

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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June 2005

## Harpur Palate, Volume 5 Issue 1, Summer 2005

Harpur Palate .  
*Binghamton University--SUNY*

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## Harpur Palate, Volume 5 Issue 1, Summer 2005

### Cover Page Footnote

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Harpur Palate Volume 5 Issue 1, Summer 2005

# Harpur Palate

Volume 5 Issue 1



# Harpur Palate

Volume 5 Issue 1 Summer 2005



Binghamton University  
New York



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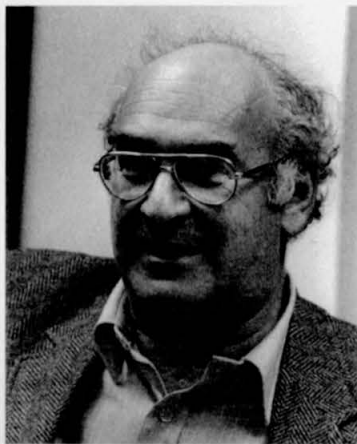
## The Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry

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

Opens: July 1

Postmark Deadline: October 1

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



Poems in any style, form or genre are welcome as long as they are 1) no more than 3 pages and 2) previously unpublished. The entry fee is \$15/5 poems. You may send as many poems as you wish, but no more than 5 poems per envelope. Please send checks drawn on a 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:

Milton Kessler Poetry Contest  
*Harpur Palate*  
English Department  
Binghamton University  
P.O. Box 6000  
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#### COVER ART

Untitled and unsigned, artist unknown, this found woodcut on paper (11 1/2" x 17") is in the possession of Stephen Corey and is referenced in Corey's article in this issue. Corey and the editors of *Harpur Palate* welcome any information our readers might have about this artwork.

## THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION



*Photo by Susan Sireble*



WINNER

A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

Kate Leary

A mother and daughter sit in a café in Bilbao, in the Basque region of Spain. They're waiting for their tour guide, who is supposed to meet them any minute now. The mother, Claudia, is forty-six. She wears gray tailored wool slacks and expensive black leather pumps, but they're hidden beneath the table. Her blouse is simple, made from black silk, and a red scarf is artfully wrapped around her neck. Her shining dark hair is pulled tightly into a large chignon. Spanish black pearls dangle from her earlobes. Her skin is creamy and smooth, her figure slender, her posture erect. Her makeup is applied to make it seem as if she isn't wearing any. The exception is her lipstick, which is a lustrous burgundy.

The daughter, Andrea—or Andy, as she prefers to be called—is twenty. She wears a blue wool sweater that is stretched in all directions and unraveling at the cuffs. Her right thumb sticks through a hole in her sleeve. Her Gore-Tex raincoat is crumpled next to her on the booth. She has long hair that is curly and dark like her father's. It's looped in a ponytail holder, in a messy sort of bun that she redoes frequently. Her pants are elastic-waist and black, her shoes steel-toed and clunky. She is maybe ten pounds overweight but she's tall, so it doesn't show much. She would have made a handsome man, but as a young woman she seems oversized and ill at ease. Her elbow is on the table and she's slumped over her café con leche, shredding her empty sugar wrapper.

Claudia lifts her cup of black espresso using only her thumb and forefinger and takes a sip. The tiny silver spoon lies next to her saucer, unused. The woman at the tour agency told her that the guide is young and handsome, with wavy hair that is a little bit too long. She shared this information with Andrea earlier, in an attempt to create a moment to giggle over together, but Andrea

simply nodded and looked bored.

Andy is playing a game. The game is that she is trying to see herself and her mother as they might appear to the tour guide when he enters. She's intent on being honest. But last semester she took a Shakespeare class, and it is undoubtedly the influence of this class that leads her to add something figurative to the tableau. As she, in the body of the tour guide, opens the door, she sees, just for a moment, identical pairs of cartoonish red horns, like those depicted on popular representations of the devil, anchored to the heads of both mother and daughter. The horns are the only characteristic the two share. She blinks and the horns are gone, but she knows why they appeared. It's a sign that they're cuckolds; this word is something else she picked up from Shakespeare. She's using it incorrectly, because it's supposed to refer to a man whose wife has been unfaithful. She has opted to use it anyway, because she can't find a word that applies to a woman who has suffered the same injury. While she is ruminating on the horns and half congratulating herself for being sophisticated enough to conjure them, a man who must be the tour guide enters, reclaiming his body.

*Lovely* is the word that both Andy and Claudia land on to describe him. Claudia thinks it because it's the word she invariably uses when something pleases her. Andy because her mother has said it so often it's difficult *not* to think of it, though she would like to eradicate it from her vocabulary.

Claudia likes the cut of his long brown wool coat, the way it swings at his feet when he walks. And when he looks up from the closed, dripping umbrella in his hand and scans the café for them, she sees his thick black eyelashes from impossibly far away.

Andy notices that his eyes are a rich brown, and that's when she tears her eyes away from him and looks at her mother.

Claudia opens her mouth, but can't settle on the right greeting, an unfamiliar sensation. When he reaches the table, Claudia breathes in the wet wool of his coat. He is, she guesses, in his mid-twenties.

"You are Claudia?" he says, his voice swooping high to make a

question mark. He smiles, and a dimple appears in his left cheek.

Claudia rises, smiling slightly. "You must be Ramón. It's nice to meet you." She extends her hand, and he takes it, giving it a soft press, just enough for her to feel that it's wet from the rain, but warm, too. She shivers, then wonders if either of them noticed. "This is my daughter, Andrea," she says. Ramón turns his gaze on Andrea and Claudia waits to see what she will do—if she'll be open to him, or even nice. Andrea extracts her thumb from the hole in the sleeve of her horrible sweater, sticks out her hand like a boy, and smiles, but Claudia sees that she's embarrassed, and the smile is something she feels she has to do. Claudia looks at the back of Ramón's head, at his hair, which is indeed too long, and forms into ringlets around his ears. He's slicked it back with some gel, but it's only partly successful at containing the curls. His skin peeks between his collar and his hair. She watches Andrea's face when Ramón grasps her hand—her eyes as they open a little wider, her lips, which part slightly—and wonders whether they have the same taste in men after all.

She thinks it might be nice if Andrea and Ramón showed some interest in each other. It might be good for Andrea to receive some positive attention from a man, especially an attractive one, after whatever happened with the break-up. She wills her to stand up straight.

"I apologize for the rain," Ramón says, and Andy thinks how funny it is that if you spend enough money, you can get people to apologize for the weather.

