  
and the room, lifting mistakes  
as she climbs a thousand stairs.

In the garish shot, a casino scene,  
it's all I see, her skin: slender bulk  
and sinew then, underneath it and  
spiraling—memory not quite erased.

## A RESPONSE TO YOUR STORY, "AN IRIS IN THE MAIL"

Dani Rado

I like the title, a phrase you use at the bottom of page 7. Though the card with the iris on it should come back in a more significant way later in the story, maybe even be a central metaphor for the piece. Your character should try to compose something on it, or even, after her appointment at the salon, imagine composing something on it. Something more than, Dear Mom, I know you like to grow irises, so I thought you'd like to get one in the mail. Something like, Dear Mom, Saw this iris and thought of you. I see other things sometimes and think of you, but I can't send them in the mail. Some of them aren't even tangible things, but moments I see of other people's lives when I'm in the grocery store or post office or salon. Sometimes it's that woman with her head set in curlers and buried in the dryer, who's reading an article about the Secret Sex Lives of Celebrities, or Feng Shui: Old House, New Look, or One Woman's Incredible Survival (it does matter what through); and when I'm looking at her I can't think of why she reminds me of you unless it's for the fact that if I were to need something from her right then she wouldn't be able to hear me.

Writing the letter is a good device because it allows you to compose within the composition.

I think you should use that.

If you want to stick with a strictly chronological narrative and avoid all the complications of the flashback, then the reader needs more information in order to determine the significance of the every day events we walk through with the main character. For instance, why mention Pete's Japanese Restaurant even though she has never been there? She's an executive, and would certainly eat at a classier place; a place that has, at the very least, cloth napkins and does not advertise a lunch buffet for \$6.99.

Does the restaurant remind her of how her parents go to

the Chinese Buffet near their house once a week and come home with pockets full of fortune cookies that they then leave out in a little dish on their coffee table? Or does it remind her specifically of that time she visited them and wanted to take them out to dinner (some place nice) but they refused, saying that a single girl can't afford fancy dinners, and instead took her to the Chinese Buffet and insisted on stuffing her purse with stale fortunes; the cookies lying like packaged babies' fists curled next to lipstick, blush, breath mints, an electronic organizer, pens without caps and loose change?

I understand that this is attempting to be a subtle piece that revolves around mundane events like going to the bookstore or salon after work, but why are they important to this character in this life on this day? At times the subtlety verges on vague, and that detracts from the necessary tension. I want to know why these little moments clutch her consciousness. I want to know why your character feels such anxiety as she walks through the bookstore parking lot trying to avoid the patches of ice ("Just a few more steps, she noted. But was it safe to put her foot there? Or there?"), yet all the tension seems to dissipate by the time she interacts with the store clerk ("She said, 'I wish you would salt those walkways. It's dangerous.' He looked at her from underneath his hair. She could not read his expression and began to hate the shabby hairdos that younger people wore these days. 'There's a bag of salt in back,' he said, and dumped the change in her hand"). Why does she choose heels on a day that's this cold, when snow has been accumulating and black ice lies in wait on the ground? Is it because the heels are the only way to give her calves definition, to allow the small muscles to flex under skin showing its first signs of sag? Is it because it's the only way, when she looks in the full-length mirror in her apartment as she gets ready on this precipitous morning, to imagine herself with enough strength to propel forward, to get to her car, to the parking garage, to the elevator, to her office, to click on the intercom button from the safety of her leather chair (a new one that came with the

promotion), and say to her secretary Sylvia, Bring me some coffee? And with the coffee the day begins, not because its aroma perks her up or anything commercial like that, but because it's the first order she gives and has the pleasure of having it carried out forthwith.

Also, there's only the slightest mention of how she tweezes her gray hair in the morning while getting ready for work. Think about specific things like the lighting in her bathroom—the fluorescent light in two long strips of bulb beaming overhead, emitting a low buzz that builds as she pulls the hair from its follicle (moving through dermis and epidermis), the hair bulb squeaking through the microscopic opening—whose circumference stretches to pass the bulb, then closes back up after the exit—ending in a crescendo at the final moment of exit, and leaving a dull twinge resonating in her scalp. Done again and again until the only residents of her head are auburn strands. At this point does she hate or love the mother who gave her this hair color and its gray tendencies?

Her self-consciousness in these situations has to stem from more than anxiety over getting old or looking silly. What's beyond that, deeper than that? What happened last week at work? How did she feel when she had to fire Jimmy Johnson, who had just bought a house and had a baby (or his wife did, rather) and he stood in her office, his suit neatly pressed and pressed against his trim solid body, his face almost crumbling, (or did she just imagine that?) as she explained the nature of cutbacks, of the economy, and of how she had to let the fledglings go. But she didn't use the word fledglings. She said newer employers; she said recent hires; she said those men who no longer want to look at her in bars.

If she did call her mother (as mentioned in passing on page 4: "While waiting in line at the bookstore she made a list in her head of things to do. Water Plants. Finish Report. Call Mother. Abbreviate Day in Memory"), how did that phone call go? Did her mother ramble on about her father, his prostate cancer and

the medications her mother has to feed him every day; how at times he will forget he has cancer and when he remembers to ask what this pill is for and her mother tells him Your prostate cancer, he starts to cry until her mother says Harry, Harry stop that? Then he opens his mouth, which may or may not have its teeth in yet, which may or may not have pink gums like skinned fingers smacking together to taste their own flesh, but which definitely have two cracked lips that open just enough to allow the tongue to slip out and create a puffy shelf on which her mother can drop the orange pill, then hand him a glass of water.

Or did her mother just sigh and say Oh, your father, and your character wondered how many times her mother has said that about her, her daughter? Or was it more of a groan of impatience, the kind given when the person you're talking to still hasn't figured out how the world works and you can't explain it to them again; the kind her mother let out when she, the daughter, said No, I'm going there to get my MBA so it won't matter whether or not I get a husband.

Why did that last love affair end?

These types of things are always hard to figure out.

You can expand the celebration of your character's most recent promotion. Stress how difficult it was for her to maintain her composure when the other executives, the ones she likes to refer to as The Good Ol' Boys to no one in particular, didn't show up at the LaSalle Grill on 8th Street after work and she sat there drinking apple martini after apple martini with her secretary Sylvia, who showed pictures of her two-year-old fraternal twins while your character held the glossy wallet photos between her sticky fingers (the drinks were sweet) and rambled about being an only child. Sylvia finally broke out the three by five photos of the two children sitting on either side of the family's golden retriever, a wide dog named Sparky (or something like that, your character can never remember) and stared at her staring at the picture until she finally said to her secretary Sylvia, Well then, we

should call it a night, and let Sylvia go home to the dowdy photographed children.

These are just some ideas for where a few more windows can be placed. A few more places where the readers can have access to a character that seems to (pardon the metaphor) draw the blinds on herself every chance she gets. At least that's what this recent boyfriend, Allen, says. But he fancies himself a part-time poet (and a full-time ad exec.) For a poet, he's remarkably unobservant, sending her irises on her birthday because she had mentioned them once (though only to say that her mother liked them) and buying her red silk sheets when she has no red in her apartment. For an ad exec, he's a good catch (or her mother would say so if she were to ever introduce them.)

How and why do the shopping centers she passes affect her? And why does she frequent them so much in this middling city where she now lives? Surely the downtown, though Spartan, has better (or at least more interesting) shops than the strip malls described on page 6.

So why is she drawn to them? How has she come to see their uniformity as a plus, a constant in that sea of change (no, not a poet) that moves her from city to town to city, as she watches the waves crash against the port windows and hopes to see a tiny archipelago—stores lumped in their shopping centers along the main roads of every place she docks.

Allen the ad exec would say, "A brave new world."

Allen the ad exec says, "What the fuck did you expect?"

What is her job, exactly? What does she do besides hire and fire people, tell them to get the Simmons report done and sign off on it, sit in her office chair and feel the leather squeak beneath her flabbing ass and recall the safety words given to her by Allen the ad exec—soufflé, widget, evanescence—and say to herself Yes, I belong here, surely I do?

I want to know this because I want to know why a senior

executive has so little confidence. In order to get to a position like that it seems one would need to be decisive and little aggressive. Maybe bossy. Maybe a bitch. She should dress in smart clean business suits that exaggerate her shoulder line and draw attention away from her waist. The skirt should drop just below her knees, the length of a skirt running in proportion to a woman's age (an equation written by her mother). Two-inch heels, the same style in beige and black, and a chic handbag. Make-up, subtle autumn tones dusting her cheeks, lining her eyes, dressing her lips. Not austere, just well put together.

I'd like to see how and why that facade is wiped away.  
Your character would like to see that too.

The note on the iris could read: Dear Mom, I know you like to grow irises, so I thought you'd like to get an iris in the mail. I want to send you other things in the mail sometimes, but I know you won't know how to receive them. I want to send you money to pay for Dad's medications, but you think I don't have enough because I'm poor in the husband sense. I want to send you pictures of me skiing with friends in Aspen, at a café in Rome, in front of the Eiffel Tower, but I don't have time for such vacations and no one to take them with. Though, I do have photos that Allen the ad exec took—my wrists and ankles tied with leather rope, all four appendages bound in front of me, the skin puffing on either side of the cords, pinkening; me on my back, my glasses perched on the knob of my nose, my eyes aimed at the camera, my lips trying to purse. His lips trembling saying "Beautiful. Beautiful." But you can't see him in the picture.

I won't send you that. Instead I'll send you the tiny beating heart of me as a child. It will soak the envelope and fall through the sopping paper, splattering on your doorstep as the mailman tries to place it in your wrinkled palm. I could put it in a box and mark it fragile, but if you didn't know that then, why tell you now?

I like your sentences, but simple things in them often get



confused. For instance at the top of pages 4 and 5 the pronouns get mixed up because there are too many “she’s.” This can be cleared up by giving her a name, since she is the main character, the one the reader is supposed to know the most about, to care about, to empathize with. Why is she given anonymity when she may not want it?

No, she doesn’t want it at all.

I think this story has a lot of potential, but you still need to be more critical of your character. Let’s not forget her self-consciousness stems from pure ego. Let’s not forget how she treated Jimmy Johnson. Let’s not forget that Sylvia is her employee and nothing more.

You need to answer one or more of these questions. What was the father like before his illness overran his mind? What does she wish her mother protected her from? How does she feel about being an only child? What did she originally go into the bookstore for? Why does she stay with Allen the ad exec?

Why does she still maintain that each promotion is getting her closer to the life she wants?

Why does she take such abuse from the clerk at the bookstore? Why does she allow such curt remarks when all she suggested was that they salt the ice patch in front of the entrance, the one she almost slipped on, the one she encountered on her way into the bookstore, the store in which she saw the card resting idly on its wire shelf, the painted iris facing her like—like maybe—an accusation?

Why, at the moment the clerk with a mop of dark hair dangling in front of his eyes dumps the change on top of the wrinkles in her outstretched palm, does she remember how her father used to hold her screaming struggling self down on the couch and pop her blackheads between his fingernails with grease-stained cuticles?

Then there are practical concerns: how long does she wait at the salon for her appointment? Does she get a trim, a perm,

highlights? Does she chat with the beautician? Does she regard him or her as she regards Sylvia? Are people like that interchangeable for her, like Japanese and Chinese food? Why doesn't she just dye her hair?

What does Allen the ad exec look like? Did she choose him, and others like him, because the nice suits and nice face (nice being the word you use when you have nothing else to say) contrasted nicely with her father's stubbled jowl and working class hands? Does she choose these men because their hearing is near perfect and her father's was damaged by years of machines pounding bolts into metal sheets, so that they are able to hear her choke out that safety word, Effulgence (or something), from under the coy rubber of the gag.

Does she realize that this is not what difference is made of?

When is the point in the story that your character begs the author, Say my name. Say my name; and the author refuses, dangling the nomenclature in front of her like a box at the end of a silver string descending through cumulus, rising up and down respectively, her leaps propelling her up and down prospectively.

How does she manage to jump in those heels?

I tell you all this because an outside reader can see problems the author cannot. An outside reader can see the character flaws, the lack of development, the textual flaws, the improper punctuation. The outside reader is not so caught up in creation that they can't see the cracks in its facade (still not a poet), and so can recommend practical solutions.

The reader can say, Confront the father, even if it's only in some indirect fashion. They are not concerned with the fact that the father is old and would not understand. The reader would respond, The mother then, confront the mother, because a reader won't believe that there can be such things as useless gestures in a text.

Why Allen the ad exec then? Why do you let me—why

do you let your character be with him? Can't you see the obvious patterns?

The reader will say, Let the character speak for herself, and myself, and themselves. Then you'll have to step aside.

Then where will we be?

AUBADE IN STOCKHOLM

Sascha Feinstein

Say we begin with scalloped yellow  
flowers, flowers I don't quite recognize  
beneath this shedding fern. Hanging  
or rising, untouching, they appear  
to be witnesses of morning routines  
inside this apartment where my cousin sleeps  
and through the window, where  
a man in a felt hat does not wave to  
a woman on the third floor. He's scurrying  
to the bus stop, but awkward glances  
give him away: he wants her to watch him.  
He's spent the night in a room he knows well  
and shouldn't, don't you agree? He'll return  
in a week, or a month, and she'll continue  
to water her white and scarlet geraniums,  
flowers I can see, just as she can see mine.  
Every day, she'll be cloaked by assumptions—  
even this one—like all the morning sun  
which never quite reaches that alley's wall.

ANNIVERSARY POEM

Sascha Feinstein

From the stone tip of a teak-handled mallet  
drums coax a sun to its balance above

this floating palace in Jaipur, the one you touched  
in picture books when family elders foretold

the rhythms of your future. What map  
can I draw from this line of salt

outlining the rim of your collarbone,  
and can it also be that drums tease the moon

so that these walls rise, the way you leaned into me  
and then collapsed into Śiva's lasting embrace?

When I taste the warmth of your throat  
I could be water lost in water, I could be

a drum skin's hillside echo, I could be the man  
who held you ten years ago in a wedding suite,

aquamarine wallpaper. Lie back.  
Dry yourself beneath the ceiling fan. Let me

lift from your shoulders your uncut hair  
tangling beneath carved mythologies.

## FIRE AND CEREMONY

Sascha Feinstein

Like too many rituals and sacred ceremonies in Bali, cremations have become something of an industry. The large advertisements along Kuta Beach look as subtle as billboards for Kentucky barbeque. Now, I'm told, tour buses clot the narrow avenues during the proceedings, but in 1987, when I first visited the island, the cremation I witnessed in no way seemed like an event for tourists. I felt honored to share in such a remarkable occasion, and my slides verify that I have not over-romanticized my experience: even thrown on a wide wall, it's challenging to find Westerners among the crowds, a truth that still surprises me given the magnitude of this particular event. More than a year before my arrival, a high-caste member of the community had died, and, quite typical of Balinese culture, his family had postponed the service in order to prepare for the expensive, elaborate festivities. Other families had waited years to collect enough money and had very recently unburied their dead in order to share in this auspicious afternoon. Of the Brahman who died, one local said to me, "He was like king of the village. This will be big."

Those who have watched or read of a Balinese cremation will find my experience familiar, though probably no less extraordinary. The procession began in the village, with various family members carrying bones wrapped in white cotton and placing them within a pagoda-like tower (*badé* or *wadeh*). Then a boy, perhaps a grandson of the deceased, climbed onto the structure and received wooden cages with small local birds to be burned alive as escorts into the afterlife. And then he rose with the whole tower, which I suddenly realized had been built on a wide bamboo platform so as to be lifted, dramatically, by many men. With one hand, the boy gripped a colorful umbrella, steadying himself and laughing as they shimmied perilously down the road.

Almost everyone, in fact, laughs or smiles at Balinese cremations; so much time elapses between death and ritual that the locals very naturally transform grief into celebration. I walked in the center of a nearly-wild crowd until the thatched buildings thinned out and trees obscured any trace of a town. Deep in the woods, the boy on the tower helped retrieve the bones and offerings, and then the family replaced the remains within a finely decorated wooden bull (*lembu*), a magical coffin afforded only by the wealthiest members of society. (Nine elaborate *lembu* stood magnificently beneath a single canopy. Other families—and there were over two hundred—had purchased less developed wooden representations; the poorest simply made wooden pyres.) I stood for a couple of hours, waiting for the various families to prepare for the event, or perhaps simply for the priests' appointed moment. Some kids scurried through the crowd to sell coconut water and warm sodas. And then someone lit the bellies of the most decorated *lembu*, and within two or three minutes, every small area between the trees fogged and flickered like the actual ascension of two hundred souls.