But her mother accepts his apology graciously. "It's January," she says. "What can we expect?"

He leads them into the street. It's raining lightly, and the air is raw. Andy knows her curls are coiling tighter in the moisture, and soon her hair will be a senseless tangle. They walk on a large pedestrian walkway of smooth gray stone that's flanked by lanes for cars. The street is lined with stores, all of which display signs in both Spanish and the Basque language. Andy stops to stare at them. She doesn't understand either language, but the Basque words are more alien—full of Xs and Ks. Ramón stops for her

KATE LEARY

and points to a shoe store sign.

"The Basque language, Euskera, is not related to any other language in the world," he says. "It is alone. Every other language is related to at minimum one other."

Her mother asks him if he speaks it.

"Oh yes," he says. "They teach it in school from the time you are small." He hesitates. "But during Franco, you would go to prison if they catch you speaking Euskera. It was almost lost. But people are trying to save it."

Andy pulls her raincoat closed. They've already spent one week in Madrid, but now she feels as though she's in another country entirely. Even the people look different. They're shorter, darker, and some of the men have jaws that jut out aggressively. She wonders what it would be like, to live in a place where you could be arrested for speaking your native tongue.

Andy and her mother are only staying in Bilbao for one night—just long enough for her mother to check the new Guggenheim off her list. She has already checked off the Prado and the Thyssen Bornemisza, which they visited in Madrid last week. They are, her mother said, the Met and MOMA of Spain, respectively. In Barcelona, they'll see the Picasso museum, and the Miró, and of course all the Gaudi buildings. But the Guggenheim Bilbao will be the centerpiece of the visit, the one to lord over the other New York museum hounds, the people her mother calls friends. Her mother volunteers one day a week at the MOMA instead of having a real job. It's something for a bored, wealthy woman to look forward to, Andy supposes. Andy is sick of museums. Her friend Tanya is studying abroad at the university in Bilbao, and as soon as this Guggenheim thing is over, she'll meet up with Tanya and they'll go out. She's planning to get drunk. She hasn't had a chance to get drunk since she discovered Ben with the other girl.

They come to the river, and the murky, industrial look of it surprises Claudia. The water is dark and sludgy, and debris is lodged against the concrete banks. An old warehouse is being demolished. Ramón points to a rickety footbridge.

"You will see our *new* bridge," he says.

Across the river, tall concrete buildings stand next to old, sooty ones. A few display banners that feature maps, with words in Euskera. The city does not seem quite ready for tourism.

"It is to free Basque prisoners," Ramón says, but the rawness of the spray painted words frightens Claudia, and she's sure he has translated the most innocuous one. There are Basque nationalist terrorists, she knows, who are responsible for bombings that have been going on for years. They want to be free to govern themselves. They want their own country. She looks for Andrea, a safety check. Andrea is lagging behind, as usual. Claudia tries to determine what she's looking at, but she seems to be squinting into the clouds, when there are so many other things to see. She considers asking, but knows it would go wrong somehow. Andrea would take it as an accusation.

She knows Andrea is in pain, because she broke up with her boyfriend, or he broke up with her. She's not clear on it, and can't bring herself to ask for details. She's not sure when she missed her chance to be the sort of mother a daughter could talk to about important things, and she wishes there were something she could say or do to turn it all around. She only knows that the relationship lasted two years, which must seem like a long time to Andrea. Andrea has been monosyllabic since the trip began. She has not taken care in dressing, and has showered only once in the past three days. Claudia is panicked because she doesn't know if this is how Andrea normally acts, or if it's a result of the break-up. A mother should be able to tell the difference. But first, Andrea was in boarding school and only home for breaks, and now she's in college and only home for breaks. Even when she's at home, it's easy to go for days without speaking to her, in that big house that Steven hardly ever bothers to come home to.

But on this trip, Claudia and Andrea eat every meal together, and sleep in the same hotel room. The day before Andrea returned home for Christmas break, Claudia discovered Steven's latest affair, and she arranged the trip in a fit of drama, thinking to cure both Andrea and herself.

They turn a corner and an arching white bridge with cables



KATE LEARY

comes into view.

Andy thinks they might not actually walk on it because it's more like a sculpture than an actual bridge, but then they do. The bottom is frosted plexiglass, slippery in the rain.

"This one is nicer, don't you think?" Ramón asks, gesturing proudly at the bridge. Andy's mother laughs at exactly the right volume, for exactly the right amount of time.

It is by Santiago Calatrava," he tells them. The way *Calatrava* rolls off his tongue makes Andy think of kissing him.

"It's beautiful," her mother says.

Andy watches his mouth and wishes he would say *Calatrava* again, only to her, and that makes her blush, and then she is angry with herself for caring about this man simply because he's good looking and as tall as her and vaguely eligible and his mouth seems acrobatic when he says some architect's name. It makes her feel bored, or *boring*. She removes her ponytail holder and tries to run her fingers through her hair to fix it, but the rain has made it impossible. She gathers it as well as she can.



Claudia picks up her pace when she sees the Guggenheim. They've come at it from the tower side, which is not ideal, not the angle of any of the photographs in the Frank Gehry book she has at home. But the sculptural tower, which she knows is the final problem Gehry solved, is astounding. It curves outward, so that it seems to be in front of her and above her at the same time. Beyond it is the Puente de Salve, and beyond that, the titanium part of the museum looks like the prow of a futuristic ship, sailing around a bend in the Nervion River, just as the book says. She wishes she could come up with her own way of thinking about the building, without falling back on other peoples' words.

But the best she can do is think that the whole thing is larger, more dominant, than it seemed in the photographs, and when they pass beneath the bridge she stops right under the tower and cranes her neck up at it. Then she steps to the side, so she can see

the flower-like structure at the museum's center. The titanium shimmers in waves and mirrors the sky's storminess, intensifying it somehow. The whole assemblage seems altogether impossible. She knows, of course, exactly why it is possible. She's seen the computer models. But this—the way it nestles into the hills around the city, the aliveness of the materials, its sheer magnitude—is a revelation. She can't unravel it, or figure out how the structure might fit together as a whole, or imagine Gehry holding it all in his head. She fills her lungs with the cold, wet air and tosses her head back to look at Andrea, ready to share her triumph, ready to share, perhaps, a transcendent moment in the face of such an accomplishment, or at least ready to agree on *something*. But Andrea is looking down, pulling on a piece of yarn on the sleeve of her sweater, which is poking out of her raincoat. The failure of the moment makes Claudia's stomach drop.

She finds Ramón, a couple of steps behind her. His eyes are on the building, his head tilted back. His eyes are roving. She knows this is because the structure has clean lines and an irresistible sense of movement, what Gehry called an *all pervading energy flow*, and that's part of what makes it great. Ramón's mouth is a little open, like Andrea's was, earlier, when she shook his hand. He can't seem to stop looking at it, even though he must see it almost every day. Some things—*great* things—never become mundane. He catches her eyes and she sees in him what she wanted from Andrea. She smiles and moves closer. She smells a waft of wet wool again, and shares the moment with him instead. Their appreciation seems to fill the space between them.

The rain begins to fall in earnest, and Ramón places his hand on Claudia's elbow and steers her around the edifice and into the museum so naturally that she doesn't notice his touch until he lets go, and then she feels its absence.

But Andy, trailing behind them, sloshing through puddles that they avoided effortlessly, noticed. She noticed and she was a little relieved, now that she knew where Ramón's interest lay. But also, her throat tightened.



They enter a small gallery, and it seems as though they're staring at a blank white wall. Claudia trusts that there's something, but looks at Ramón for reassurance. He hung up their coats earlier, and he's wearing a chocolate brown suit with a navy silk tie. She doesn't know the Spanish designers, but it's a good suit, without being flashy, and it fits him well.

"Wait," he says.

The light on part of the wall changes. The colors shift, imitating a sunrise, and it's clear that this light is not being projected onto the wall, but is somehow shining from within it. Claudia walks up to the wall and extends her hand, hesitating at the last moment to look at Ramón. He nods and bites his lip as if trying to contain his excitement. She reaches in further, and her hand goes through the wall. She sticks her arm in, up to her elbow, and smiles, caught in a moment of pure surprise. It's not a wall, after all, but a room with rounded edges instead of the expected corners, an elaborate *trompe l'oeil*.

Andy watches Ramón smile, too. He looks like someone who has just given a fabulous present and received exactly the reaction he hoped for.

Andy sticks her hand through the wall and wiggles it around in the light. She understands that they've been taught a lesson about perception. Things aren't always what they seem. It's disappointing that someone built an installation piece to say something so obvious.

Andy found out in the dramatic way: she walked in on them. She turned the doorknob to Ben's room and saw him, naked, atop a small girl whose feet poked out on either side of his knees. The feet were tiny, and, for whatever reason, pointed. One of the toes had a silver ring on it. The toenails were painted pink. The pointed little feet, the toe-ring, and Ben's ass, clenched with the effort of pumping away at the girl, were what Andy took in before she closed the door. Outside, she leaned against the door

and, for a split second, understood why her mother pretended her father didn't fuck other women. It would be so much easier than starting from scratch with someone else.

But Andy didn't pretend. She confronted Ben. He told her who she was, that it had been going on for some time, and that he had been trying to tell Andy but was afraid of hurting her.

"A *sorority* girl?" she said. "We hate sorority girls."

"She's different."

"No," Andy said. "*She's* not different. *I'm* different. She's the same." She said it with great certainty, though she knew it made no sense at all. She had begun dating Ben a month into their freshman year of college. He was the first boy she had sex with, and she picked him partly because he seemed the opposite of her father—not interested in money or appearances. Interested, instead, in making the world better. She'd thought they agreed on things, had an understanding about which people were worthwhile (Ben and Andy), and which people weren't (Andy's parents, sorority girls, and the like). When she thinks about it now, it all seems entirely predictable. Her mother warned her that it wasn't a good idea to jump into a relationship right after orientation, that it might be better to make her own friends and choose her own activities without tangling her life up with his. But Andy has never listened to her mother. She obeys her when necessary, but she never really listens. It has to do with her mother's complete lack of credibility.



One of the galleries is devoted to time-lapse photographs. The same view, taken every day for a year, or every hour for a day, or every minute for an hour. Claudia tries to see the point. It's either how slowly things change, or how different the same thing can appear depending on when you look at it. But the differences in most of them are barely discernable, and she doesn't care to search for them. Andrea is in another corner of the gallery, absorbed in a photograph. Despite Claudia's hopes, Andrea has

said barely anything to Ramón since they entered the museum, and seems almost to be avoiding him. He turns to Claudia and nods at a photograph.

"I admit I find these not so interesting," he says.

Claudia laughs, relieved. Ramón laughs, too. She touches his forearm lightly, before she has a chance to think better of it. Once her hand is there, though, she can't help thinking it would be so easy, so natural, to slide her hand into his and clasp fingers. She knows Steven is probably off somewhere with his mistress, taking advantage of his temporary freedom. Holding hands with this tour guide would be nothing in comparison—a few seconds of warm human contact, which she has been missing for years. But she lets go.

Andy has been listening since she heard the alto laugh, a sound she associates with the dinner parties her parents hosted when she was little. The laugh was always warm and genuine—never shrill—and it inspired laughter in others. She used to sneak out of bed to see what was so spectacularly funny. She would crouch at the bend in the staircase and watch everyone, but mostly her mother, who always seemed to be the most important person in the room. Her mother's job was to host lovely parties, to look beautiful, and to act charming for her father's associates and clients and their wives. She was good at it, Andy knows. She was born for it. But it didn't add up to anything. Her father probably cheated from the very beginning, she thinks now. It's the way he is. She had always sensed something was wrong with her parents' marriage, but she didn't know her father cheated until she was eleven and overheard them fighting.

She sees the way Ramón leans toward her mother, after the touch. He's already fallen for her laugh, and she knows that next he will notice how long and shiny her hair is, and he will want to touch it. Then he'll see how smooth her skin is, how straight her nose is, how large and blue her eyes are. How her lips resemble a small, perfect heart. Of course, her mother won't have any of it. She prefers martyrdom and flights to Spain.

Andy sidles closer. They're making small talk.



"I spent a year in Washington, D.C. in high school," Ramón says.

"Have you been back since?" her mother asks.

"Just once." Ramón looks down at the floor. He seems embarrassed. "After I graduated from university, I did not know what to do. Fine arts degree," he shrugs. "What *can* you do?"

*Make art*, Andy wants to say. But maybe he does, when he goes home, and this job is only for money. Maybe tonight he'll go to his studio and paint.

"So I went to Martha's Vineyard and waited tables for the summer." Andy searches for a reason for his embarrassment, and can't decide between the fact that he waited tables, or the probability that he worked illegally. Maybe he's afraid her mother will think less of him.

"Sounds fun," her mother says, and he looks relieved.