Soon the crowd began to dissipate, except for those whose relatives had died recently and who therefore had to intensify the flames to burn away the flesh. Most others—even those bankrupted preparing for this burst of fire—had no reason to linger. “To the Balinese,” explains Miguel Covarrubias in *Island of Bali*, his famous study from 1937, “only the soul is really important, the body being simply an unclean object to be got rid of, about which there is no hysteria.” Half a century later, my experience eerily paralleled his descriptions, including this passage on the aftermath:

The men in charge poke the corpses unceremoniously with long poles, adding debris from the towers, all the while joking and talking to the corpse. The crowd is neither affected nor touched by the weird sight of corpses bursting out of the half-burned coffins, becoming anxious only when the body is slow to burn. Soon the cow's legs

give way and the coffin collapses, spilling burning flesh and calcinated bones over the fire until they are totally consumed. . . .

Some of the remaining ash gets covered with palm leaves; some gets collected and deposited in the sea. But the point of a Balinese cremation has much more to do with fire than ash.

How different from the Western world, where we expend so much energy on the burial of ash or flesh, and how unusual to remove grief from the realities of death. Standing as a witness in the flaming forest, I became so entranced by these unfamiliar rituals that I initially made no comparisons to my culture, or even my specific past. But later I thought about the ceremony for my mother, who wanted to be cremated and whose ashes we had spread seven summers earlier in Cape Cod Bay. That was 1980. I had just turned seventeen.

My mother was an artist of remarkable breadth and accomplishment. A painter, designer, and weaver, she also worked successfully in photography, film, and pottery. She was, in short, a woman of phenomenal vitality. So when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the age of forty-six, the reality of her illness seemed incomprehensible to those who knew her. A few months later, some literally did not believe that she had died. Some began a quest of profound soul searching, suddenly aware of their own mortality. Some questioned God.

For my mother's ceremony, my father waited until July, three months after her death. Perhaps he wanted warmer weather for the boat ride, or perhaps, like the Balinese, he knew only time would temper sadness. Whatever his reasoning, nature rewarded patience with glorious sunshine and low humidity.

The boat itself usually carried fishing expeditions and had more than enough room for the forty or fifty friends who boarded. The captain motored out just far enough so that the shore blended with the sky, and then my father began his eulogy, which, strangely, we have on tape, his voice steady and penetrating against the rhythms of wind and water. Those words, public



though they might have been, should remain in the private domain of husband and wife. But I can tell you how, after my father said goodbye, he tilted the urn into the wind, and then others threw flowers, much the way I described several years later:

Behind the large boat  
lulled waves of lilies, roses

from her garden sparkling the current,  
and when a seabird circled the cluster  
one close friend said she was with us.

I don't know if I believed her,  
but I watched the bird become a cloud  
while the petals withdrew.

The flowers had been unexpected. My father and I had only planned on his eulogy and the scattering of ashes. But shortly before our guests departed for the boat, several women cut a few handfuls of stems from my mother's gardens—a lovely final gift, I thought. In a similar gesture, another friend brought on board a bottle of Akvavit, which we poured into Dixie cups. Some tried sipping, but the strength of the alcohol burned through the cups' paraffin and spilled to the deck. It was almost as though my mother commanded from the heavens: "Oh, come on! Knock it back!"

What irritated and baffled me, though, were the two or three cigarettes that had been tossed overboard. The woman who threw them—a wonderful sculptor named Eleni—told my father, "At parties, Anita used to bum a smoke or two. I thought I'd give her a couple." Even now, the image of cigarettes floating with flowers repulses me: Marlboros unrolling in the current, the thin paper disintegrating even before, perhaps, it reached the sandy bed. But we all, I suppose, have to say goodbye in our own ways, and for Eleni, this had been her ceremony within a ceremony.

I threw nothing into the bay. I watched my father

momentarily, before he vanished amid groups of friends. When I looked back over the rail, I felt oddly stunned and embarrassed to realize I was weeping. I stared at my wet hands, wondering what I should do about this response that was no doubt expected by everyone else. Then someone placed a hand on my shoulder: “Hey there, handsome.” I quickly wiped my eyes, and she came into focus—an old friend who learned how to weave from my mother.

“Yeah,” I said. “I bet I’m really good looking right now.”

Then she pulled her fingers across my cheeks, drying whatever I’d missed, and smiled. “Don’t you know,” she said, “tears from brown eyes don’t streak.”



Like many children, I first experienced death with the loss of a pet, not a person. In my case, it was my cat Robin, named after Robin Hood. My father had discouraged getting a pet, but when I turned four, arguably the best age for begging, he agreed. So my mother and I pursued various ads in the local newspaper.

Although relatively young at the time, I remember a great deal of that afternoon, especially one dilapidated house with overflowing garbage cans. We knocked several times before an enormous woman shuffled to the screen door and let us in. Greasy sauces had dripped down the stove, and I held my nose—right in front of this ogreish woman—before announcing, “It stinks in here!” The woman laughed in a breathy, restrained way, and my mother nervously asked to see her cats. The woman slowly pivoted towards the living room and whistled, and suddenly twenty or maybe even thirty cats jettisoned from parts unseen and scrambled across the house, some hissing and others screeching.

We did not stay to inspect them. (I think we walked outside in a matter of seconds). But at the next property, clean and bucolic, the owners offered my mother coffee while I played with a litter of five or six orange tabbies. Seeing that they had

been cared for, if not pampered, my mother told me to take my time and choose any one that I liked. The kittens were chubby and playful—all except for one, who looked thin and languid, and of course that's the one I chose.

"Are you sure?" my mother asked, over and over. "You can choose any one."

"I want him," I said, stroking the top of his head.

"That one over there is nice and round. Look at—"

"No, this is the one I want."

She had promised earlier that morning that I could make the final decision, and after several minutes of failed persuasion, we collected the litter's runt and I held him on my lap for the ride home. My mother never asked me to explain why I selected the smallest and boniest of the bunch, but I could have told her: I thought his size meant he was the youngest, and that he would be the last to die.

Robin lived eight more years and in that time grew to be almost obscenely fat. He happily slept away most of the days and never developed any hunting capabilities. Other cats bullied him. Blue jays dive-bombed from the willow tree. Sometimes he miraculously landed on a mole and batted it around the lawn. In general, he had the nature of a big, gentle coward—and I couldn't imagine my life without him.

Although overweight and sluggish, he did not seem to be in any kind of mortal jeopardy, but when his body began to decline, it collapsed quickly and completely. Steadily and uncharacteristically, he began to meow in a high, awful pitch. We brought him to our vet and soon learned that his spleen and kidneys had begun to fail. My parents explained that we would have to "put him to sleep," a phrase and a reality that made no sense to me, though I knew I had no options. The next day, I stayed home while they picked up the body, wrapped in a black garbage bag.

We wanted to bury Robin on the property, and my father dug a hole near a tree that I had planted as a child. He made the hole extra deep so that raccoons wouldn't disturb the site. He

also thought it would better not to use the plastic bag but, rather, a cardboard box so that the decomposition would take place more rapidly. My mother agreed and, perhaps thinking of Egyptian burials or simply in an effort to make me feel more involved, suggested I paint the cardboard sides. So I shared my mother's acrylic paints and brushed landscapes, I think, while she worked on large canvases.

We brought the multi-colored box to the backyard and I placed it at the bottom of the hole. My father got on his knees and angled the plastic bag until Robin's body slipped to the cardboard base. Then my father stood and we all looked down. Not a sound. Finally, my mother said, "He looks like he's sleeping," and her voice cracked. That's when I turned my head and pressed it into her side. In my last memory of that day, my mother rubs my hair and says to my father, "He was trying so hard not to cry."



In the tiny universe of an individual Western family, birth and death tend to be celebrated only in the context of personal joy or grief. How many public holidays, for example, have retained the essence of their origins? Aren't we far more aware of dates that correspond with our selves? I was born on March 13, 1963, and, in a ridiculous and ridiculously American way, I used to scour jazz LPs to find a magnificent session recorded on the day of my birth. Blue Note records alone, after all, produced so many wonderful recordings from that year: Joe Henderson's *Page One* and *Our Thing*, Jackie McLean's *One Step Beyond* and *Destination Out*, Dexter Gordon's *Our Man in Paris*, Grant Green's *Idle Moments*, Grachan Moncur III's *Evolution*, Kenny Burrell's *Midnight Blue*, Lee Morgan's *The Sidewinder*, and so on. But no one recorded for Blue Note on my birthday.

The hunt was all ego, of course—jazz lover as Narcissus—but it's typical of human nature, I'd now like to believe, to self-aggrandize in that way (e.g., "I share a birthday with \_\_\_\_\_," or

“This house used to belong to \_\_\_\_\_,” or, even more common, “I once ran into \_\_\_\_\_”). Ironically, the most interesting historical context of my birth week took place half way around world. The Balinese had completed the first five months of Eka Dasa Rudra, a centennial rite intended to coax gods into restoring the world’s natural balance. The whole island makes sacrificial offerings, mostly concentrated at Besakih, their holiest temple located on the slope of their largest volcano, Gunung Agung. Although a significant part of Eka Dasa Rudra culminated on March 8<sup>th</sup>, the Balinese had much to do before the next major event in April. And then, on the 12<sup>th</sup>, Agung began to discharge mud and large stones

No one, from what I’ve read, anticipated the magnitude of this explosion, even though the smoke and the mud flows intensified over the next five days. Perhaps they felt protected by the intensity of Eka Dasa Rudra. Perhaps, with no witnesses living from Agung’s previous eruption in 1843, no one could imagine such a reality. But the explosion on March 17<sup>th</sup> killed over 1,500 Balinese. One young survivor named Sepek, who had been praying in a small village temple on the morning of the tragedy, described his experience to a translator for *National Geographic*:

There was no noise at first, but then the *duk-duk-duk-duk-duk* of falling stones. Some people in the temple seemed to be sleeping. I tried to wake them, but they would not answer—they were dead. There were children, too, but they could not cry. They made strange wailing noises, because they had ashes in their mouths.

Then the roof flamed and he ran for nine miles while ash speckled his body. “Fortunately,” the article explains, “his wife and child had left Sorga two hours before the glowing cloud had come, and thus had been saved.” Sepek saw this fortune as divine intervention—“The gods made them go”—but of the seventy worshipers who did not survive, did he claim the gods selected them to die?

Of the numerous temples on the island, the most celebrated has always been Besakih, the central location for the Eka Dasa Rudra, and had it not been for the volcano's topographical grooves—or had the gods intervened?—this stunning temple, with black thatched pagodas directed to the heavens, would have been consumed absolutely by lava. (Besakih did not escape thick layers of volcanic ash, and some of the architecture required substantive repair.) When I visited Besakih in 1987, my guide told me about the explosion from '63, but he never mentioned the 1,500 who perished. Instead, he spoke of the lava flow that spilled towards the temple and then split like a forked river in Hades, leaving the holy structure intact. "Besakih is our Mother Temple," he said to me, beaming. "She is a miracle."



I did not witness the men take my mother's body to the crematorium, and I was in school when my father picked up her ashes. I don't even know if I tried to imagine what the crematorium looked like, or how much anyone's allowed to see. Nor did I have any interest in the ashes themselves, though I remember my father describing the blandness of the vessel provided: he said it looked like a tin can that had washed up from the shore.

Maybe that's when he decided to make his own urn. He designed the shape and later asked his old friend, a potter, to reproduce it in clay. After the bisque, my father glazed the vase himself in what he hoped would suggest a night sky, and then, with brush strokes that streaked like shooting stars, inscribed the urn with her name. I know he spent time practicing the lettering because sometimes I'd find napkins or scraps of paper with my mother's name written again and again.

The art of a kiln fire, of course, requires both artistry and good fortune. A single glaze often provides a great range of hues, even in the same load. Sometimes a particular glaze—blood red, say, or Chinese bronze—can fail a potter for years. Individual

batches of clay also produce varied results. Our friends at Scargo Pottery were as expert as anyone in the country, but, after opening the heavy door to the kiln that held my mother's urn, they discovered that some pots had cracked and some glazes had crawled or discolored. But the urn had been perfectly fired and emanated deep, luminous blues. No one thanked the gods, but, at that moment, I believe we all felt blessed.

During the making of the urn, my father and I planted a memorial tree, a copper beech that has since grown as tall as our house. We took turns digging the hole. I dragged a bag of peat moss from the front of the house, and he pulled a hose across the lawn. I remember the planting took less time than I had imagined and I felt almost startled when, abruptly, we had nothing more to do except to turn off the water, return our shovels, and hope that the soil would sufficiently nourish the roots.

A couple of summers ago, during a visit with my wife and children, my son asked about the copper beech, because he knew we had planted the tree in memory of my mother and, at age six, had become more curious about death. We walked to the backyard when the afternoon sun charged the coppery sheen like the metallic iridescence of a *rakú* glaze. My son stared for a moment and then touched a hanging branch.

"Do you see your mother's face in every leaf?" he asked.

I loved his question and wanted to tell him that I did, though that would have been a lie, and so I explained how I thought about the tree as a whole rather than a collection of individual pieces.

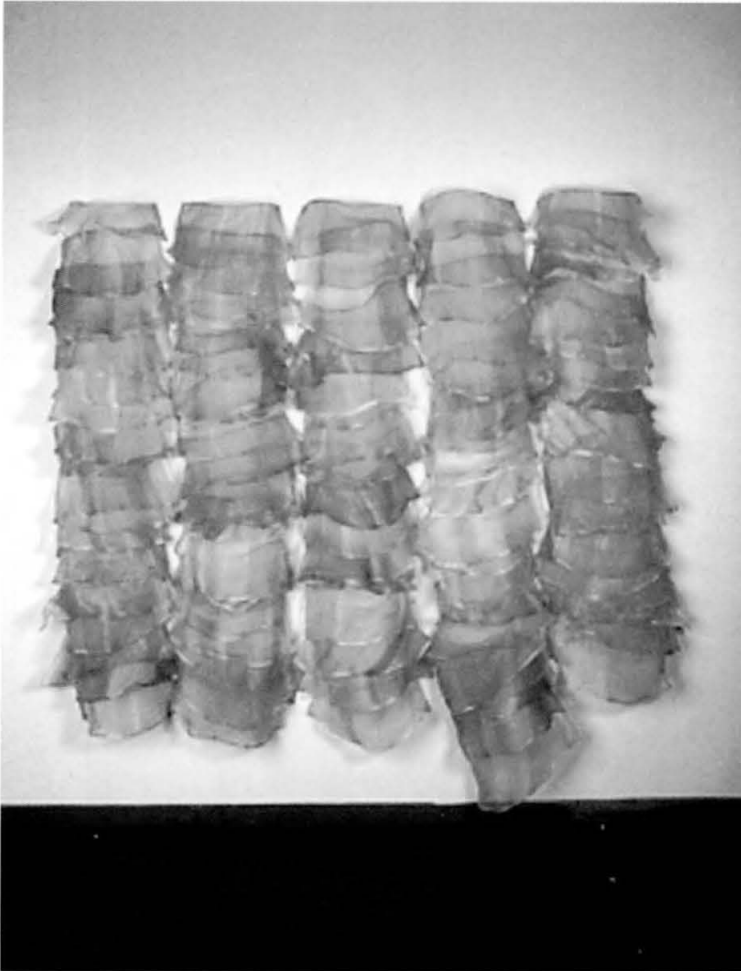
"That's good," he said. "Otherwise you would be very sad when the leaves fall."



*"Front and Back"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart





*"Stagnant Ruffles"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo Photography by Barbara Malloy



*"Elegance"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart



*"Child's Coat"*

Artwork by Kara D'Angelo, Photography by Travis Gearhart

DRAFT OF AN OBITUARY (WRITTEN BY THE DECEASED,  
THREE DAYS BEFORE HER DEATH)

Ronald F. Currie, Jr.

Andrea E. 'Andy' LeClair  
1971-2001

GREENVILLE—Andrea Elisabeth LeClair,<sup>1</sup> 30, died Saturday, February 17, 2001, in Greenville,<sup>2</sup> following a long illness.<sup>3</sup> She was born January 2, 1971,<sup>4</sup> in Bangor,<sup>5</sup> the daughter of John<sup>6</sup> and Ellen (Spencer)<sup>7</sup> LeClair.