Andy has been to Martha's Vineyard. She knows what a sensation Ramón must have been on an island crawling with WASP girls who had nothing to do all summer but work on their tans and their bodies and comb the beaches for men to waste time with. She wonders if he chose just one of them, and then she wonders why in the world he would have.

She strides toward them, and they move apart when Claudia hears her heavy steps.

"I need a cup of coffee," Andrea says. "I'll just go to the café I saw downstairs."

"We'll come with you," Claudia says.

"No," Andrea says. "No, I'll go alone," and Claudia listens. There is some kind of warning in Andrea's voice, and even her hair, which has swelled from the rain, looks angry.

"We are almost finish," Ramón says. "We'll meet you in the big gallery. You will know it when you see it."

"Sure," Andrea says. She does a nearly perfect about-face in her big, military shoes and practically stomps out of the gallery.

Claudia feels reprieved, though she knows she should feel concerned or some other, more maternal emotion. But when she and Andrea are in a room together, it's as if the air is pressurized,

and all the unsaid things, all the questions they want to ask each other, close in on them. *Do you know?* Claudia wants to scream. *Do you know about the affairs?* And: *What do you think of me?* But as soon as Andrea disappears around the corner, as soon as the sound of her shoes is no longer audible, Claudia feels as if she can breathe again.

Claudia found out in the creeping, gradual way: the evidence simply accumulated until she could no longer ignore it. The damning piece was a receipt for a pair of diamond earrings Claudia never received. It was the fifth dalliance that she knew of. She had found out about each one in basically the same way, though the first had been the hardest blow. This time, as was her custom, she accused him; he confessed; she threatened to leave; they both knew she wouldn't, but he allowed her to storm off to Spain with Andrea anyway. It was her privilege. The first time, they had both thought she might actually leave for good. But Andrea was only two months old, and Claudia was in no condition to leave. She has never caught him *in flagrante delicto*, as her own mother would have put it, and she thinks something like that might have made a difference.



"You will love this," Ramón says, and cocks his elbow. Claudia slides her arm into his and wonders whether this is unusual behavior for him, or just Spanish courtliness. They're perfectly in sync, and they look good, she knows, walking together. But she also knows it's because she's making little adjustments for him, a habit she can't break.

They pass into the atrium, at the center of the titanium flower, and look up. It's like being in a cathedral, or in heaven, with all the white and the light streaming in from the glass wall and the skylight. His arm tightens, and she takes a tiny step closer to him. He's not afraid to make eye contact. "Can you believe this is not the best part?" he says, without blinking. She can't help it. She tilts her head up to look at his face. His cheeks are beautifully

round, and beneath one eye is a mole, a delicate beauty mark.

And then they're moving again, into the largest gallery. The light is dazzling on the white walls. The ceiling is high and open. Buttresses and catwalks crisscross it in layers. Again, the eye is drawn upward. From the outside, she knows this is the extension that looks like the ship. She's heard the ceiling compared to the spine of an immense fish, which fits, though she feels more like she's in the belly of a whale. Gehry is obsessed with fish.

"Can you see it is like a fish?" Ramón asks.

She nods and is suddenly conscious that their arms are still linked. "Maybe you could give me back my arm," she says, her tone teasing.

He raises his eyebrows, and his smile expands so he shows his teeth. "Of course," he says, releasing her arm. He takes an exaggerated step back and gestures to the sculpture in the middle of the room.

"The snake," she says.

"Good. By?"

"Richard Serra."

"*Very* good."

It's three enormous sheets of rusty looking steel that undulate, creating two passages that people can walk through. They must be at least twice as tall as she is and over a hundred feet long. She walks through the wider of the two passages, but it tricks her and narrows in the middle. She runs her hand along the rough steel. Through the top, she can see the white expanse of the ceiling.

Ramón is waiting on the other side.

"We are at the end," he says, looking genuinely sad. "You can look around at Serra's other sculptures." They are scattered about—giant industrial sculptures made of American steel.

Claudia nods. "Andrea should be here soon."



Andy finds her way from the café to the gallery. Already, her head feels better from the caffeine, less muddled. She overheard an

KATE LEARY

old couple speaking Euskera in the café. She's almost certain it was Euskera, because it didn't sound like anything else she's ever heard. It was softer than she'd expected from the signs. Lots of *chs* and lisping and gentle *ks*, so that it almost sounded like whispering, as if they were telling each other secrets. She wonders if it was always that way, or if it became that way when it was outlawed and people have been unable to get over it. She thinks she might ask Ramón. He's not so bad. Even if he does think her mother is pretty, nothing will come of it. It doesn't matter.

She enters the gallery and it is spectacular. She looks to see if anyone is watching, and places her cheek against the steel of an enormous sculpture in the middle of the gallery. It's cold and rough and reassuring.



Ramón looks down and up again, then purses his lips. He puts his hand on one of the sculpture's walls and leans into it. "It is a pleasure to show the museum to someone like you, who has a knowledge of art."

Claudia smiles, flattered. Her ability to appreciate art and architecture is a modest talent, but still, it's the only one she has. "I got a degree in fine arts too," she says, "a long time ago. This is all I use it for." She doesn't want to tell him that one day a week, she takes schoolchildren through the MOMA. It might sound amateurish.

He makes a gentle clucking sound with his tongue. His skin looks supple and scrubbed, as if an old layer has just been peeled off. "I don't believe it was so long ago." He removes his hand from the sculpture and places his hand on her arm, and his intent is unmistakable. He's hitting on her. She must be nearly twenty years his senior. He's probably younger than whomever Steven is sleeping with, and she smiles at the thought. She wonders if Steven would even bother to be jealous if he could see them.

"You and Andrea have plans for tonight?" he asks. She stares at his hand. His fingers are long and thin, and he has no hangnails,

no peeling skin.

"No," she says, distracted. "Her friend is studying here. She's meeting her for dinner and they're going out. To clubs or something."

His fingers tighten around her forearm. She meets his eyes, realizing what she's just said.

"Oh," he says, and blinks several times. His lashes flutter luxuriously. "You will eat dinner alone, then?" He lets go of her hand, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a business card and pen. The card is from the tour agency, but on the back, he writes "Home," and then his phone number, in a pattern of digits and dashes that she's not used to. "Maybe you will call me," he says, and she tells herself it's a professional courtesy, or he wants a bigger tip, or perhaps he genuinely likes her and wishes to discuss Frank Gehry further, but that's all. But he presses the card into her hand and holds on a beat too long, and trails his fingers down her palm when he releases it. Her heartbeat quickens. She could call him, she thinks, and blushes. She takes a step closer to him.