Andrea attended Greenville schools, and was a member of the Russell High School class of 1988,<sup>8</sup> though she left a year before graduation.<sup>9</sup> After leaving school she moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where she began work as a model.<sup>10</sup> Modeling afforded her the opportunity to travel the country and the world, and over the next seven years she made her home in New York,<sup>11</sup> Paris,<sup>12</sup> Rome,<sup>13</sup> and, for a short time, the tiny island nation of Cyprus.<sup>14</sup>

In 1996 Andrea gave up modeling and returned to Greenville.<sup>15</sup> She bought a house on Webb road, where she lived until her death, tending her garden, playing Scrabble against herself, and reading.

Andrea was predeceased by her father.<sup>16</sup>

Survivors include her husband, Louis Gold, of New York City; mother, Ellen LeClair, of Greenville; aunt, Jody Spencer, also of Greenville; uncle, Joseph LeClair and wife Hillary, of San Antonio, Texas; several cousins, a niece, and two nephews.<sup>17</sup>

There will be no visiting hours. Spring burial will be at the Brown Catholic Cemetery in Greenville. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in her memory to the Hemlock Society, PO Box 101810, Denver CO 80250.

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<sup>1</sup> I have not loved much in my life—either in quantity or quality. I am, as near as I can determine, constitutionally incapable of love in the way most people

seem to think of or feel it. Maybe it's genetic, like being able to roll your tongue; some people can, and some people can't. Well, most people can love, and I can't. But I have always loved my name—the lilting flow, the way my parents spelled Elisabeth, with an s instead of a z, the capital “C” in LeClair. It's unfortunate that I can't keep it, but it should have gone to someone prettier than I am, anyway. By this I don't mean physically pretty, of course. Despite everything, I am still quite beautiful, and I say that without an ounce of pride or delusion, but out of an absolute and terminal desire to tell the truth, here, in this obituary. The truth is in these footnotes. I've used them as a polite gesture to whichever intern at the local paper sets the body of this obituary for the morning edition some time next week, so that he or she can just type it up or scan it or whatever without having to sanitize it by removing the disjointed, icky, but true details contained herein for the consumption of strangers half-asleep over their bagels and low-fat cream cheese. But for those who are interested (perhaps even you, unnamed and faceless intern), here is the truth: I am beautiful, on the exterior. No one could deny it.

<sup>2</sup> Greenville, Maine is technically speaking a town, but in reality is nothing more than a loose collection of angular, hardy domiciles (most of them seasonal, buried year-round in the trees of the North Woods and for seven months of the year in snow and ice) which lie clustered around Moosehead Lake and offer no justification for being incorporated other than that they are closer to one another than to anything else that gives off even the faintest whiff of civilization. On the lakeshore, in what passes for the center of town, are a small supermarket, a souvenir shop known to locals as the Indian Store because of the wooden Indian glaring perpetually out from the display window, and a restaurant called the Road Kill Café, the motto of which is “You Kill 'Em, We Grill 'Em.” That's it. The rest is trees and water and rolling hills. And in the winter, which is long and dark here, snow. A nice place to be if it's summer and you have someplace else to go and the means to get there when the weather turns. Otherwise I wouldn't recommend it, unless you're into snowmobiling.

<sup>3</sup> An undiagnosable schizo-depressive thing which has been my constant companion (and given fits to scores of psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and hopelessly overmatched plain old counselors) basically since I can remember. It drapes the world in gray gauze, dooms every good

intention to failure and makes every kind gesture suspect. Sometimes a low chatter, easily ignored if you're accustomed to it, and sometimes a crashing roar which drowns out all the sounds of a normal life—the steady press and buzz of the machinery of routine, the reassuring murmur of the familial web—it was responsible for my two previous suicide attempts, and can be blamed, I suppose, for the last one. Which, if you are reading this, was successful.

<sup>4</sup> A Christmas baby. Ugh.

<sup>5</sup> The nearest bastion of civilization to Greenville, itself a sorry little hamlet of 30,000 people. For kids growing up here, Bangor was the place to party and take in concerts and movies. It was the place to discover what the orange glow of streetlamps is like. It was where I went, at sixteen, to have an abortion, and it was the first stop on an ultimately fruitless odyssey begun shortly thereafter, when my father found out about the abortion and blackened my eye (the only time he ever put a hand on me) before throwing me out of the house.

<sup>6</sup> My father, who died just two weeks ago. The only man I've known whose love for me was conditional, or ever in doubt. The only man I've known who was not moved by my beauty to devotion, or sacrifice, or forgiveness. He was at various times a seminary student, a minor-league shortstop, a Marine, a welder, a volunteer firefighter, a Shriner. He was at all times a Red Sox fan and a Catholic. He was steady and quiet and loved with deeds, not words. He was, for me, the embodiment of God on Earth. When he died we hadn't spoken for a decade and a half, even though I've been living here in Greenville, two miles from the home where I was raised, for the last five years.

<sup>7</sup> My mother, from whom I inherited both my beauty and my susceptibility to tension, paranoia, and nervous breakdown. Despite her fragile mental state, she has remained beautiful into her fifties (though she was never quite as cripplingly gorgeous as I am). Over the years, sustaining her beauty has become for her a sort of coping mechanism. She has no time, while busy driving to Boston for Botox injections or having her hair stripped and highlighted, to dwell on the daily bombardment of unpleasant stimuli to which she is so vulnerable. In the two weeks since my father died, she's gone to Bangor five times for full spa treatments, including pedicure, manicure, mud bath, full-body massage, and electrolysis.

She changes lipstick shades a dozen times a day. When she isn't preening, or in transit to be preened, she calls me and cries, because she misses my father, and because she is a love junkie and for the first time in her life she is without heavy doses of the stuff. I am fond of my mother, but I have no real love to offer her, and she knows it. What little love I've felt in my life died with my father.

<sup>8</sup> It was while in high school, of course, that I became pregnant. I'd been fending off the advances of boys, and sometimes grown men, since I was twelve. The way they ogled and genuflected, the way they made fools of themselves and fell all over each other vying for my attention and favor, hoping for a single word, a mere glance, the way they talked to my tits, the way they bought me trinkets and candies I neither asked for nor wanted, the way they spluttered the most ridiculous and inane things to impress or flatter me, their minds feverish with the desire, the *compulsion*, to fuck me, to own me—at first it was amusing, as any sort of simple comic performance is amusing to a child. Before long, though, as I came to understand the base appetite behind the performance, amusement gave way to disgust. The only man I knew who did not prostrate himself before me was my father, and he was the only man for whom I felt anything but disdain.

I was lonely, though. I had no girlfriends. They all hated me. You know how they say no one likes the prettiest girl in the room? How do you think they feel about the prettiest girl in the world? And since the boys had no interest in me as anything other than an idol, the divine piece of underage ass, I had no friends. I kept my own counsel. I read tons of books. I sat around the house in the afternoons and adored my father, his back wide and solid as a vault door, his head bowed in prayer over the dinner spread, his mouth a straight, silent line.

But since I'd grown breasts my father would not touch me. Not that he was ever very demonstrative with his love, but at least when I was a freckled androgynous little thing he would brush my hair from time to time, or bounce me on his knee. Now I can see he was frightened of me, but at the time it didn't occur to me that he could be frightened of anything, and I just felt rejected.

And so one night, in the spring of my junior year, I showed up at a party in the woods on the north side of Moosehead Lake. In the flickering yellow light of the bonfire, eyes went wide and jaws dropped when I appeared out of the darkness. And just as casually as you like, I gave the boys what they wanted. But I wouldn't let just one of them have me—there were five, the entirety of Russell

High's wrestling team. Panting, quivering, their chests dotted with pimples and comically bloated from too much time in the weight room. I took them, one after the other. It felt like nothing, and it meant less than that.

Until.

Until I missed my period. At that point I had two options, neither of which was very appealing. I could keep the baby, which would necessitate admitting to my father that A) I'd had sex at age sixteen; B) I'd had sex out of wedlock; C) I'd had sex with five guys; and D) I had no idea which of them was the father. Or I could roll the dice, abort the pregnancy and hope he never found out, because if he did it would be ten times worse than A,B,C, and D rolled into one. Plus, part of me wanted to keep the baby. Something to take care of. Something to touch and love. That's how I thought of it at the time. I didn't think of practical concerns, like how I was sixteen and my sole source of income was babysitting for the Folsoms every other Saturday. I just wanted something that would inspire love in me. So I savored the idea for a few nights, petting and poking my belly in the darkness of my bedroom, imagining how it would swell and stretch and at the end of nine months not only would I have something to touch and love, but my body would be ruined for good and men would leave me alone.

I knew, though, that this was just idle fantasy. I couldn't face my father with this.

So I went to Bangor and had an abortion and he found out anyway, how I still don't know. It was two days later and I was still bleeding when he threw open the door to my bedroom and cursed me and hit me and for what seemed like a long time, cowering on my knees, I couldn't make sense of what was happening. It wasn't until the next morning, when I woke in my aunt's apartment over the Indian store, that I understood.

I stayed with my aunt for less than a week, then took a bus to Boston. I didn't come back for nine years.

<sup>9</sup> At the top of my class, incidentally. This sounds impressive until you consider that there were only 32 people in the class.

<sup>10</sup> This is a gross summary of my first two years in Boston, during which I worked as everything *but* a model—hostess, busgirl, waitress, office temp, toilet scrubber. I even spent time landscaping, planting flowerbeds and digging



trenches for affluent suburbanites, but the attention I suffered from the rest of the crew, comprised almost entirely of sexually ravenous Haitians, drove me away from that line of work. In the summer of '89 I'd been without a job for five months. I was nearly broke, living on peanut butter and chickpeas and deflecting the attentions of my landlord, who in lieu of back rent I couldn't pay was suggesting, less and less subtly, that another arrangement be worked out between us.

Louis discovered me while we were waiting in line, separately, at Dunkin Donuts. I was spending my last three dollars on a Mochaccino. He was an agent for William Morris. I took off the foam-and-mesh *Highlander Laundromat* ballcap I hid my beauty under, to scratch a tingle, and Louis made a strangling noise in his throat. He put a manicured hand to his mouth and stared. At first I ignored him. Men stared; it was a fact of life for me, though in this case it seemed strange, since Louis was so obviously gay. I pulled my hair up and stuffed it back under the cap.

"No!" Louis said. He took the hand from his mouth and thrust it out, as if to grab me. "Take it off again. Please."

I bared my teeth. "Fuck off, creep," I said.

But Louis pulled a business card from his vest pocket and waved it at me. "We're going to be rich," he said. "And you're going to be worshipped the world over."

The money sounded good, anyway.

A week later I was in New York. A week after that I was striking poses in Bali, my skin burned the color of watermelon flesh. On signing the contract for the Balinese shoot, I'd made more money in ten seconds than my father had made in his whole working life. Best of all, I'd found Louis, who was made of love like an omelet is made of eggs, and couldn't have been less interested in fucking me. He dropped his other clients to focus on managing and promoting my face, the likes of which, he said, hadn't blessed the Earth since that Helen of Troy debacle. We traveled together, had dinner together, took long idyllic strolls together through the postcards and movie sets that had suddenly become my life. We played tic-tac-toe on each other's arms. We nursed one another through bouts of dysentery and malaria. Louis could be surprisingly butch, and spent as much time driving off would-be suitors of mine as he did negotiating contracts and planning itineraries.

One night in Botswana I invited him into the shroud of mosquito netting

that hung over my bed. I slept with his arms around me. In Africa I learned that monsters do indeed exist, and that there is reason to be afraid of the dark, and so when something rustled the tall grass outside my hut I woke and clutched Louis's hand and reflexively, embarrassingly, called him Daddy. He squeezed back and soothed me, whispering against my neck. It didn't matter that he was gay.

<sup>11</sup> Where I got my first psychiatrist, a thin man in his fifties who looked and dressed like Tom Wolfe—silvery hair, white linen suits, long, elegantly wrinkled hands. I spent several hours a day in his office, scratching absently at the window with the filed oval of one fingernail, watching cars and people hustle by on the avenue below, and telling him how I was involved with a gay man and hadn't spoken to my parents in three years. He asked me about sex. He went "Hmmm" a lot. He tented his fingers. When he came up behind me and put a hand on my hip, I bit my own forearm hard enough to draw blood, then showed it to him. He said he'd send me to Bellevue. I told him he wasn't worried I would hurt myself and only wanted to put me someplace where I'd be under his control. His face flushed, and he looked away.

Around this time my mother called me out of the blue. She'd seen photos of me in the magazines she was so fond of—*Cosmo*, *Vogue*, *Redbook*—and though I modeled under an assumed name, my phone number and address were in the name she'd given me, so I wasn't hard to track down. I came home from a job in Morocco and heard her voice on my answering machine.

"I saw the Versace spread in *Vogue*," she said. "Honey, I'm so proud. I couldn't be prouder."

What about Dad? I wanted to ask the machine.

"I feel so strange," my mother continued, "talking to you but not actually *talking to you*, you know. After all this time." She paused for a few seconds, and I could picture her dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief, careful not to smudge her mascara. "So what's new here, you must be wondering? Nothing, really. Let's see. The Road Kill Café had a fire, but they're rebuilding. That's about it.

"Oh, your father is home," my mother said. "I have to go. Call us, baby. Let us know you're okay. We miss you. Your father, too. He wouldn't say it. You know how he is. But he does. He misses you. He worries."

And I did it, after steeling myself with a bubble bath and several tumblers

of mint schnapps. I called. The line rang three times, then I heard my father's voice, calm and expectant: "LeClair residence."

The warm tingle from the schnapps disappeared instantly, and I froze.

"Hello?" my father said.

*Hi Dad, I thought. How am I, you ask? Oh, fine, fine. There are a million men in my life, and all but two of them want to devour me. But I'm good. How are you?*

My father, never having had much patience with games, hung up before I could unstick my tongue.

<sup>12</sup> Where I was bored and anxious and read all of Graham Greene and did not speak French (though Louis did). In Paris I tried to kill myself by leaping into the Seine from the Pont de l'Alma. It just happened. I looked down at the rippling coffee surface and suddenly I wanted to be on the bottom, suspended, slick with algae, my only company discarded tires and stolen crepe stands. I had on Doc Martens and a heavy flannel shirt (grunge was high fashion by then, even in Paris), and they took on water instantly, yanking me under as though I were tethered to a boulder. Sadly, a waiter had followed me from the Champs-Elysees like some sort of love-struck zombie, and he splashed into the river and fished me out before I could die, dragging me up onto the bank where a small crowd cheered his heroism. He spoke to me in French, and though I didn't understand the words it seemed clear he thought I owed him something. He stood over me, waiting, his long apron soaked and clinging to his thighs. I got to my feet, brushed past him and walked home, leaving a trail of wet footprints two miles long.

Paris was also where I developed my first zit ever, an angry white peak besieged by a blazing red aureole. It was huge, like an infected nipple on my forehead, ugly and impossible to ignore. I loved it, and when it finally healed I spent a full 50-minute hour mourning its loss with my therapist, a sultry, 30-ish Frenchwoman.

"You should be happy," she said to me in heavily accented English. "Your beauty is intact again."

"Don't tell me how to feel," I said. "That's not your job."

She put a finger to her lips. "An-dy," she said, "I should like to make love with you. I'm sorry. I cannot contain it any more."

I looked at her. "You're married," I said. "You have a son."

And she covered her teary eyes with one hand and said, "I should not have

told you about my life. That was wrong.”

<sup>13</sup> Not the ideal place for a woman weary of attention. The men there swarm like libidinous bees, single-minded and tireless.

<sup>14</sup> Where Louis and I were married in a Greek Orthodox ceremony. We kissed, but did not have sex.

“I’m gay, honey,” he said when I asked him to consummate our union. “I married you as my friend, not my lover.”

For our honeymoon we left Nicosia and drove west, through the dusty red hills of the central countryside, around the Troodos mountains, and south to Aphrodite’s rock, a dull chunk of granite jutting out of the shallows of the southern coastline. The story was that Aphrodite had no parents, but was born in a geyser of foam at this very spot when Kronos threw his father Ouranos’s severed penis into the sea. She emerged from the water, flawless and glowing with passion, and proceeded to torment mortal men through the ages.

On the gravel beach surrounding Aphrodite’s rock tourists milled about, the backs of their legs scorched red and their necks laden with camera straps. Most gazed up at the towering, shapeless boulder, shielding their eyes from the sun with cupped hands, probably wondering what the big deal was and why they had driven so far to see this stupid rock. Then Louis and I crested the hill leading down to the beach. Heads turned. Men gawked, and wives punched their shoulders. Two young boys in shorts and sandals stopped throwing pebbles into the water and turned to stare at me.

I looked at Louis, a bitter smile on my lips. “Aphrodite returns,” I said.

And I broke into a run, sprinting down the hill and across the width of the beach. I dove into the water, shoes, backpack and all. I could hear Louis calling to me, his voice tight with alarm. The tourists were still staring when I reached into the backpack and took out the can of spray paint; they raised their cameras as, bobbing like a buoy, I wrote BITCH in large red capitals across the base of Aphrodite’s rock. Then I dropped the can into the water and swam further away from shore. Louis was after me now, cutting through the waves with a strong freestyle stroke, gaining on me as my arms tired. I blew the air from my lungs and sank beneath the surface.

The Cypriot authorities allowed me to convalesce for two days before expelling me from the country.

In my bedroom in Nicosia, Louis said: "Go home, Andy." And I knew what he meant.

<sup>15</sup> The same way I'd left nine years before: by bus, under cover of night. There's no proper bus station in Greenville; the driver deposited me on the sidewalk outside the Indian store. No one was there to greet me. The streets were empty and the one stoplight at the one intersection was blinking yellow. I walked west out of town, carrying only a duffel bag with a pair of jeans, two pairs of socks, two pairs of panties, and a *Cyprus Is For Lovers* t-shirt inside. By the time I reached my parents' home, six miles from the bus stop, the sky behind me was fading from black to pink with the first tendrils of a new day. I didn't dare to knock on their door, so I settled into the grass under an ancient elm in their front yard, put my head on the duffel, and slept.

A few hours later my mother found me. I woke to her kissing me, leaving waxy smears of lipstick on my forehead, my cheeks, my hair. "John!" she called to my father. "John, it's Andy! Andy's come home!"

But my father did not emerge. No long unbelieving stare, no embrace, no exchange of apology and forgiveness. I thought I caught a glimpse of him, gazing out from the window over the kitchen sink, but when I looked closer I saw nothing but the interior of the kitchen, the blue walls, the ceiling fan over the table. For all I could tell my father was not even home. Perhaps he was dead.

I stayed under the elm tree for three days. My mother flitted between me in the yard and my father in the house. She brought sandwiches and lemonade, a blanket, a pillow. I wore a hole in the grass; my elbows and knees were brown with dirt. My mother told me he would come around. She told me I knew how he was. On the afternoon of the third day she told me, while she cried and held my face in her hands, that my father had wood to split and wanted me to leave.

<sup>16</sup> The day of my father's funeral, just two weeks ago, my mother invited me to the house. My nostrils still stung from the flowers at the funeral home. I followed my mother through the front door, but stopped cold in the entryway. I smelled Old Spice. I heard the dried and crinkled pages of the New Testament rustle in the study. My father was not gone from the house. Neither was the ghost of my childhood. I couldn't move a muscle.

My mother gave me my father's pocketknife and wallet. The knife bore the globe-and-anchor insignia of the Marines. In the wallet, among the receipts and

business cards and loose cash, was an insulin dosing schedule.

I did not know, until I opened the wallet, that my father had been a diabetic. I never saw a syringe, or a vial of insulin. I never saw a blood sugar test kit. My mother, who was notoriously bad at keeping secrets, had never said a word to me. Never.

<sup>17</sup> And my baby, whom I killed at the clinic in Bangor so many years ago. I have given him a name, and I have imagined a life for him. His name is John. The details of his life I keep for myself, except to say that he is ugly and happy and will live on long after I am gone.

THE CONCERT

Hal Sirowitz

You run your fingers  
up and down my spine,  
she said, as if you're playing  
the piano. I enjoy listening  
until you start accompanying  
yourself with heavy breathing.  
You sound like Glenn Gould.  
I hope that doesn't mean you're  
seriously thinking of becoming a recluse.

WITH LOVE

Hal Sirowitz

Mother said she puts  
a lot of love in her cooking,  
even though her family doesn't  
always deserve it. She hasn't  
yet figured a way of cooking  
that's reflective of her anger  
without setting off the smoke alarm.



## NAMING YOUR PET

Matthew Byrne

I was supposed to be composing poetry  
but was trolling the internet instead.  
I learned that many people had been  
accomplishing many things I had not.  
I discovered in particular a certain  
rival of mine had won a prestigious  
award. I was consumed by the injustice  
of it all, so I opened a window, and in  
flew a bat. It fluttered up and down  
my bookshelves, and I hit the deck.  
When I mustered the courage to look up  
I found it clinging to my monitor,  
where it convulsed rabidly for a spell,  
then became still. Truth be told  
it looked sort of cute up there, really  
just a winged mouse with the unfortunate  
addition of fangs. So I did what any  
red-blooded American would have done  
and typed up a poem about the merits  
of magnanimity when confronted with  
the news that a bombastic academic  
won an award decided by one of similar  
disregard for all that is warm, funny,  
and understandable. It was with this  
sense of amnesty that I cupped the bat  
in my hands and named it Proust.

SUBURBAN NOIR

Sue William Silverman

I stand in my bedroom, a finger denting  
the slat of the venetian blind  
watching Lowell Road,

a small fury of snowflakes dimming  
the corner streetlight, Dad in shadows  
walking home from city

trains, pausing to inhale  
a last cigarette, smelling  
of investments, furtive perfume...

on those secret evenings everyone  
else looked away  
from the perennials readying themselves to bloom.

SWEAT

Michael Hettich

My first girl's mother exercised  
by walking up and down the stairs  
of their elegant house, from attic to basement  
and back. For hours. She wore a jogging suit  
and she listened to soap operas on the TVs  
she blared from each floor. Sometimes she called out  
to the characters, panting. Then she'd rest  
in the kitchen with a small glass of juice and talk  
on the phone, sighing, still breathing  
with gusto, patting her forehead with a damp cloth  
and proudly stretching her legs.

Her daughter took bubble baths while I sat  
in the hallway outside her bathroom door  
and played folk songs on guitar, leaning  
toward the keyhole, so she could hear me  
over those soap opera voices.  
Eventually she'd emerge, wrapped in a huge towel,  
and slip past, into her bedroom to dress.  
Of course I was eager to see her new outfits,  
to smell her perfumes and lotions and oils—

so I claimed I was writing love songs, out there  
in the hallway, and I played what snippets of tunes  
I could imagine, from records I hoped she'd never heard,  
with such simple chords my clumsy fingers  
eventually sounded graceful, even  
musical enough to charm her into  
the love I imagined so vividly  
my singing grew strangled, into a kind of howl—

## WINTER BEANS

Bruce Holland Rogers

Every night as I went to bed, I would tell myself that the next day would be different, that I would get up and shave and shower first thing. Then I'd wash every dish and all my dirty clothes. I'd split wood, pay bills. I'd call my kids, talk to my grandchildren.

But when I woke up, it would be to another gray sky. I'd rake out the fire, dress in yesterday's clothes to wade through the snow and search the wood pile for a few logs small enough to get the stove going again. Then I would sit close to the fire, warming. Once I was warm, I would doze. Or think. Not about anything in particular. Mostly about how things were, about the things that needed doing and weren't getting done.

One afternoon, the woman from across the street knocked on my door. I don't know her name. Used to be, neighbors moved in to stay, and we all knew each other, but now every other house is a rental. She did tell me her name once. We trade from our gardens in summer. I take her my black prince tomatoes and some cucumbers. She gives me sweet peppers and corn. She's younger than my youngest daughter, and not like my girls. She's dark.

She had cookies.

"I thank you kindly," I said, accepting the plate. I can always manage to be polite.

"You need anything?" she asked me.

I did need something, but I didn't know what it was. I told her I was fine. I could drive myself to the grocery when I had boiled the last package of spaghetti.

She was pushy then. She said, "You sure?" She looked at me, and she looked in the direction of my kitchen as if she could see it from the door.

I smiled because I wanted her to go away. I thanked her again for the cookies. When she had gone, I went back to sitting.

Later, I had cookies for dinner.

She was back the next day. I didn't want to answer the door, but if I didn't, then I'd still have her plate. Returning it would become one of the things that needed doing. I didn't ask her in. I stood in the doorway and gave the plate to her. "Thank you again," I said, and started to close the door.

"Wait! This is for you." She gave me the bottom of a milk carton filled with potting soil.

"What is it?"

"Something my kids were doing at school. It made me think of you. Keep it watered and warm."

I thanked her and closed the door. I put the carton in the kitchen, and I wondered how much she understood. *It made me think of you.* Did she think that all I needed was a reminder of spring? Because of course there were seeds in the potting soil. My own kids had sprouted beans at school a generation ago. Did she think that all I needed was the sight of something green and growing? I had houseplants. Whatever was wrong with me was more than a sprouting seed could cure.

I remembered to check the carton each morning and kept the soil moist.

Some time in here, my middle daughter called. My oldest grandson was the star of the high school baseball team. The second boy was starting to drive. They were all going to Florida in March. She asked how I was, and I said I was fine. She was a thousand miles away, and I didn't want her to worry.

One morning, the white humps of two sprouts had broken the surface of the soil. One was a little higher than the other and was pulling up the shrinking seed halves it had come from. They were indeed bean sprouts. New life. Good. But I was not transformed. These plants, if I kept them going, would grow and mature and go to seed and die. I was entirely familiar with the process. I spent most of the day by the fire. At dinner, I washed just the dirty dishes I needed, and the next day, I wore dirty clothes again.

I put the sprouts near a window.

*It made me think of you.*

I thought, *She is very young. There are no miracle cures.*

In fact, why had I assumed that she understood anything at all? We both gardened. She had given me a tiny garden. She hadn't meant anything by it.

I gathered up my clothes and put them near the door. Later I might go to the laundry. I might clean myself up. If I washed half of the dishes, that would be a start, right? Then I took a nap on my sofa. I managed to sleep most of the day. It was dark when I woke up. Dinner was a can of tuna.

Tomorrow would be better, I told myself.

I did not sleep well in the night. In the morning, I was too cold and too tired to chop wood. I fit some big pieces into the firebox on top of the ashes and coals. The logs only smoked at first. I would give them time. I sat with a blanket around me. The sprouts on the windowsill had opened secondary leaves. I thought I would like to look at them more closely. Perhaps today I would do half of the dishes. It would be an accomplishment to shave.

Eventually, I roused myself and went to the window. I touched the new leaves. They were so green, so perfectly shaped. I said, without knowing why or to whom I was saying it, "Thank you."

I did wash all the dishes that day. I shaved. But that was the extent of it. Spring was coming, and I was bound to feel better eventually. Eventually, I washed my clothes, started to shower every day, and got outside more and more to chop wood. Sun broke through the clouds more often. One thaw followed another. Spring rain fell.

I kept the bean plants watered. I repotted them. But they never flowered and before the garden was dry enough for me to work the soil they began to die. I was not surprised. One morning, I took the failing plants outside to add them to my compost heap. It happened to be a sunny day.

ELLSWORTH AVENUE  
Grace Cavalieri

The little girls sit on a porch,  
cool dresses. It is 3 o'clock.  
Mothers are in their kitchens setting  
spoons on the table. There are  
iced drinks and cookies,  
powdered sugar,  
talcum powder,  
a confection of air.  
Not even fathers come home to  
break the silence.  
The only sound is the boy on the tracks  
who has caught a small animal  
and tramps through weeds  
carrying a cardboard cage,  
three holes for air.  
The girls ask whose turn it is  
to make up a story.  
They visit bright countries—  
in this way they travel  
beyond swinging chairs,  
white railings,  
a summer porch.  
It is as if God mutes the trees to listen.  
The only sound is a thrashing,  
the biting and scratching as the boy falls,  
the rustling and scrambling  
of a small animal breaking free.

OBJET TROUVÉ

Ron McFarland

Glancing out the kitchen window this morning  
onto the lawn I'd meticulously mowed  
last Saturday, I saw what appeared to be  
a foot-long strip of red and white rag,  
maybe a wad of paper  
blown in from a neighbor's garbage.  
My wife believes in art.  
Our walls sing out with beauty, design  
and balance, with almost frightening symmetry.  
Before we walk on the immaculate beige carpet,  
we remove our shoes: it's that kind of house.  
She does not understand  
random scatterings, the Budweiser bottle  
shattered in the gutter, cigarettes  
smoked down to their filters and flipped  
casually into our carefully weeded shrubs,  
nomadic and nameless dogs leaving their scat,  
unforeseen costs of a corner lot.  
She will not appreciate  
this avant-garde still life: small rabbit  
half devoured on a lawn of sun-scorched grass.



## MORE THAN ONE HAND

Dara Cerv

Standing in Josephine's yard  
I beg the tall grass to tell me when I'll learn  
something motherish. I don't kneel or scream,  
but treasure the emphatic gesture of hands  
raised to the night sky. I need more  
than one hand on which to count  
engaged or married friends, their children,  
terriers, tabbies, fish. They no longer preen  
as I do: *oh, god no, I can't hold that, I'm terrible  
with kids*. I am really terrible with kids.  
Josephine can tell the sex of a baby  
just by looking at its bundled face, has packed  
a separate little world into this white house  
in Westchester. Forced outside to smoke,  
I beg the tall grass to tell me when  
I'll learn something motherish, as if it's like Danish,  
Spanish, or gibberish. I lurk the backyard  
like I don't belong near a family, my hand  
along their clothesline, touching its delicate things,  
plucking its strange chords, an instrument  
I'd like to learn. Then again I've dropped one too many  
china ballerinas. The tall grass *must* sense  
something motherish in my step—*Stop  
standing in backyards, watching the world  
on a screen, thunking your hands against the thick  
glass like a child. Get out there and get nine months  
of bloat, a husband who will walk  
your small, hairless dog at midnight.*

TORCH PASSING

Raymond P. Hammond

and there is much they don't teach us  
when in youth we inhale their brains  
learning, forgetting, yearning all  
to be something more than we are  
but what we don't much consider  
we just savor, suckle and seek  
not thinking beyond the thinking

and there is much they don't show us  
but the lonely path of process  
streetlighted road down town's main street  
whose end is always at the edge  
of night. Slight sight squinting to see  
so slowly illuminated  
until leaving us all alone

and there is much they don't leave us  
except to learn without teachers  
and a knowledge that is useless  
unless passed on to crusaders  
lighting their own streets through dark ages  
who can never be shown where they  
are going until we are gone

## SUNDAY MORNINGS

Doug Ramspeck

This is the sound of polished shoes and  
Sunday mornings. Of August corn  
fields, their arms raised in supplication.  
Of pond water congealing into muck—  
slow summers in languishing abeyance.  
My brother and I rise each day and  
hold ourselves suspended; we hide in empty  
spaces between heartbeats. We watch the  
gathering reds and golds ride like sorrow  
on cloud underbellies. Our father's  
tractor chugs and expels black smoke.  
We have gone this way before. We walk  
the fields and sense the air grow still.  
The day shimmers and reclaims us.  
Our flesh is weak. I lie on straw and feel  
the grief flee out of me. These are prayers  
of dirt, of rich loam we fear will bury us.  
We listen to the inland prairie sea, to waves  
of wind that scar the land, to our mother  
weeping down the hall. The heat hangs  
heavy as a noose. The cows low  
late at night. In our worst dreams  
our father's hands and feet turn black.  
They caw like crows then disappear  
beyond the field. This air is rich with  
tallgrass and manure. The walls can't  
absorb what I am feeling. This ancient  
house crumbles with its age. Bricks fall.  
Pipes burst. Plaster chips and scatters.  
My brother cries soundlessly for our  
father. Each Sunday the pews are  
hard as flint. Hymns rise to the rafters and

beyond. Every sermon is preverbal, as raw  
as grit. When church is over, the four of  
us walk out into the heat. Sunday's done.  
Only chores are left. We strip off shirts—  
our father's scar puckers in the sun and  
draws a map. In the pond a bloated dead  
raccoon floats—the blueflies are ravenous  
with greed. Old farms have soil like a  
graveyard. You feel it in your fingers, taste it.  
It is the weight of generations. The church  
cemetery is visible from our barn. We stand  
there in the midday sun—baked in dizziness.  
Heat empties out the soul. At the funeral  
home I reach into the open casket.  
Our father has retreated inside his skin.  
His eyes are closed. It is Sunday. Nothing  
swims in our back pond. The hours congeal  
as weight, as translation of memory, as  
instruments of what we do not know. The rain  
won't fall. The earth peels like rotting skin.  
The cistern is blank as a dead eye. This is  
the sound of polished shoes. Of August corn.  
Of arms reaching out in supplication.

## HAPTICS

R. L. Futrell

Haptics: of or relating to the sense of touch; tactile. [Greek: *haptikos*, from *haptesthai*, to grasp, touch.]

1.