What if she called?



Andy walks through the narrower passage of the sculpture. When she's almost all the way through, she sees her mother and Ramón, standing close together. She catches her breath and stops and watches her mother step away, waving her hand and laughing *nervously*, Andy would say, if she could believe her mother capable of such a thing. Her mother sticks something small into her pocket, and walks away to another sculpture. Ramón takes a deep breath, releases it, and runs a hand through his hair.

Andy continues through the passage, and meets Ramón's eyes. His head jerks from her to her mother, and then he puts on a fake smile. She leans against the edge of the sculpture, next to him.

"You got your café?" he says.

She nods.



His face relaxes. "Your mother says you are maybe going to clubs later?"

"Maybe," she says.

"I know one that is OK. A little silly, maybe, because it is a disco. And a terrible name. Discoteca Rock Star."

Andy cracks a smile, because it *is* a terrible name. The kind of name that is supposed to invoke America, but that Americans would laugh at.

"In the old town. I go there sometimes. Probably not tonight."

"Thanks," she says. He doesn't move away, and she searches for something to fill the silence. "I was wondering how many people speak Euskera."

Ramón smiles sadly. "They think maybe one million at most, but not all those people speak it very well. Spanish is the first language most of us learned."

"Oh," she says, and because it's genuinely sad and she sees that he cares about it, she tries to give him a sympathetic look. But she can't resist the chance to make him pay for whatever she just witnessed. "Do *you* speak it well?" she asks.

"I am better at Spanish," he says. He looks over her head wistfully and says: "The old men you will see with berets. Those are the real Basques. Born before Franco took over." He shakes his head and smiles, and then seems to notice his hand on the sculpture. "This is done by Richard Serra," he says, in full tour guide mode. "It was designed specifically for this space."

Andy nods, knowing he has said the same words hundreds of times. "I'm going to look at that one," she says, and points to the sculpture that is the farthest away.



In the hotel lobby, as Andrea looks at the gift shop display window, Claudia pulls the card from her pocket and tosses it into a wastebasket before she can change her mind. She's never cheated, and she's not going to start now and lose the moral high ground, though she would like to go to bed with a man who

thinks she's intelligent, a man who is genuinely beautiful. And she'd like to run her fingers through that hair just once. But that's how Steven thinks. That's how he ruined their marriage.

Andy waits for her mother to turn the corner and call the elevator, then reaches into the wastebasket to retrieve the card. She knows it must be what Ramón gave her mother. She shoves it into her pocket just as the elevator dings.



While her mother is in the bathroom, Andy looks at the card. A lump rises in her throat when she sees the writing on the back. She tries to swallow back her jealousy. She promised herself she wouldn't think about men in that way until she'd figured out how she allowed Ben to trick her. She thinks of her mother, the eternal victim, throwing the card away. She'd like to see her mother *do* something, for once, even if it's only getting laid by a good-looking Spanish man half her age who knows about art. She thinks something like that might be enough to propel her mother into a more radical sort of action such as leaving her father, so she props the card up on the nightstand, right next to the TV remote control.

Her mother emerges from the bathroom.

"I'm staying at Tanya's tonight," Andy says.

"I know."

"I won't be back until late. Noon, probably."

"OK. Our flight's at three." With her hair down and her face scrubbed, her mother looks tired, imperfect. Andy is not sure her mother understands what she's trying to tell her, but she doesn't know what else to say.



At 2 A.M., Andy is drunk and dancing at Discoteca Rock Star with Tanya and some of her friends from the program. She's wearing a great deal of makeup, some of it sparkly, and clothes

she borrowed from Tanya: a tight black sleeveless top, a black miniskirt, and boots that come up to her knees. She isn't dressed like herself—she's dressed more like the sorority girl Ben is fucking, or maybe making love to. She's not sure which. She's not even sure which he was doing to her. The balls of her feet are starting to hurt, and she's parched.

"I'm getting a Coke," she yells to Tanya. "Want one?"

Tanya shakes her head. She's dancing with a slick looking Spanish guy. Tanya has always been the kind of friend who will ditch you for a boy. It's understood.

Andy struggles through the toiling crowd and squeezes into a stool at the bar. She orders a Coke and swivels her stool so she can look out at the dancers. The way she's sitting, her stomach forms into two clearly visible rolls, and she wishes she could learn to like Diet Coke. Her hair, which she washed and blow-dried straight at Tanya's, is frizzy again and sticking to her neck and she has lost her ponytail holder. Despite all this, a man approaches her.

"No habla Ingles," she says.

He tries Spanish.

"No habla Español," she says, and laughs. Ben would have thought that was funny, and as much as she hates him, she wishes they could laugh about it together. She swivels back, and the bartender hands her the Coke, which she sucks down quickly.

Someone taps her on the shoulder. She swivels around and it's Ramón, dressed down now, in gray slacks and a green collared shirt.

She wants to ask him, very casually, why he's here when he ought to be having sex with her mother. Or at the very least, why he isn't making art. But instead she says: "I thought you said you weren't coming here."

"I changed my mind," he says. "My friends convince me." He gestures at a group of people who are scrunched at the end of the bar. One of them waves. Ramón turns back to her and shrugs. "Bilbao is not so big," he says apologetically. "Not many places open at this time." She can tell, now, that he's been drinking,

too. It's on his breath, and in his sweat.

He clears his throat. This is when she expects him to say goodbye, tell her to have fun, and go back to his friends.

"You changed," he says, moving his eyes down her body.

She looks down at her chest, then back at him. His eyes flicker away.

"You look nice," he says, and she can't tell, quite yet, if he's really going to try this.

"You, too."

"Which one is your friend?"

Andy looks out at the crowd, but can't see Tanya anymore. "I lost her."

"That's not good," he says. "You like to dance? Maybe we will find her that way."

Maybe he's just being kind, trying to rescue her from sitting alone. "OK," she says.



Claudia has been lying awake for hours. She tried her Yoga breathing exercises, but when she heard herself, she sounded as if she were gasping for air, so she stopped. After only a week of sharing a bedroom with Andrea, she misses the sound of her breathing. Andrea falls asleep easily, and her slow, even breaths are reassuring, easy to follow into sleep. Usually, Claudia sleeps alone. She hasn't shared a bedroom with Steven in years. Usually, her Yoga breathing does not sound desperate. She worries about Andrea wandering around this foreign city at night, with some girl Claudia has never met. They're probably drinking too much.

If she had called Ramón, she could be having sex right now, instead of worrying about Andrea. Steven rarely bothers with her anymore, and she hasn't really missed it. But she thinks sex with Ramón would have been different. She thinks he would have tried to make her feel special, made some kind of effort to woo her.

Claudia turns on her bedside light and reaches for her book,

but something flutters off the nightstand. It's probably nothing, but she swings her feet out of bed and plucks it from the carpet anyway. She feels that it's a business card, but doesn't believe it until she brings it to her face and sees Ramón's handwriting. For a moment, she thinks it's magic, or fate, or she's lost her mind and only *thinks* she threw it away, and she is thrilled to have it back, thrilled to have the chance to decide differently. But then she realizes it must have been Andrea, that Andrea knows Ramón wanted to see her tonight, knows Steven cheats. Andrea *knows*, and she has never said a word. It is unbearably sad, and she feels her throat constrict, her body preparing to cry.

Andrea wants her to call Ramón. She is giving permission or something.

Or it could be that Andrea is simply mocking her, waving the evidence in her face, threatening to tell Steven of her flirtation.

Maybe Andrea doesn't know at all. She looks at the phone again. She wants to know what Andrea meant—not because she would call Ramón, but because she wants to know Andrea better.



Ramón leads Andy to the dance floor by the hand, which seems like an odd, old-fashioned gesture for the setting. During the first song, they do exaggerated moves and make faces to show they're not being serious. During the second song, he puts his hands on her back and pulls her closer, so she can't even see his face anymore. She never danced with Ben because he hated dancing, hated clubs. She wonders how it would have felt, and it seems strange that now she is pressed up against this stranger, and she can smell his sweat, can feel it seeping through his shirt. Even though she knows it shouldn't, it makes her think about sex. She presses her head into his shoulder and thinks that she could go home with him instead of with Tanya. Maybe if she didn't expect anything more than one night, he wouldn't be able to hurt her. She could have sex with him and it would be different than it had been with Ben. Ramón could teach her things. They would

both pretend her mother hadn't been his first choice. In the morning he would brew thick coffee on the stove and pour in plenty of warm milk and tell her more about Basque culture and history. He would teach her some words in Euskera. He would give her precise directions back to the hotel, where she would meet her mother as though nothing had happened, and they'd fly on to Barcelona. Her father gets away with it all the time, so why shouldn't she?

Ramón places his hand on the back of her head and pulls her face close to his. He turns it so her ear is at his mouth. "We should get a drink?" he asks. His lips graze her earlobe when he straightens up.

She meets his eyes, which are hooded now. His whole face is languid, as if he has just finished having sex. Everything turns hazy. She feels her eyelids lower and her mouth soften, and then she is leaning forward, into him, or maybe being pulled. But he puts his free hand on her face at the last moment and strokes her cheek with his thumb. She wants to moan.

"Andrea," he says, rolling the *R*, so that her name sounds Spanish. He removes his hand from her head and grins slyly. He wraps his arm around her waist and leads her back to the bar. She wishes Ben could see her. Ramón asks what she wants, and when she tells him a Coke, he takes his arm away and pays for the drinks with her mother's money, she realizes. Really, it's her father's money. When she takes a sip, there's rum mixed with the Coke, and she feels a surge of anger.

"You like Bilbao?" He gestures to the crowd and laughs. He's being self-deprecating and she wants to tell him to stop it, because it's a beautiful place. A place that still means something and he knows better than to talk about it that way. She finishes the drink quickly and puts it down on the bar. She burps, but Ramón doesn't notice. He puts his arm around her, and his hand brushes her breast, and she turns to him and sees on his face that it was not an accident. She closes her eyes and sees, against her will, Ramón brushing her mother's breast in the same way. But he wouldn't have done that to her mother, exactly. He would have

altered his game a little. Eventually, though, his hand would have made its way to her mother's breast. Andy opens her eyes and really looks at his soft, damp face. He returns her gaze, but it is so clearly an act that she wants to scream. She hates him for seeing the same possibilities in her that he saw in her mother. She hates what Ben did to her. The rum and Coke boil up in her stomach, and she has to swallow a vomity burp. He pulls her closer, but she slips away.

"My mother didn't call you?" she shouts over the crowd, aware that she could puke on his shoes at any moment.

His face goes slack, and then he shakes his head and smiles slightly. "No. She did not call."

She would like to take him by the shoulders and shake him and tell him he's blind if he can't see that she and her mother are so fucking different, they hardly belong to the same species. But it doesn't even sound true when she says it in her head. And anyway, she wants to leave before she's sick. It occurs to her that maybe in a very long time, this will be something to laugh with her mother about, but she can't imagine herself getting the story out.

"I have to go," she says, and he nods, unsurprised. She reclaims her coat and finds Tanya and tells her she's going back to the hotel. She stumbles outside, and on the corner, a bunch of old men in berets are sitting on a flight of stone steps, singing a song in Euskera with gusto. The language doesn't sound so gentle anymore. The words explode from their mouths. These are the men Ramón was talking about. Some young people passing by start singing, too. At least everyone knows the song, even if they don't really know what it means. Andy thinks, for a moment, that if she could throw back her head and sing along in that ancient language, everything would make sense. But instead she throws up on the sidewalk and hails a cab.





When Claudia wakes to the sound of the door opening, she thinks, at first, that it must be Steven, and then she thinks Ramón. But instead it's Andrea, silhouetted against the light from the hallway, incredibly tall but hunched over.

"What's wrong?" Claudia says, a reflex. She's surprised when, instead of ignoring her, Andrea closes the door and says: "I don't know." She's even more surprised when Andrea takes off her boots and pads around to the other side of Claudia's bed and slides between the sheets and curls into a ball, still wearing her bar clothes. The room has two beds. Andrea smells like smoke and booze and vomit, but Claudia places her hand on Andrea's back and feels that she's shuddering. She knows, then, to slide closer to her daughter and fit herself against her back, and reach around to smooth the hair away from her forehead. And after a while, she feels the precise moment when Andy relaxes into sleep.