She calls it a *nook*. A *breakfast nook*. I don't know why but I don't like this word. This combination of words. It's the way she says it. The way it rolls off her tongue. It rubs me the wrong way. It's a table. It's our kitchen table. It is up against the window and there is a bit of an indentation in the wall there, but this, in no way, qualifies the space as being a *nook*.

I have explained my feelings to Anne about this, have told her that I simply don't like the word, *nook*. I have even, on two separate occasions, read to Anne the definition of *nook* from the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*: 1. *A small corner, alcove, or recess, especially one in a large room.* 2. *A hidden or secluded spot.*

*A noun*, I said. *Middle English. Probably of Scandinavian origin. This is not a nook.* On both occasions she told me to shut up and eat my waffles.

*Waffles*, she said. *A light, crisp battercake baked in a waffle iron. Most likely of Dutch origin. And don't forget that we have your birthday party thing to go to this evening.*

Anne and I have not been getting along well lately. We don't talk anymore, at least not the way we used to. We speak in fits and starts. We get quickly to the business of the day.

Today is the 24<sup>th</sup> of August. My birthday. School has recently begun and already I don't know what to do with myself. This is the first year in the twenty-one years that Anne and I have been married that I have not been teaching. For the last fifteen I've taught *World History* at Patrick Henry High School, just a five-minute drive from the house.

It feels odd not to be heading out the door after breakfast. I don't know what to do with myself. The school board called it budget cuts, but I understand (and even accept) that it is something different. I'm afraid that they too, like Anne, have noticed that I haven't been myself lately.

2.

What I have not said, but what I believe Anne suspects, is that something is wrong with me. I don't feel anymore. I don't feel anything. Not for her, not for our marriage. Not for the students I'm not teaching this year. It's as if I've lost something of myself and don't know where to find it. I am certain that Dr. Anderson cannot help me in this regard, but I'm hopeful that Dr. Okamura might be able to teach me something.

Last week I applied for admission into Johns Hopkins's continuing education program and in the course catalog's description for Dr. Okamura's class I read: *A haptic interface is a force reflecting device, which allows a user to touch, feel, manipulate, create, and/or alter simulated three-dimensional objects in a virtual environment. Such an interface could be used to train physical skills such as those jobs requiring specialized hand-held tools (e.g., surgeons, astronauts, mechanics) to provide haptic feedback modeling of scientific concepts to trainees in a classroom (e.g., "feeling" how molecules attract and lock-on to, or repel one another), to enable modeling of three-dimensional objects without a physical medium (such as automobile body designers working with clay models), or to mock-up developmental prototypes directly from CAD databases (rather than in a machine shop). Training motor skills requiring the sense of touch, or teaching physical relationships at an atomic, molecular, bench-top, or cosmic level are the domain of haptic interfaces.*

3.

Dr. Anderson insists that I call him Kyle. I cannot bring myself

to do this. I hate this. I hate this more than I hate the word *nook*. In our weekly meetings he sits there in his newly re-upholstered leather chair, jotting things down on a yellow notepad and, without looking up says, *Please, Kyle is fine*.

It frustrates him when I refuse to do so.

*Please*, he'll say again, *Call me Kyle*.

I have been meeting with Dr. Anderson for two months now, at the request of my wife. She insisted, after our last big fight, that we each meet with a counselor, independently of course. He is a nice enough man. If you were casting for a movie and needed to fill the role of *marriage counselor*, you would cast Dr. Anderson. His hair is unkempt in a way that indicates it wasn't so when he left the house. His salt-and-pepper beard is nicely trimmed. He is, above all, calm in every situation.

Dr. Anderson does not force conversation, does not steer things in any particular direction; or rather, if he does, he does so in such a way that you do not notice. Sometimes we spend the first ten minutes of our session sitting in silence across from one another.

In our last session we did not speak for thirteen minutes and forty-two seconds. I used this time as I always do: I took note of things. I enjoy this. Enjoy simply sitting there and looking around his office. I have built a world for Dr. Anderson to live in, have created a life for him based loosely around the facts I'm able to piece together. He is married, with two children (this I gather from the pictures on his desk); he is religious (this I know from some of the books on his shelves and from the fact that he is a deacon at the church my wife attends on occasion); he is well educated with a Master's and PhD from East Tennessee State and the University of Alabama respectively (this from the framed degrees on the wall—there is no posted degree from his undergraduate years, but there's a throw-pillow on the couch against the wall that says, *Go Dawgs*. I'm guessing Georgia, but I could be wrong. There are, after all, a number of schools that celebrate the bulldog as their mascot); he has a secretary who we are both mildly attracted to (I've talked to her on the phone.

Her name is Amy. I've seen prettier women before but have yet to come across a voice quite as naturally seductive as hers).

Finally Dr. Anderson began.

*It's been about fifteen minutes, Jim, he said. Would you like to begin?*

I told him that I did not really care either way, that it was his call.

*Well then, he said. Let's begin this way. Tell me a bit more about Dr. Okamura.*

4.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted, wiping almost instantaneously from the earth the small Roman village of Pompeii. Most everyone is familiar with this story—is familiar with the images of men frozen in place while working on some sea-faring vessel for the town, with images of mothers clutching their nursing babies tight against them or frozen in time while weaving a tapestry at the loom. What few remember is that nearby Herculaneum, the other coastal village on the Bay of Naples, was also buried that day in pyroclastic ash.

But it was Herculaneum that was discovered first, in 1738. And it was the art, the architecture, the philosophy, and the literature rediscovered in Herculaneum, not Pompeii, that sparked the Neoclassical movement of Western Europe. But this is just history. No one cares about history anymore.

5.

Anne works from home, and this too has caused a bit of a problem. I get the feeling she does not like having me around the house all day. She does translation work for a number of German companies conducting business here in the States. Mostly she spends her time in the little office we put together a couple of years ago and is at the computer for a good part of the day (collecting emails, gathering faxes, compiling documents for this company or that one). She works hard. She doesn't talk to me



much. Every now and then I hear her speaking in German, nothing more than the usual greetings and salutations, and her easy, flowing manner reminds me all over again why I fell in love with her.

When she's on the phone she paces around the house, walking in and out of rooms, stopping occasionally to write something down, or pour another cup of coffee. And then, from the other room, she'll say something to me. Usually centered around me being in her way, which I don't understand because I'm anything but in her way these days. I spend my time reading. Mostly history books. Going over the things I've taught before but am already beginning to forget. I read the papers, I do crossword puzzles. Sometimes, in the evenings, as the sun is going down, I'll sit out on the steps of the back porch and wonder what Dr. Anderson would say if he could see us in action, if he could see us work our way around the house to avoid one another.

Seven down, four letters, starts with *n*: "\_\_\_\_\_ and cranny."

6.

Anne has been trying for some time now to get me to attend church with her. I have yet to go, but I'm not against the idea in theory.

*It would be good for you, she says. It would be good for us.*

7.

A few days ago I read in the paper that another site has been approved in the Arizona desert for the storage of spent radioactive waste. What a beautiful solution: the burying of things. We seem to have a knack for this sort of solution; and when we forget to do it—forget about how necessary it is that we bury things—nature seems to handle it for us.

Sometimes whole civilizations are destroyed in this manner.

In Carlsbad, New Mexico, there is a facility called the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, which, for the last thirty years has been one of the main salt deposit waste repositories operating in the United States. The WIPP isolates wastes, mostly containing long-lived alpha-emitting radionuclides and chemically hazardous constituents from nuclear weapons research and production, in thick-bedded salt 655 meters below the desert surface.

The article proposed using these facilities for multiple purposes: *A deep geological repository, whether functioning as an afterthought to mineral extraction, or being excavated and operated just for waste disposal, can offer essentially the same infrastructure support as a single-purpose mine. To make better use of the WIPP, without compromising its primary mission, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has encouraged proposals to search for weakly interacting massive particles, to discriminate among neutrino flavors, and to study other hot topics in particle astrophysics and cosmology.* The WIPP underground environment is eminently suited for this sort of work—the 655 meters of overburden shields against almost all cosmic radiation, and the salt “host” rock contributes less natural background radiation than virtually any other geologic medium.

The only thing better being, perhaps, volcanic ash.

I tried explaining all this to Anne while we sat together at the breakfast table.

*Things get buried, I said. But then we dig them up again and study them. Nothing stays buried forever.*

This was the conversation that prompted her to request professional counseling.

8.

Dr. Anderson knows that I am no longer teaching. He knows also that I am working two days a week as a janitor in an office building for the Applied Physics Laboratory, a part of Johns Hopkins University's research and development division. I have expressed to Dr. Anderson my interest in taking a class there

entitled “Haptics for Virtual Reality” taught by Dr. Allison Okamura, although he and I both know I would not be able to take such a course. I have no educational background in the sciences. But this is beside the point.

What is important for Dr. Anderson to understand is this: that I am interested in taking the course, that I care about “Physical User Interface Design” and would like to be a part of the good work being done at the laboratory. I have explained to him that the APL has quite a number of projects currently underway for the Department of Defense, NASA, and other government agencies, and that I would like to do my part. I feel that this is important.

And what I need right now is to be a part of something important.

I have spent entire sessions with Dr. Anderson explaining some of the ways the research is applicable to the medical community, the sciences, life in general, but together we keep coming back to one main issue. That being that I don’t know what I’m talking about. This, too, I see as beside the point.

9.

On our way to the birthday party this evening Anne and I said little to each other. As is common this time of year, the clouds were beginning to gather and billow. We had the windows down and could feel the air beginning to cool. Rain was coming. The radio was on but only barely, tuned in to the NPR station out of Washington. I could hear voices, mostly solemn and news-like, but couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. Probably more of the same.

It’s my birthday, but no one in Iraq cares about that. They’re busy over there in the Middle East burying civilizations in their own special way, a way they’ve seemed to grow accustomed to over the years. I am forty-nine today. As good an age to be as any other I guess. A good age to get some things together in my life before turning fifty. Everyone should have to

sit with Dr. Anderson the year before they turn fifty.

10.

The other day, while sitting at the breakfast nook, working another crossword puzzle, I was reminded of the time that Brent Howland hit me in the face in the tenth grade.

*Noun. Three letters, an athletic facility.*

It was just after gym class, the group of us boys lined up by the wall, towels over shoulders, waiting for an open shower. I had been making fun of him for wearing his underwear in the shower when he just turned around and hit me. It actually felt good. Immediately reaping the consequences of my words. Blood dripping from my nose. There's a moment, just after you've been hit in the face, when your brain goes into overdrive—nerves active and popping like electrical wires—and everything is pure and white and blinding, and everything is right with the world. It's like having an epiphany.

I have tried, in my adult years, to remember what it is like to be hit in the face. It seems important to hold onto history in this way. I have tried to remember what it was like to feel something, anything. I have finally, in this past week, talked to Dr. Anderson about this, and when he just sits there and nods, I think, *This is a man who has never known pain. This is a man who needs to be hit in the face, who needs to be reminded.*

Sometimes, when Anne is arguing with me, I hope that she will hit me in the face. I hope that she will pick something up from around the house—a mug, an empty vase—and smash it against me. That she will make me bleed for her. But she never does.

11.

I have never been to services with Anne, but on occasion have joined her for a Sunday afternoon "Dinner on the Grounds." I enjoy standing by her, listening to her talk. She has a missionary

friend there she speaks German with and who makes the best ham biscuits I have ever tasted. I have seen Dr. Anderson there a few times and find it is the only situation in which I can refer to him as Kyle. I have never seen his wife and children.

In our sessions Dr. Anderson asks me why I come to the dinners but not to the services themselves.

*I am not a religious person*, I tell him.

He always nods as if he understands but is disappointed.

What I want to tell him is that I'm afraid that I will not feel anything while I'm there. That I will sit next to my wife—my back against the wooden pew, listening to them sing, listening to them preach—and feel nothing. I want to tell him that I don't breathe well in church, as if the walls were closing in around me, growing thicker, encapsulating me.

In Poland, at the Wieliczka Salt Mine, there are chapels and cathedrals carved in salt. There is an altar in Saint Anthony's chapel, completed in 1698 by the brothers Josef and Thomas Markowski. There are lakes with high timbered ceilings—salt statues of worshipers and Saint John Nepomucen rising up like an archipelago. The Chapel of The Blessed Kinga is 101 meters below the surface and is 50 meters long, 15 meters wide, and 12 meters high. It contains a volume of 10,000 cubic meters and has working chandeliers. This seems a temple in which I could find sanctuary.

12.

Heading home from the party, Anne asks me how my birthday has been. It is the first direct question she has asked me in months. She is driving and it has begun to rain so hard that she has slowed the car down to a near crawl.

I am looking out the window for the white line along the roadside, thinking of how to answer her and all of a sudden I want to tell her everything—that at night I lie awake in bed next to her and wonder why we are seeing, independently, the same therapist. I want to tell her about Dr. Okamura and the class at

Johns Hopkins, and about forgotten Herculaneum on the shore of the Bay of Naples. I want tell her about the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad and about the salt mine cathedrals in Poland. I want to tell her that the human hand can detect a raised dot just three microns high etched onto a smooth plate of glass; that the average human hair is 50 to 100 microns in diameter; that by using a texture, rather than a dot, Dr. Okamura has discovered that the hand can detect roughness just 75 nanometers high; that a nanometer is only a thousandth of a micron. I want to tell her that the hand is comprised of twenty bones and has joints that allow for twenty degrees of movement; that there are twenty muscles in the hand itself, and twenty in the forearm, and twenty different nerves types that register feeling in the brain. I want to tell her about the Markowski brothers and the time Brent Howland hit me in the face.

*I want you to do something for me, I say.*

*Ok.*

*This is important to me.*

Anne can tell from the faraway sound of my voice that I am serious. She has pulled the car into the parking lot of a store that sells Christmas decorations year 'round and though it's closed for the evening we can see all the shining white lights through the windows as the rain begins to let up. The parking lot is flooded but I open the door and step out of the car and can feel the ambient warmth of the day's heat rising from the asphalt like life itself oozing up from volcanic ash.

Anne opens her door and joins me, the two of us now standing in the rain, staring at one another over the top of the car.

*Do you promise, I say.*

*I don't know yet. What is it?*

*Promise me. Promise me, on my birthday, that you will do this for me.*

Anne is facing me squarely now, her hands on the roof of the car, her hair hanging in wet ropes across her forehead.

*I don't want to do this, she says, and I know that she*

means standing in the rain like this, facing one another.

I don't want to do this anymore, either. I don't want to see Dr. Anderson anymore. I don't want to have to call him Kyle. I don't want to wake up and not know my place in the world. I don't want to be asked to go to church if I don't want to. I don't want to say the word *nook* or sit around solving crossword puzzles or reading books.

*I want you to hit me in the face, I say.*

*Excuse me?*

*I want you to hit me in the face. Right on the nose. Hard.*

Anne looks around as if I'm no longer talking to her. She squints the way she does when she can't remember the German word for something.

*I want you to hit me in the face so hard it makes my nose bleed. I want to remember what that feels like. I want to hold my head up and pinch my nose to stop the bleeding and feel the rain coming down on me and taste the salty blood on my lips.*

*Why?* she asks. *Why would you want me to do that?*

*To remember what it feels like.*

ED, BRAGGING  
Francine M. Tolf

Hunched over his computer keys, Ed coughs hard  
into his handkerchief, catches his breath, wheezing,  
goes on. *I can kill just about anything*, he says.  
*Ducks, rabbits, squirrels. It don't bother me. Hell,*  
*I shot my own dog once. A Doberman I picked up from the pound.*  
*Come home with some meat from the butcher*  
*and he lunges at me. I says to myself, oh no you don't.*  
*Got my shotgun and nailed that dog right between the eyes.*  
He takes a bite of the Danish  
he brought for the office.

Ed's son walked away from his three teenaged boys  
who live with Ed now in his trailer.  
That much I know.  
I know that he owned a tavern outside Little Rock,  
hasn't talked to his brother in years,  
believes all vegetarians are kooks  
but calls me "dear" even so.  
Also, that he was operated on for cancer  
two months ago and is losing weight fast.