## SORTING THROUGH THE RECORDS

Jack Ridl

"I'll toss the ones I'll never listen to,"  
my mother says, "or give them to Grace  
who'll sell them at the Lutheran Home."  
I can see my mother dusting each record,  
setting aside the ones she doesn't remember,  
finding ones that take her to the dance floor  
where she jitterbugged, fox trotted, slow  
danced with my father. "I can still see us.  
Dancing to 'Polka Dots and Moonbeams.'  
My dress had polka dots. I know that's dumb."  
It was 1940. The war was waiting  
for my father. He graduated, the next day  
took a bus to boot camp, became the captain  
of a black company and slogged through the mud  
of France and Belgium, then into the jungle rot  
of the Philippines. Through Basic, he ate, slept,  
bathed with the white soldiers, used the whites only  
toilets, drank from the fountains just for whites.  
At the day's end, he saluted his men,  
then dismissed them to their sergeant. "I thought  
that's just the way it was," he said only once,  
his brow furrowed like the rows the tanks cut deep  
in the camp dust. Every week, he wrote my mother  
ending always with the same P.S. "I know this war  
will never end." She waited. One New Year's Eve  
he sent her violets from France. She pinned them  
on her coat, stood outside, listened to the clang  
and clamor of midnight. Tonight she'll play  
Frank Sinatra singing "I Bought You Violets  
for Your Furs." Later in the week, she'll go  
to her line dance lesson with some friends.

## THE ONTOLOGY OF DOGS

Jack Ridl

Our dog cannot overcome  
 his happiness. The birds  
 around our house peck along  
 the gravel walks. He sits,  
 looks out across the back field. He  
 sleeps, his great head turned left  
 over his paws, sits up when  
 a rabbit or squirrel runs past  
 the window. He loves his walk,  
 loves smelling the same smells  
 rising from the mud, hanging  
 along the leaves, sticking to the stems  
 and trunks. When I come home,  
 he meets me at the door,  
 his tail wagging, his back side  
 wiggling. He pushes his head  
 between my legs, snorts, then  
 nudges me toward his basket  
 of biscuits. When I give him  
 one, he carries it to the door.  
 I let him out. He pees.  
 He lies down in the tall grass.  
 I imagine how his good nose  
 leaves us all behind.

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
HONORABLE MENTION

## WHEN CHARACTERS DIE

Grant Tracey

Nick Patterson is starting to think that his character isn't going to be around next season. He plays Chris Swados, head of UNTSO (United Nations Theatre of Special Ops), a counterterrorist organization that protects the globe from attack. This is the third year for the series *Hard Rain*, and Swados is dying from exposure to a nuclear isotope. Special Agent Rick Furey is searching for an antidote, but time's running out.

"Man, I wish they'd serve French fries with gravy," says Colin Dewars, who plays Furey, the series star.

Nick smiles as they eat in the Fox commissary, a few blocks down from soundstage twelve, where they film most of the series' interiors. Colin always misses Canada.

"It'll make you fat. You're better off." The commissary is full of long tables, long lines of track lights and quiet caterers dishing up everything from low-carb yogurt smoothies to burritos as big as your head and pepperoni calzones the size of footballs.

Colin shrugs and sips Michelob from a frosted glass. His hair, thin and high on his forehead, looks like a wet muskrat, but his face is chiseled and he has that low "Snake Plissken" voice that all action heroes seem to have since *Escape from New York*. Nick by contrast is heavy, his shoulders sag with forty-something anguish, and salt and pepper stubble dots his chin. His cheeks, from an age-old battle with teenage acne, look like overcooked lentils, and his voice, full of Regis Toomey and James Stewart, lacks military toughness. Nick has played small parts and second leads for fifteen years and Swados is the role of his career. The lollipop chomping UNTSO head is loud, passionate, and admirable. In the first season he was administratively ambiguous—an always-

by-the-book suit at odds with Furey, and viewers wondered if he were really a spook for the Slobodon Milosevic-backed terrorists. This year he is much more lovable, trying to reconcile with his seventeen-year-old son and his ex-wife, while secretly battling radiation poisoning. Only Furey knows Swados has it. If his superiors knew, Swados would be removed from duty.

"That scene today in the office was fucking great," Colin says, his bright eyes narrowing. "Your intensity gave me a lot to play on."

"Thanks." They shot two-eighths of a page, about four hours of work. They're now having a late lunch. Nick enjoys hanging with Colin. They both like hockey—Colin had gone to high school with Wayne Gretzky in Brantford, Ontario—and they are both fans of the Method style, carving out the inner lives of their characters. Swados hates ties, even though he has to wear one, and before working at UNTSO, he wiretapped for the FBI. His favorite color is blue, he loves dogs, especially yellow labs, and he likes women to be on top during sex. "I don't want my character to die," Nick blurts, embarrassed, feeling like he were seven again, and playing war in the backyard of his parents South Dakota home. He had overheard the writers talking between takes about next year and Swados was never mentioned.

"We'll find a cure. Hell, I'm Rick Furey," Colin beams as he sits back in his chair. "Relax, pal. Relax."



In seventh grade, Nick Patterson watched Mrs. Wedge cry.

He can never remember all the details of how they broke down his English teacher—images and motives disappear like chalk lines in the rain—but he remembers the guilt in his eyes and shoulders and across his chest as Mark Gunnerson and Danny Heritage led the coup. Mrs. Wedge had a wide expressive face and as she cried it somehow narrowed, the emotions caving in on her inner self. The boys laughed after she left the room.

Mrs. Wedge was attractive, and that's what makes it all seem

so weird: You'd think the boys would like her. Also a girls gym teacher, Mrs. Wedge often wore slacks and a black Danskin top and Nick saw the outlines of her aureoles, at least that's what he remembers. And twenty minutes a day, she read books to the class, including S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and, when a church burned and the greasers tried to escape from a collapsing roof and splintering wood, a sudden sadness filled her. Reading was the only time she appeared completely at ease. Hinton's words transformed her.

Nick was surprised to find out years later that S. E. was a girl. She knew boys so well, and Mrs. Wedge's voice, reading Hinton's prose, was unlike any voice he had heard in South Dakota. It didn't sound Scandinavian or have that drawn-out lilt. Her cadence was more clipped and direct. And she had a high, intellectual forehead, window-framed glasses, and light brown hair with some blonde underneath. And her smile—it started at the eyes and moved outward and always made Nick smile. She liked him, and said that he had a great sense of humor, especially when he did forensics, and a series of impressions like Bruce Lee reading Poe's "The Raven" with accompanying yells, punches, and kicks, John Wayne singing "Be-Bop-a-Lu-La," and Jimmy Stewart trying to explain to a four-year-old where babies come from.