That much I know, and what he told me today,  
how his father taught him to be a man  
one morning when he was twelve, how he handed Ed a knife  
and told him to brace that lamb who'd been following him around  
like a pet, brace that animal between his thighs  
and slit his throat *like this*, he said,  
*and, Jesus, I couldn't do it. That lamb looked me in the eyes and baaed*  
*and I couldn't do it. My father beat the crap outta me*  
*in our yard. You're a man now, he said,*  
*you do what you hafta do. After that*  
*I could kill anything.*  
*It didn't bother me at all.*



WALT WHITMAN VISITS THE CARPENTER CARE HOME  
IN TUNKHANNOCK, PENNSYLVANIA

Shane Seely

Because I cannot, will not, no matter what the price in guilt, go  
in there,  
I send him in my stead, robust and white-bearded, bright-eyed, arms  
open, face open, singing, prayerful, impudent, spry,  
to walk the bright halls with the low fat railings and the stars cut  
from construction paper on the walls  
among the broken, the bent-backed elderly, the stooped babblers  
with their caved-in mouths, who wave their arms and call him  
son or scream for help;  
he tips his hat to them or stops to talk, to take the hands of the one  
who says *I love you, I love you, I love you*, to her shoes,  
to console the one in the wheelchair who pleads for someone to bring  
her back her bicycle, she's lost it.

Because I can't he strides, undaunted by the smell of lives attenuated  
in a dry and constant heat  
to my grandmother's room, 212, where she sits waiting in her  
wheelchair, watching the Christmas lights on the bare poplars  
in the courtyard out her window.  
She doesn't recognize him. But he is gentle, playful, telling jokes and  
asking questions,  
until she calls him Sonny Jim and offers to make her famous macaroni  
and cheese and put him in her guest room for the night. He  
looks around her tiny room  
at the lamp stand and the hospital bed, at her roommate laboring  
through sleep,  
and respectfully declines.

My grandmother tells him that her mind isn't what it used to be  
as she asks him for the fifth time how his wife is; each time he  
smiles and says "fine,"

then teases her about her boyfriend, an addled lawyer from the South  
who sings “Nearer My God to Thee” as he wheels himself to  
the cafeteria.

When she complains about her dinner—hot dog, creamed corn,  
apple juice—he throws it in the trash and calls for Chinese  
take-out:

they eat Kung-Pau chicken with chopsticks on the bed.

My grandmother loves to be outside, and so he wheels her to the  
parking lot, where they ride up and down the sidewalk, his  
feet on the back bar of the wheelchair, her laugh echoing into  
the evening;

they stay for sunset, and the last cardinal song at dusk.

When he goes to leave, replacing his hat and taking up his coat, my  
grandmother asks after me. Her face is hopeful, a little sad.  
*He will come to see you soon*, he says.

MR. D TAKES HIS MOTHER TO CHURCH  
Candace Black

He'd always been the dutiful  
son: college at St. Leo's, house built  
behind his mother's, separated  
only by a tiled patio. And now he takes  
Mamie to church. High Mass at eleven.  
Ceiling fans swirl  
the muggy air slowly. Parishioners wave  
their leaflet missals. And still  
sweat rolls down the spine, between powdered  
breasts, down from the armpit  
until at last wet  
skin feels good, licked  
by weak breezes. Mr. D thinks of this  
as he goes through the motions  
of worship, Mamie's rosary and lips moving  
quickly in an effort to finish  
before Communion. Blessed, they greet  
Father Menville at the door. Only the secrecy  
of the confessional prevents  
any mention of the obviously  
absent: Mr. D's wife, damned  
for control of her body, forbidden from this  
gathering of saints.

MR. D SELLS HIS HOUSE

Candace Black

It was and it wasn't the money.  
When Mamie died he could've remodeled  
his way across the patio. God knows  
he needed the space. But her house  
had seen its century and the thought of living  
through all those upgrades wearied him  
beyond belief. Let these two,  
with their obvious taste  
for the decorative arts, pay him twice  
the market value for the whole damn lot  
and turn it all into the B & B of their dreams.  
Old Town was going that way anyway.  
Whoring itself for the tourist dollar.  
Let newcomers lease from the termites  
for a change, sink their savings into paint,  
antiques, and a year's supply of croissants.  
He's tired of the Conch Train's spiel.  
Better to move the family up the Keys  
a few bridges, away from assholes  
drinking their way through the bars on Duval.  
The migrating gentry can devise their own plan  
for clearing out the unwanted  
while maintaining a certain raffish charm.  
He'll drive in to the bank each day and approve  
their loans, then return to a new house  
free of gingerbread to watch herons  
stalking through the shallows.

## I CONKED A DOG

Russell Rowland

A dead-pull hitter in Little League, I lined  
drives foul. The most torrid of these many  
long strikes homed in like a prototype  
smart bomb on a mongrel out beyond  
third base, minding his nose's own business.

No friend or enemy of mine. The ball  
rebounded off his skull with a second crack,  
and down he went, as if his legs had been  
jerked out from under him. An inning passed  
before he wobbled upright and went home.

After that cloudless Saturday afternoon,  
girls talked to me who never had before.

## HOW WE SAY GOOD-BYE

Joan Connor

The double bind of time. We live in time. We love outside of time. The treble bind of time. Time is a grinning gap-toothed juggler with three pins. Sometimes two tenses are in the air, sometimes one, sometimes three. Past and present. Future, past. Sometimes, one slips, lands. We wait, dizzy for the other pin to drop.

When you and I first meet, you are perhaps more interested than I. Mid-sentence in class, I raise my eyes and catch you staring too intently, too thoughtfully at me as I make my observation, which even I know really isn't that sharp. You chew your pencil deliberately. You avert your eyes and pretend to stare down the creative hemisphere of your brain. I find the gestures theatrical and think, *Who is this clown?* But still there is something, something in the blue sizzle of your eyes when I catch you staring. Someone inside, someone lost, someone asking to be freed from his too-blue eyes. Maybe I cannot bear the pain. Maybe I cannot bear the tenderness. Whatever my response is, I elect to dismiss it, to dismiss you.

My friend Lisa tells me that you have a crush on me.

"Don't be silly. That type never goes for me."

"What type?" she asks, her eyebrows arched.

"The glamour boy, the trust fund baby. The tan and handsome jock."

She smiles smugly. "He's playing." She nods toward the tennis courts. "And I guarantee that when you walk by, he'll miss the ball."

You miss the ball. Lisa and I are snickering about it when you land suddenly beside us on the grass. We take a beat to recover conversationally. Your shorts bloom green like the grass. You cross and uncross your perfect legs. You are grinning expectantly as you lounge shirtless next to me. Yes, you are beautiful, but you look as if you are waiting to be unwrapped. *Who* is this joker? I

wonder. I roll my eyes at Lisa. "It's time for the lecture." And we rise and walk away. I didn't know yet that the joker was wild.

In class, your offerings sound ponderous, as if you had planned what to say in advance. You struggle for the vocabulary, pausing long between words in your literary observations. You always sit across from me; I always ignore your eyes.

When you sit next to me at lunch, I fire direct questions at you to keep your interest at arm's length. Your responses are evasive. Only later will I enter the past that I saw burning in your eyes; only later will I see the jungle there, the eyes of the men who died as you stared into them, the miserable marriage that should have been put out of its misery years earlier, the misbegotten loves and lusts, the temporary homes, the lost friends. Only later will I hear what is, finally, a life, your life, a life like so many others, ordinary for all its stupidities, joys, deficiencies, bumbles. Only later will I start unraveling the skein that is the knot that your life has snarled into. But then, then, I only thought you insincere, evasive. Later, I would recognize it as elusive, find the elusiveness intriguing, then exasperating. But not when we first met, not then, not yet.

At school, I watched you with women, so many women, all too fond. So he is one of those, I thought, who must have them all, must be loved by them all. I watched them, blonde, gray, brunette, young girls and women aged beyond their state of grace, batting around you like gnats around a porch light burning late into Saturday night. I knew from conversation that you had one at home as well.

"Do you love her?" I asked.

"Love?" You shrugged. You smirked. It was a man's way of leaving the door ajar. I didn't choose to enter.

But others did. So many moth-like women flitting. You seemed aware of your effect, knew how you attracted. A porch light with consciousness, a porch light with will, luring all the luna moths. A faint whiff of singed wings clung to you. But I misidentified the odor that I'd recognize later: Citronella.

Later you would confide that, when you saw me walk

across the lawn on the first day, you thought of Daisy Buchanan. I didn't realize then the proleptic implication of your allusion to that careless life. But I saw Gatsby's aspirations in your easy elegance, your polished grace. Later you told me that I stood apart, an Ice Princess, but I was the big thaw. I couldn't know then that you wanted ice, ice chips in my hands, the gravelly pellets of dense cold, an Arctic heart.

But I was icy when we first met, frosty, because I was in love. I could afford for you to be meaningless. Your meaninglessness to me attracted you. You wanted to inscribe your meaning, define yourself for me in some way that might pertain. To be entered in the lexicon of my life—that attracted you. What then attracted me? Something did. Haltingly, I circled you. I stepped, stalked, backed off and balked. But those eyes, the sorrow in those eyes, the thwarted tenderness, the longing. There was a story in those eyes I had to read.

Then I read your story, a disjunctive narrative from the fragments of which a tiger rose, a patient careful tiger. And before I knew that I was creeping into the verdant undergrowth, I fell in love with your story, with the cat in you although I would not know it for a while. When I met your eyes, I only knew that I was hacking my way into the foliage deep, too deep. I instinctively sniffed trouble, and I followed its scent in until, one night, wine-lusty, I said to Lisa, "I am just going over there. I'm just going to go over there and crawl into bed with that man."

"It's a bad idea," she said.

It was, in fact, a perfect idea, but one only glimpsed in time passing, in the rearview mirror, like a white dog narrowly missed at a speed too fast to brake. I slept in my single bed.

On the Fourth of July at the dance, in coy, girlish gear, I asked you to dance. You grinned. You could grin small like a cat. Bemused. You looked bemused. But then I realized that I'd bumbled into spritzed territory—an outstanding involvement, an unresolved involvement. I watched your whispered shouting match play out on the dance floor. The two of you knew all the moves.



I returned to my dorm and slept fitfully in the steamy night, feeling out of myself as if I'd slipped into something less comfortable, a steamy caricature of a Tennessee Williams heroine. Randy cat on a hot tin bed, scratchy in my skin. Sometime near dawn, I fell asleep.

You invited me to the beach. I noted how you loved your body, how you arched catlike in yourself toward the sun. I noted your snoozy sexiness. I should have realized then; cats only belong to themselves. But I recall wanting just to stroke you, perverse, imperturbable cat. Longing for coolness, longing to lose myself in water, I swam alone, swam hard, swam harder than I normally would because I wanted to out-swim those blue, blue eyes. Or did I want to swim into them? Drowning is always difficult.

At school I kept my skin intact; I stayed inside of it. But on one of the bad days, I cried. I cried in front of you, my outside life encroaching with legal papers, feral lawyers, the electronic hum of phone call crises, my son pleading, "Come home now," a knot of telephone wire which I could not untangle long distance.

My wet, streaky face humiliated me; I could not raise my eyes, but, when I did, when I saw the answering pain in your eyes, pain parting like lips, parting like thighs with all the trust implicit in the cleaving, for the first time, I thought, *Here* was a man. Then, untimely then, one of the pretty moths flapped in, and you flew off. But still, it was enough. I had read the spectrum of your stare. Beyond the blue to you.

The first time we said good-bye, you wrote your name in my address book. An act of faith in itself: I grant you access. But you seemed surprised when I wrote you. You wrote back. You began calling, too, often. Your lovely hand-painted cards arrived like grace notes, unanticipated, thrilling for the octaves that they scaled. Then books. Always, you sent books. I read them all.

But the calls were the best gifts. They were like surprise bags at childhood church fairs, gifts that could never disappoint because they were all so unexpected. They could be very wrong,

like rubber gloves or deodorant, a planting calendar or a cigar snipper for a four-year old, but they were always surprises, always challenges for the imagination to find uses for them, places for them.

After school ended, we decided on the phone to meet once. Briefly. In August when I had to leave my son with his father for the first time, you drove me. The tenderness, your willingness stunned me. When I said good-bye to my son, I didn't cry because you were there. When I said good-bye to you, you tried to hug me. Terrified that you would try to kiss me, I ducked. I stared at your boots. Too soon. Confused. Not this. Not now. I was in love; wasn't I? In love with someone else.

You were not, you candidly told me under direct fire. But you lived with a woman. The loveless condo sounded sad to me, but I was newly displaced myself. When love ends, couples often persevere out of sheer perverseness. I passed no judgment. I was only grateful that, on one of the most difficult days of my life, I had not been alone. Later, I would revise that—on one of the most difficult days of my life, I was grateful that I had been with you.

A day of parting. Parting from my son whom I knew viscerally, every waking and sleeping moment from his fine fly-away hair to his untrimmed toe nails. The scent of his pajamas on the day after laundry day, the dampness of his pillow. Loss. I could not tolerate the loss. But you were there. You were tall and steady. Your shirt starched summer crisp and awning striped. You anchored me.

As I recall, we had coffee. Then you left to meet a former lover, she of the dance floor shouting match. When you hugged me good-bye, I stared at your boots and thought, I wish I had a boyfriend who wore boots like those. I didn't know yet that it wasn't really the boots.

You became someone. You became the phone calls, the letters. You became the person I confided in about my troubled love affair. The phone relieved us of our bodies. The phone granted us the anonymity of the confessional, in the secretiveness

of which I could reveal all of my secrets, all of my sins, even the private ones, the ones I could not even tell my lover because they were about him. Some I had not even told myself because they were about me. You listened to them all. Sad as they were, we laughed.

And you talked, too, pursuing the spark of your thought out to the vanishing point, pursuing it until I could no longer follow. I just listened, loving your intelligence. We talked books, madness, children, sex, love. What we did not talk about would be a shorter list than what we did. You told me tougher stories than I had ever wanted to hear, but, hearing them, I knew them as my own, the stories I had waited all of my life to hear.

You needed to talk. I needed to talk. We both listened with a greed born of solitariness. In the silence between us, the silence stretching telephone wire over three states, I realized that I had been meeting you for my entire life, that something was shifting into place, a slow turning. I knew that, for the first time, I was confronting something that I did not truly understand, someone whom I did not truly understand. For the first time, I comprehended mystery; its allure is its very unknowability, despite what is known. You cannot poke it, prod its facts into line, force understanding. You can only know a mystery by letting it remain unknown.

The facts: despite your French surname, you are Boston Irish.

Lapsed Catholic.

Former Marine. Former distinguished Marine. Two tours in Viet Nam.

Once married, once divorced. One son.

You ski. You run. You are an adrenaline junkie; its drug stands between you and the gathering madness of the past.

You write a streamlined, elegant prose.

You have a telepathic buzz that wires itself into my dreams, my thought patterns.

The cat in you was happiest in the East.

You drove a taxi for a while, lived on an island off the

coast of Maine, taught paraplegics how to ski, oriented children to the nighttime sky, led Outward Bound expeditions, drank cases of Absolut to still the demons, only to find them whirling back up, more vengeful, tasting blood.

You no longer drink.

You pop valium.

You sometimes sneak up on a quiet madness.

But while this is the text of you, it is not you. You are something other, something more than the sum of your parts, more than your sun-furrowed face, more than your chevron brows, your goofy mouth, your painful eyes, your past.

Sometimes I think that you were most yourself on the day before you boarded the bus for boot camp. But I am only guessing, guessing that you left your soul at the bus stop on the curb like a forgotten duffel. The good news: the soul never stays behind. If you have one, it always follows you. There is an eternal lost-and-found for essences. Yours still illuminates your eyes.

The phone call facts—I loved them. But I loved you in your letters, too—your wryness as you described family holidays, all the drunken uncles, your logily sexy mother, drill sergeant dad, the intelligence as you sketched your military past, the desperation, almost girlish, as you tried to convey your understanding of me, of us, the effort to write it right, to express the ineffable.

Sometimes you called me from the bath, your voice splashing in a languorous sexiness. I was seduced, and seduction induced panic. My friend, I cannot lose my friend. My resistance made you laugh; “We’re okay,” you reassured me. Perhaps you were wrong.

Why do male-female attachments always move toward a breaking point?

“I’m half in love with you already,” you said.

“Which half?” I asked.

You laughed; you were a man, I knew, who needed to laugh.

We made many tentative plans to meet, but you always

cancelled. I thought that I knew why. You'd seen the trouble in my eyes, too. For a year, we managed to stay apart with our lovers between us. On the phone, we perfected ways of saying good-bye:

"Ciao."

"Later, gator."

"Call you next week."

"Well, that really burned a hole in my bill."

"Good-bye."

On the phone, the conversation must always end, one must always say good-bye. On the phone, time is money. But still we purchased a strange intimacy on the phone. We started dreaming each other's dreams. We completed each other's sentences, thoughts, images, characters, stories. You always called me on the mornings when my boyfriend left; you knew I'd be upset about love gone awry.

I started waking to find you in my thoughts. What *is* this? I wondered. Who *is* this man? I had no answer; you were only yourself. The closeness terrified me. You were only a voice, a voice that had begun to haunt my heart.

When we weren't sparking and arcing, you told me stories. The stories you told: a decision not to marry the woman you lived with, a man jiggling on a high-tension wire against an orange sun, a home that sounded like a flat without emotional furniture, a prophet in the LA airport, the camaraderie of men who find true love in the threat of imminent death, your love for your son. "The last love I will ever feel," you said. Dolt, I thought, you're already in love again. You were not just slow of emotional study; you were glacial. I am as patient as murrain when the weight is worth bearing. Time and glaciers advance at the same pace. But I didn't know yet that your specialty was retreating.

After a year of conversation, I was nervous about seeing you at school. I have always been bad at hellos, because they always end in good-byes. During the year, we had come to know each other as voices, had come to know each other from the inside out, so that sight seemed unimaginable. But when I saw

you, I was home. I saw a family I had always known: my brother, my husband, myself, my father, my son, my perhaps lover, my sister. Recognition ended in a hug.

During school, you walked around dazed, with a dopey gleam like you'd swallowed the sun or had been fly-swatted by Glinda the good witch. Friends, observing your Gee-whiz bafflement, said, "He is in love with you."

"I know," I said. "He doesn't."

It was okay. It was enough to be proximate, enough to see you looking gangly in the sun as you played self-conscious tennis with one of the flirty interchangeable blondes, enough to see you dark and sun-sotted, sucking down iced teas, enough to see your face, surprised and hopeful about all that you did not know that you were feeling. Again, it was okay. I knew. When I looked at you, my stomach flipped. And when we finally kissed, all the flirtiness dispersed, and, blind-folded, I fell straight into the dark center of you. Not this, I thought. Oh, so it's this. I wanted to stay there. I was home.

On the day that my boyfriend was due to arrive, you told me that you loved me. I returned the dangerous words. We would wait a year to learn what they implied: nothing. We both have a disastrous sense of timing.

No matter when it happens, pain is always present tense, love is always past.

The boyfriend came. My heart writhed with an animated nightmare forest, Snow White's Disney woods. Hostile trees everywhere grabbed at me, shaking me into the deepening awareness that I had lost my way. When the boyfriend left, I felt only relief. I did not understand yet that we had already ended. A slow turning, a turning away, a turning toward.

You came and found me. You held me. I could have remained there for a year. For the first time, there seemed so much that I couldn't tell you:

How badly I wanted to hold your hand on the night that we got stoned and went and romped in the chain saw artist's menagerie of bears and moose, beavers and sharp-faced foxes.

How happy I was on the night when we went out for dinner with friends, and I watched you deliberating with yourself, understanding how hard it was for you to make decisions, and you finally, purposefully took my hand, knowing what it signified.

How shy I felt with you, naked in my body, you so beautiful in yours. The prettiest man whom I had ever seen. How young I felt, how awkward as if I'd known only thirteen years.

How I understood for the first time that you were neither insincere nor theatrical but indecisive. That to make decisions, you role-played yourself as if you were a split man, that this was the consequence of your history.

How I would like to take that history and cup it nest-like in my hands so that you would never again have to inhabit it without protection.

How I felt so raw in love with you that I could not talk about it when you insisted that we should. And you were right; we should have. Double bind of time.

How, instead, I bought a book for you, spending hours in the bookstore to find exactly the right book, so that it could say what I could not—that I loved you, that I felt like a wound that needed your salty touch, that I was so afraid, so afraid to be attempting this again, so uncertain the outcome, so unlikely the result, that I could not speak until I felt safe again and the only place that I felt safe was in your arms. And I could say none of this.

Love. Again.

I said, "There is a person here. There are two of us, here, we two." I warned you, "You cannot push things into shapes they do not want to assume." I asked you, "Are you certain? Do you really think you can cross over, give yourself up to it? You'll just go home, retrench," I said. "For a day or two, you'll try to shake me from your head. Gradually, I will diminish. You'll settle into your routine, return to the woman you live with. First, I am a memory, then a memory of a memory."

"No," you said, "you don't know everything."

But perhaps I did.

On the morning that we were to separate, we lay together on your college bed, neither speaking nor not speaking, neither caressing nor not caressing, just deferring the moment when we would say good-bye. For luck I wore my talisman earrings, a cluster of hearts and cupids. Retrospectively, they seem not to have served me well, but perhaps it would have been worse without them.

The room had a spartan whiteness to it, a purity, a simplicity, identical to the feeling with which I looked at you. The white light of love. You were squirmy, coy. You wanted to make love, you said.

Shy, I shook my head. "I have to go home," I said, "my son."

I kissed you. I packed my car. I found the fan that I had loaned you on the sidewalk beside my car. I didn't cry, but why, leaving, did I feel stretched to the snapping point, did I feel as if I'd left my hand or a foot behind on the pavement, did I feel that I needed to drive back, retrieve my foot, my hand, my missing self? Only later, unpacking, would I realize that I'd left half of my clothes behind. Only later would I confess to you on the phone that I'd gotten lost on the ride home. You admitted that you had, too. Only then would I realize why—because, apart, we were lost. Our destination, each other, we navigated unplanned side trips, trying to circle back, loop through time, trying to recover each other.

Again, briefly, I saw you as I drove my son North again for the annual parting. You wore a white sweater. Your eyes made mine sting. I wanted to hold your hand. I wanted you to take mine. I wanted you to explain what would happen next.

Instead I saw the condo where you live with her, acquired the blueprint which would permit me to imagine you together there: she, in her room; you, in yours; or you in the oversized Papa Bear chair; or you watching Sunday games on the oak encased TV. You sprawled on the Victorian settee, you asleep in your oak bed. I'd have no paucity of images with which to miss you.



I said, "I like your home."

"It's a house, not a home," you said.

"But it fits you."

"You fit it," you said.

Playfully I pushed you onto your mattress. "No," you said, "not now, not here. We don't have the time now. I want to go slow."

You always go slow.

You showed me photographs of your father, of your mother. I saw your face in them. You showed me a photograph of your son; again, I saw your face. You showed me a photograph of your lover. I wanted to ask, Why? But I did not. She was lying on the beach. She was beautiful. I imagined you beside her taking her photo. I imagined me on the other side of you, behind your turned shoulder.

We said good-bye in a parking lot. We did not kiss good-bye. Driving home, I missed my turn. All turns led to you, but still I drove myself South and home, following a map other than that of my heart.

We returned to phones, but the calls altered. We had more context now. At first, your calls were panicky. "What?" you demanded. "What are we going to do?"

But you were the one living with someone. "It's up to you," I said. "It's up to you."

"I'm tired of being team leader," you said.

But what could I do? Drive to your home, stage a scene? Reverse time so that we could be together again? It was up to you.

What you tell me on the phone after I get home: that you sleep in separate rooms. That in your anger at her, you smash the tennis ball at her during a game. That you tell her that she has more in common with her hairdresser than with you, that she is fat.

What I know: that you smack the ball at her, because you are angry that she is not me, that you do not know that that is why you are angry; you only know that you are angry. That

you insult her because you hope that she will leave first, that she will make the decision so that you will not have to make it. But she stays.

Then you become angry at me, accuse me of self-centeredness, accuse me of indiscriminateness in love, accuse me of obsession, accuse me of sexual passivity. It may be true, in part or in total, but none of the accusations pertains. I am only trying to love you. I know that you are flailing, trying to ward off your love for me, trying to ward me off, because you are beginning to realize that you must make a decision, that finally it comes down to either/or, the breaking point of love, a binary decision. Then my phone calls become panicky.

In desperation, you suggest I go marry a lawyer. In desperation, you suggest that we have an affair. In time, this may prove to be all that we do have, and a measly one at that. But then my cheek stings as if I've been slapped. Your suggestion seems tawdry for us. I say, "I'm not a second-string pony."

During the upcoming weeks, I will learn that for the entire range of emotions that you feel, you have only one that you express, anger. I wait.

In September when you come to see me, I am a wreck, because now, every time I look at you, a question hangs between us: do you want to try or not? But you do not answer. I wait for an answer. I wait for you to decide. I wait for you to leave. I wait to say good-bye.

Before you say good-bye, we sit fireside and hear the coyotes wail, their voices clear as starlight. We ride the gondola to the top of Killington, and you name the mountains for me, the mountains shouldering back in space, in purple rank-and-file. Seeming eternal, almost eternal, but not eternal, I know.

As we descend, I want to tip your hand into mine, read our future in your palm. Do we have one? What do we do now, so that this moment connects to the next, so that soon we are not saying good-bye? Nothing.

This time when we say good-bye, when we hug, I cry. When you drive away, my shadow self is in the car with you.

That is how I know that you hesitate at the base of the hill, that you consider turning around. But I know you; I've dreamed you crossing deserts, stopping your car, looking westward over your shoulder to the past you are escaping. But you never turn around.

Over the phone, I make cases for myself. "We could be good," I say. "I would never leave you. We could care for each other."

"I'm with the wrong woman," you say.

"I know. What do you think I have been trying to tell you?"

"I am going to talk to her," you say. "I am going to talk to my son."

I note the verb tense. I wait. I can only wait. I will not play homewrecker. Not even for you. I will not, I cannot, press you to make a decision that you would regret. I cannot decide for you. I can only wait. With practice, I'm becoming good at it.

I go swimming alone. I do everything alone. Lying on the raft, I watch my earring, with the hearts and cupids, fall into the lake with a tiny splash. I watch it drift like a lure through the green water, down until my sight fails and imagination takes over, and I see it settle, settle into the lake bottom muck, disappear. I read the omen; love is lost. I dive into a murky despair.

This is how love passes—a broken spell. A snapped hex. With love, with spells, timing is everything. I know that our best time, our best chance is already somewhere behind us in the past. A slow turning. We have missed it. I silently say good-bye. I wish I could wrest the time, like Superman, spin the day back on itself. But I feel time slipping like a stretched rubber belt around my heart.

When you come to see me in October, I give you your Christmas present. "I can't see you again," I say. "My heart can't take it."

When you leave, you leave the gift behind. This time when we say good-bye, you say, "Get your life in order."

But I can only wait. I mail your gift: a small box figured with a coyote. Your saying: no regrets, coyote. A perfect motto

for a sprinter who outraces his own past, who inhabits an eternal present.

This time when you leave, you leave behind your gold signet ring somewhere in the dirt. We searched beside the tennis courts for hours, but we could not find it. We searched in the grass where we sat together in the sun. I sympathize with you and your ring, think of my hearts and cupids, sinking in the muck. I know what unplanned loss feels like.

This time when you say good-bye, you leave behind these images:

You, pink and glowing, skin scrubbed to boyishness, fresh from the shower.

The emptiness of your boots, agape at the foot of the bed. Inside that emptiness, I slumped and crumpled like an unwashed sock.

You, lying naked on the couch, pretty in your unselfconscious skin.

A glimpse of you posing before the mirror, after you have pulled on your green shirt. You toss your hair back and vogue. You like what you see. The vanity doesn't trouble me; I like what you see, too.

When you call this time, you say, "We do not get along."

You say that you are not good for me, that I should not love you.

But it's late for that now; isn't it? Slow turning.

When I ask about her, you say, "It's none of your freaking business."

We haven't censored each other before. I am only trying to come to terms with loving you.

"Do you love her?" I ask.

"Love," you scoff. "It's only a word. What is it? Show me one. Is it a frankfurter? Now I could show you a frankfurter."

I do not say what I am thinking, that you are smarter than that, that saying that is too easy. But I let it pass. I make a joke about your showing me a frankfurter, preferably with relish. I am a clause dependent on a word: love. I wait.

What I do while I wait: one sunny afternoon, I actually dance myself into a frenzy, believing that I can call you, summon you, believing that, at any moment, your green car will pull up. You will unfold from the seat. I will run to you, and I will know that, at last, you have decided. But I only dance myself into, first, a frenzy, then, a fatigue. You do not come.

I stare at the phone.

When I come home, I pray that the blinking red light signals a call from you.

Sometimes I cry.

When I answer the phone, I hope for your voice.

I write you letters, too many letters.

I send you Miles's tape, *Bitches' Brew*.

When I see an envelope with your handwriting on it, my heart skips.

When you call, I no longer tell you about my dates, because it upsets you although you do not know why.

When we talk, I hope for what you do not say.

Finally I can bear waiting no more. "Tell me to bugger off," I say. "Tell me to scram, beat it. There's more mercy in it. The coup de grace."

"The coup d'etat?" you ask me.

Coup de grace, coup d'etat – it's all upsetting.

"What do you want?" you yell. "Do you want me to move out? Do you want to move in together?"

Yes, I say to myself, you stupid lug, of course that is what I want. Yes, yes, yes, but I cannot say this to you, because *you* must want it.

"What do you want?" you repeat.

"You." Truth has a knack for stilling time.

"That's pretty clear," you say. "I'll talk to her. I'll prepare my son."

Over the phone, we push and pull. At night when I *can* sleep, I dream of you. When I wake, I wake to you. Am I not pretty enough, not smart enough? I wonder. Am I finally just not worth the risk?

"Self-pity does not become you," you remark on the phone.

And so I wait. Sometimes now we say good-bye by hanging up on each other.

You accuse: your love life's been a revolving door. You wear people out.

The first assertion is true of us both. As for the second—no, no one has ever left me. I have never worn anyone out. But I am wearing myself out with waiting.

"I move slowly," you say. But you do not move at all.

"Something must give," I say. "I can't keep doing this, doing nothing, missing you." But nothing changes. I have misgivings, doubts. Perhaps, I think, you are insincere after all. Perhaps you are unreliable. Perhaps I am just part of the show at school. A gumball machine prize? A bodyshield. A trophy.

"Would you lie to me?" I ask.

"No," you assure me, "no."

Friends begin to warn me, "He's an operator. A manipulator."

What can I do but look into my memory of your eyes, your blue heart and wait? I love you now. I can't turn back. School will be different, I tell myself. I look forward to school. I wait.

School is different. On Christmas Eve before we meet at school, I spot an estate signet ring through a plate glass window, and I know that it is yours. I have it engraved to match the one you lost. The curves in the monogram twine around my heart. The gold glints. I see myself smiling in its polished surface. To the extent that I have a Christmas this year, it is in the pleasure of this gift to you. When I get to school, I hang it in a bag on your door knob, but you do not unwrap it until the last day.

"I can't accept this," you say. "It is too much."

"You have to. It's monogrammed."

Between the first day and the last, we are together. You speak as if you have decided. You speak of moving vans. You cite dates. We will be together, I think. Your voice serious, you ask me, "What would you do if I were recommissioned?"

"I couldn't bear it," I answer. The thought of you hurt or in danger wells in my eyes.

"It's not likely," you reassure me.

Now when you hold my hand, it feels like trust.

I amass more images of you:

Your face turned toward the sun when we went skiing, your face so happy, my heart elated, and I felt as if I wore your face like a mask.

You on the same day, skiing into the weeds and knocking yourself flat on your back. Grinning, you stared at the sky until I intervened between, smiling down at you.

You in the men's store picking out a tie with endearing finickiness.

Your worried face scouting for me in a crowded auditorium, relaxing as you spotted me. Yes, here. I am here. For you, I am here.

You returning from a day on the mountain, your face simplified by air and sun and speed, your forehead eased back into your boy face.

You, playful after an afternoon in bed, standing behind me, wrapping your arms across my stomach, rocking me. Now that's the boy I like, I thought. That boy.

You across from me at dinner, finding my hand. A pink brocade room, a fire behind the hearth, a flute concerto measuring a perfect meal.

You dancing, stomping your boots, squatting, bucking. When you move, you always smile.

You at my reading, looking down into my face. "Was I okay?" I asked. You smiled. "You were great."

You, leaving, taking all of my heart, all of my best self with you. You leaving. Love is a retreating back.

Why must we always say good-bye? Why can't there be more images, a string of them? Why am I always left with memories that I try to hold like water in my hands?

How we say good-bye: I say, "I'm not good at this."

You say, "I know."

We stand beside our cars. My eyes are dry. My hug is trusting. "Will you come see me on my birthday?"

"Yes," you say.

My birthday comes, but you do not.

You drive off at sixty miles per hour into blinding white-outs. You do not call for several days.

When you do call, I miss you so much that my breath catches.

"What," you ask me, "what?"

"What do you think? For eleven days, we spent every waking and most sleeping minutes together. Then nothing. I feel untethered, lost."

"What do you want?" you ask.

By the question, I know that you are already in another time, a parallel place.

I stare myself down in a triptych mirror: the other woman.

What I do not answer: I want you to get your ass in your car and get over here.

I want to make love to you for hours under a comforter on some dreary November day.

I want to lie next to you in bed and watch you read the Clancy techno-thrillers that you stash under the box spring in embarrassment.

I want to watch you shower, watch you shave.

I want to know that you are home when I am not.

I want to cook cioppino for you.

I want to watch you watch the football games.

I want to rub your feet when you are tired.

When you are sad, I want to cheer you or, if cheer is not possible, to hold you, at least to hold you.

But I can say none of this, because you must realize that you want it, too.

"Do you love me?" I ask.

"I think so."

"Do you miss me when I'm not there?" (Yes.) "Do I know



you better than anyone?" (Yes.) "Do you spend two hundred dollars a month on calls to anyone else?" (No.) "When you are troubled, whom do you think to call?" (You.)

"Do you love me?" I ask again.

"Hell, I don't know. I wouldn't know love if it jumped up and bit me on the ass."

"Consider yourself bit." I hang up.

A week later, independently you offer that you love me. I'm not surprised, but I am tired. The dance of advance-retreat is wearing out the carpet of my heart.

On my birthday, I receive three lovely gifts from you: pens, filigree earrings, a mirror in the shape of the sun. My three prism sides. You love me, I think. Perhaps. For a week, I wear the earrings every day. It takes me a week to realize that I'd have preferred something else—you, just you. You here.

But I am alone on my birthday. And I am alone on Valentine's Day. Advancing through the cycling calendar of holidays alone. You send me a Valentine that says, "This feels like too much and too little." You are right on the second count. Too little.

"You are writing me too much," you say, "too often, too critically, too contradictorily."

"I am coping," I explain. "I am trying to understand. I offer this, I offer that. You don't respond. It is like trying to love a vacuum."

"What do you want?" you ask.

Jesus Christ, I think, no one can be this obtuse. A mutuality of love and trust and tenderness. You, I want you, you and your love. I cannot bear missing you. And reassurance, I want reassurance. I am hopelessly in love with you. I am alone, lost somewhere inside of all of this, and I can't find my way out.

But I don't say that; I say, "I want you to do something. Do something. Do anything."

Time makes the decisions that we cannot or will not.

"Yes," you say. "Okay. The ball is in my court. This isn't serving anyone well."

“Act. Just act. No more talk. Figure out what you want and do something.”

I feel caught in the double bind of time, the double bind of love. I know that I shouldn’t call you, but I call you. I know that I should wait, but I can’t wait.

When I call you, you say, “What’s the glorious wisdom this week? What’s the big solution to my problems—a hot bath, the love of a good woman? Love makes the world go round, eh?”

You make love sound like a one-trick pony, me sound like a fool. Over and over I bring you this gift, and you ignore it, or you dash it to the ground, dance cowboy on it, stomp it into dust. But still I come riding back on my one-trick pony.

An OLD joke: how do you keep an asshole waiting?

I don’t know. How?

No answer.

You say you will talk to her. You say you will come. You do not talk to her. You do not come. The circumstances are unchanged from the moment I first set eyes on you and saw trouble. What will it take for me to realize, for *me* to act? God wearing a sandwich board, parading back and forth before my house: THE END IS NOT COMING. IT IS NOW. But I stand in the center of the double bind of love and time. I can only elect to be miserable without you or to be miserable without you by my election. Which one is ultimately worse?

You say, “Look, your attention is making me think you are hysterical; that is why I don’t come to see you.”

“I am hysterical,” I say, “because you don’t come.”

The double bind of love.

At night when I cannot sleep, I rock myself into your skin. Waking in the morning to a room of winter light, I smooth my sheets and create you there. I lie on you. Your skin is soft, your body hard. All day, I talk to you in my head. When I laugh, I laugh with you. When I note something beautiful, I store it for you. But you are not there.

One snowy night at school when we made love and you

could not stay hard, I asked you, "Is it me?"

You shook your head.

I thought I understood. "The juggler has two pins in the air. Sooner or later, one must land."

"Yes," you said, "that's it."

Joke: how do you keep an asshole waiting?

I think of your beautiful ring on your beautiful finger. I am the circlet of gold, the charmed circle you wear. Wherever you go, I go with you. Your monogram blazes in my heart.

"What do you expect of me?" you ask. "Are you saying that I can't see you as long as I stay with her?"

"Well, yeah, Slick. That's exactly what I am saying. Sometimes I think you are crazy. What else do you propose—that you divide into two and sustain two simultaneous lives and loves with disparate women in disparate places with disparate lives? Do you time-travel, love? For you, making a decision is an out-of-body experience."

And for me, at forty, when it comes to love, I'm from the Show-Me State.

So show me.

How do you keep an asshole waiting?

Finally, I say, "Enough. You figure it out. You decide. When you do, let me know what you want, and we'll see what we can do. Until then, we need to leave each other alone. You need to act, to do."

"You will miss me," you say.

"I already do."

"No, you will."

"I do now."

You say, "Good-bye."

Good-bye. That is the simplest way to do it.

But my hands cup my heart, steaming with dry ice. My hot and cold running modernized heart.

I wish I could write this story in reverse, work backwards into the text and say, "Here, here is where you might have made a decision. When I asked you to dance, you said, 'Yes,' and we

spun into immediate 4/4 time. Here, here, the night we had dinner together, here is what I might have said, no demurrals, no deferrals: I love you *now*. Here, that night, we should have simply held each other. That bitter comment, I kept that to myself."

In the story, I can move us around, prod us onto our stage floor chalk-marks, put words in our mouths, develop for us an incremental plot with a happy ending that is our beginning. But we live outside of the story, in time, waiting for the pins to land. You hold the future pin. The present whirls, end-over-end, high through the air.

I wish I could write time in reverse, recover the day that we are separating and you are listening to Cat Stevens in your car. When you reach the Portsmouth bridge, you say, "No." You bump a traffic cone. Horns blaring at you, you flip the bird at the drivers and grin. You pull a U-ie. You lay rubber. You turn around, following the map of your heart.

In Woodstock, Vermont, I brake my car because my hands are trembling on the wheel. "No," I say, not this time. "No, not *him*. I will not lose him." I turn my car around and follow the map of my heart. Somewhere on Route Four, we intersect, we recognize each other's cars as we whirr by, skid and screech to a halt. Oblivious to traffic, we meet on the dotted line. "Okay, okay," we console each other, "end of the line. We're here. Now. Okay." And I hold your face in my hands, your eyes in my eyes. Okay, that is all I wanted.

But that only happens in stories. Time works against such odds, such conclusions.

I toss the future pin in the air, juggle possibility. I see how we say good-bye:

We meet again. We say good-bye, perhaps kissing this time. Perhaps I cry. We stand by our cars. A car door slams. There will be a flurry of phone calls, a flurry of unanswered letters. We will say, "I love you, but." Or "I love you, and." The calls will become more desultory. For the first few years after we graduate, I will still, perhaps, remember your birthday, transferring the date annually from calendar to calendar. I will send you prettily

wrapped packages with Indonesian fishing cats inside, or wired electric-lavender cats, painted with orange dots, regretless coyotes. Then I'll forget to transfer the date. I'll remember that your birthday is in August. I'll send you cards, missing the date by a day or two, cards with lions on them playing flutes, or tigers wearing crowns and smiling. In one of my recent moves, I'll discover that I've lost the cards you sent me years ago, the cards that I read and re-read, so that I still should have some of the quirky lines memorized, but when I try to remember them, I'll be surprised to discover that I cannot. For a while, I'll still have sleepless nights when your blue eyes poke holes into my dreams, and I'll startle, thinking that you are above me in my bed, staring at my face. But my hand will clutch, reach, find someone next to me, someone who is not you, sleeping quietly. We will still call each other, but the intervals between will grow longer, and, although more time has elapsed, we will find that we have less to say. One day, by accident, I'll discover your name in my address book, written in your hand the summer we met, and I'll cry for a different future that's already past. Regrets, coyote, regrets. But I will not cry for very long, not as long as I once might have. For a while, I'll send Christmas cards to that address. The notes will be cheery, newsy, false. One day, the envelope will come back with a stamp: not at this address, and I'll cross your name out of my address book. But never out of my heart. The heart keeps its own time.

One day, we will meet, barely recognize each other for how the intervening years have dressed us. We'll be awkward, surprised, standing outside of a coffee shop in Harvard Square, both thinking we should suggest coffee, both looking at the dog-eared steamy window of the coffee shop rather than at each other's eyes, both deciding against the suggestion. We deferred so much for so long that deferral became its own conclusion. We cannot reclaim the past. We will express awkward surprise at the coincidence, bid each other a clumsy good-bye. Unable to bear your retreating back, I'll keep my eyes on the sidewalk ahead and listen to your boot heels recede. We'll both return to our spouses

with anecdotes, "You won't believe who I ran into." Anecdotal to each other, we'll still wonder on the queasy edge of sleep—What happened exactly? What went wrong? When? But we'll drop into the dreamless sleep of the past, and we will wake up to the diurnal clatter of our separate lives, shake each other off like half-remembered dreams, shower, resume our habits.

I watch the forward arc of the pin twirling through time. I watch the juggler grin and lose myself through the gap of his white-hot teeth. I want to knock the juggler over, grab time like two erasers, clap the present against the past, choke on a chalk-dust cloud that erases all time. I want to draw my own future in a chalk-picture on a square of the sidewalk and forbid all rain to smear it, blear it, wash it away. But these are only words, a figurative language that can conduce to no literal world, can confine no time.

How we say good-bye: like this.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Lee K. Abbott, Professor of English at The Ohio State University, is the author of seven collections of short fiction, including *Space, Time, and Massy Earth: New and Selected Stories*, forthcoming from Norton in 2005. His story here, "One of Star Wars, One of Doom," originally appeared in *The Georgia Review*.

Kristin Abraham is pursuing her MFA in creative writing at West Virginia University. Her poems have appeared in *Shampoo*, *can we have our ball back?*, and *Rio: A Journal of the Arts*, and are forthcoming in *Elixir*, *Phoebe*, and *the tiny*.

Marvin Bell's latest books are *Rampant* and *Nightworks: Poems 1962-2000*. A longtime faculty member at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, he also works for America SCORES and for two low-residency MFA programs in the Northwest. He is Iowa's Poet Laureate.

Candace Black's first book of poetry won the 2000 Minnesota Voices Poetry Project and was published by New Rivers Press in 2003. Her two poems in this issue of *Harpur Palate* are part of a sequence set in Key West.

J. Lorraine Brown has received a Massachusetts Cultural Council Professional Development Grant and a residency at the Vermont Studio Center. Her poems and short stories have won prizes including a week at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and two honorable mentions in *The MacGuffin* National Poet Hunt.

Matthew Byrne has an MFA in poetry from the University of Montana, serving as poetry editor of *CutBank* for one year. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Antietam Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *failbetter.com*, *Hayden's Ferry*

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Grace Cavalieri is the author of fourteen books of poetry and twenty plays. She has produced "The Poet and the Poem," entering its 28th year, now broadcast from the Library of Congress via NPR satellite. She produces "Poetry from Archives" for the Library's website. Grace holds the Allen Ginsberg Award for Poetry, the Pen Fiction Award, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Silver Medal.

Dara Cerv was originally from Manhattan, and now lives and studies in Boston. Her work has recently appeared in *Poetry Motel* and *Rainbow Curve*.

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Jonathan Crimmins lives in Seattle, Washington. His story "Mulberry, Monkey and Weasel" has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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Kara D'Angelo is a textile artist who resides in Miami, Florida. She earned her MFA from the University of California at Davis. She is represented by the Bettcher Gallery in Miami, and her work has appeared internationally.

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Maria Fire is a former lawyer, hospice director, and massage therapist. She lives in Asheville, North Carolina, with her husband of 30 years. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore*, *Main Street Rag*, *Western North Carolina Woman*, *The Raleigh News & Observer*, and others.

R. L. Futrell has published fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in journals such as *Virginia Adversaria* and *Zone 3*, and has work forthcoming in *The Cresset Review*, *Flights!*, *Poetry Motel*, *Square Lake*, and *caketrain*. He is currently at work on a collection of short fiction and a novel. He teaches creative writing courses at Cedarville University.

Raymond P. Hammond is the editor of the *New York Quarterly* and the author of *Glacial Reasoning*, a collection of poetry. *Reach into Falling Rain*, a critical work, is forthcoming from Athenata Arts Press. He is a Federal Law Enforcement Officer at the Statue

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Michael Hettich has published over ten books and chapbooks of poetry, most of them in small editions, with two books forthcoming: *Swimmer Dreams* (winner of the Tales Prize) and *Flock and Shadow: New and Selected Poems*. His poems have appeared in journals including *The Literary Review*, *Witness*, *TriQuarterly*, *Poetry East*, *New Letters*, and *Cimarron Review*.

Anne Keefe is pursuing her doctorate in 20th-century poetry at Rutgers University. She received her MFA from the University of Maryland, College Park, where she also taught in the English department. Her poems have most recently appeared in the *Crab Orchard Review*.

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Ron McFarland teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Idaho. His books of literary criticism include *The Villanelle: The Evolution of a Poetic Form*, *The World of David Wagoner*, and *Understanding James Welch*. His poems are collected in *Stranger in Town: New & Selected Poems* and his prose in *Catching First Light: 30 Stories and Essays from Idaho*. In 2003, Pudding House Press published his chapbook, *Ron McFarland, Greatest Hits, 1976-2002*.

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Bruce Holland Rogers is the author of *Word Work: Surviving and Thriving as a Writer* as well as four collections of short fiction. He distributes many of his new stories by email subscription. His stories have won the Pushcart Prize, two Nebula Awards, and the World Fantasy Award. Next fall, he will begin teaching in the Whidbey Writers low-residency MFA program.

Russell Rowland lives, works, and hikes in New Hampshire's Lakes Region. His poems have appeared in over eighty small journals. He drinks Moxie and wonders what you all thought of the Red Sox this year.

Stan Sanvel Rubin's poems have recently appeared in *Square Lake* and are forthcoming in the *Iowa Review* and *Mississippi Review*. His fourth collection, *Five Colors*, is published by Custom Words. He writes regular essay-reviews for *Water-Stone Review* and is founding director of the new Rainier Writing Workshop low residency MFA program at PLU in Tacoma.

Shane Seely teaches in the English Department at Washington University in St. Louis. Recent poems have appeared in *Natural Bridge*, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, and on the *Poetry Daily* website.

Sue William Silverman's memoir, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* won the AWP Award in creative nonfiction. *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey Through Sexual Addiction* is under development for a Lifetime Television original

movie, and her poetry collection, *Hieroglyphics in Neon*, is forthcoming from Orchises Press. She teaches in Vermont College's MFA program.

Hal Sirowitz is the Poet Laureate of Queens, New York. He has been the recipient of a NEA Fellowship and a NYS Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, and is the author of four books of poetry. His first book, *Mother Said*, was translated into nine languages; his latest book is *Father Said*. He is anthologized in Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems* and Billy Collins's *Poetry 180*.

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George Tucker grew up in the Ozarks of Northern Arkansas, where his best friend was a dog named Pudgy. He received his MFA from Florida International University in 2003. His work is forthcoming in *The Ledge*, *Front Range Review*, and *Freshwater*.

Ryan G. Van Cleave's most recent books include a poetry collection, *Imagine the Dawn: The Civil War Sonnets* (Turning Point Press, 2005), and a creative writing textbook, *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes*. He teaches creative writing and literature at Clemson University.

Gail Waldstein, M.D. is a pediatric pathologist whose work appears in *Kaleidoscope*, *Nimrod*, *New Letters*, *The MacGuffin*, *Carve*, *Explorations*, *High Plains Review*, *Negative Capability*, *100 words*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Blueline*, *Bayou*, *Pearl*, *Asphodel*, and numerous anthologies. Her poetry chapbook was published by *Plan B Press*, and her nonfiction collection, *To Quit This Calling*, has been accepted for publication by Ghost Road Press.

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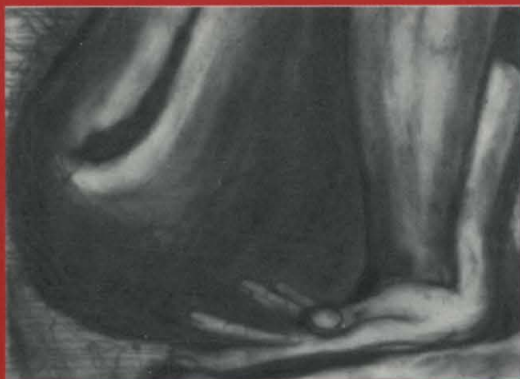
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