It's episode nineteen of *Hard Rain*, and Nick drinks iced tea between takes. He and Furey have tracked an atomic device to a small airport in the Arizona desert. Some of the exteriors were photographed in Bronson Canyon, where in the 1930s Mascot Studios filmed many B-westerns around the area's caves and dry sand and Universal's Flash Gordon fought on Mars. The sky in Bronson Canyon looks bleached like a bone and the hot sun hangs high like a contact lens shimmering in colored cleaning solution. Nick prefers the controlled temperature of the soundstage, and he's glad that the art crew can make number twelve pass for a desert. Colin, the sleeves of his commando sweater pushed up above the elbows, is playing with his prop gun, slapping a clip in and out, as arc lights glint along the metal

frames of his sunglasses. The actors get directions from Leonard Hall, a twenty-five-year-old wunderkind. The writers, the Bukay brothers from Modesto, in collaboration with Hall, develop the script as they shoot, and Nick has no idea what's happening next. "Keeps everyone on edge, fresh," says Hall. "This series is about expecting the unexpected, and we want that from our actors, too."

Great way to justify chaos, Nick figures, but he's not mad about it—he doesn't have time to be. Instead, his mental energy for the past two weeks has been filled with blurred images, montages of memory: Mrs. Wedge. Somewhere between the third and fourth time she cried in front of the class, Nick decided to help. He wasn't very strong—he never sat in an aisle by a window out of fear that he'd be asked to open one and wouldn't be able to—but he was going to speak up. Danny and Mark were slouched carelessly in the hall by a fountain. It was lunch hour, and they were talking about *Playboy* and wanting to bury it in the "field" of a Playmate from Bakersfield. They were always gross, but Nick walked over, his head down, hands heavy at his sides with his binder and lunch box. "Hey, guys. Why don't you take it easy on Mrs. Wedge? She's okay. She's never—"

Mark shoved Nick hard into the lockers. Mark's dad was a cop, so he must have taught him if you're going to push someone around make it matter, and Nick's chest and the front edges of his collarbones were suddenly sore, his courage perforated. "Why don't you mind your own fucking business, huh?" Mark's eyes carried a twist of anger and guilt and they looked like the bottom of a dirty pond. Danny, his hair tightly curled, and his upper lip jagged with a cold sore in the corner, leaned over Mark's shoulder and watched Nick stagger to find his nerve.

"What did you say, faggot?" Danny asked, his words tangled up, sparking like fallen telephone lines.

"Nothing."

"Hey check out his lunch." Danny grabbed Nick's *Emergency* lunch pail and held it aloft. "The fag carries a lunch box and a thermos."



"A thermos," echoed Mark, sweat dotting the upper edges of his lip.

"Yeah. That's total faggy. It's downright salt, man, salt."

"Loserville," Mark said.

Everyone in seventh grade carried sack lunches but Nick's Mom still packed him hot chocolate or hot dogs in a thermos. Nick didn't want to change. While his friends spent money on .45 records and clothes—platform shoes and wide bell bottoms—Nick still enjoyed Strat-O-Matic baseball and playing with his Airfix army men across his green bedspread.

"Come on, give me back my thermos," he pleaded, and then Mark pushed harder, sending Nick sprawling. As he hit the floor, edges of notepaper fell from his black binder and his elbows hurt, and Danny, arms shaking like he were King Kong, jumped up and down on Nick's thermos. The plastic yielded and the thermos's fragile center cracked.

In the early morning, before Susan would drive him to Fox studios and Nick would get the day's call sheet—two pages, twelve or so hours of work—he rubbed up against his wife in bed, his insistent hard-on pleading against her left thigh.

"Nick, what are you doing?"

Susan's face was down in a heavy pillow, her auburn hair spread in adjacent directions, as his hand reached under her teddy for a breast.

"I've got to get to work—and it's been a while—and it's the morning—and—"

"And you're horny."

"Well, yeah."

She rolled over and smiled at him. She too was an actress, once, but now worked as a publicist for Paramount. "Maybe tonight. I don't feel like it right now. But the snuggle was nice," she said.

"Sure." The headboard behind her was light brown, contemporary with mission accents, and the small slits along the top looked vaguely Asian. Nick was staring into the slits. He

exhaled lightly. "But Jessica will be up late. It'll be impossible to make love." Jessica was their seventeen-year-old daughter. She would be a senior in the fall and she often had friends over, boys and girls eating Doritos and watching 1 A.M. reruns of the *Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone*. He sat up.

"We'll just have to be quiet."

Nick smiled, his erection ebbed. "I think they're writing me out of the show."

"Well, who has ever come back from radiation poisoning? Nobody that I know. This is kind of a no brainer, Nick." Dimples formed at the edge of his wife's lips.

"Well quit being so practical, huh?"

*Hard Rain* was in the top twenty and Nick would get residuals once the show went into syndication, so it wasn't about the money. They had already done close to sixty episodes, so he'd make a fair chunk. He just loved the show, and the crew, and working with Colin even though he was a pain in the ass and found ways—little bits of business—to steal a scene. "It's the first thing in a long time that I've done that makes me cool to Jessica and her friends. They watch the show."

"They watch the show for Rick Furey. Colin is cute, or 'hot,' as the kids today say. Face it."

"Yeah." Colin was having an affair with Midge Reynolds, who played Lauren, a double agent. Colin had only been married seven months.

Susan patted Nick's wrist. "But you're cute to me."

"Thanks." He shrugged, drinking the water he left last night at the side of the bed. "I keep thinking about Mrs. Wedge. It's weird."

"Your seventh-grade English teacher? The one that melted down in class and left the school after one year?" Susan was now sitting up, her teddy scooped low around her neck. She had a thin crease along her forehead and between her eyes that seemed more pronounced after just waking up.

"Yeah." He placed the glass back on the end table. "We're filming and I see her. Between takes she's on my mind. I—"

"Maybe she's your muse."

"No." He patted his wife's thigh. "You are."

She disagreed, saying how she was getting heavy in the legs and her boobs were sagging. "Mrs. Wedge had great boobs. You told me."

"I like your saggy boobs."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment."

He smiled. "I better get to work."

She scooted toward him on the bed, her feet hanging over the side. "Nick, there will be other roles—Steve Soderbergh wants you to read for a new film he's working on."

"Yeah. And the script's good, too. Damn good."

"Hey—"

"Yeah?"

She rolled back on the bed, the pillow propped behind her neck. "Lock the door. I've changed my mind."

Several days after Mark Gunnerson and Danny Heritage beat the shit out of Nick's thermos and roughed him up in the hall, Mrs. Wedge asked Nick to stay after class. English was the period before lunch. She sat behind a desk piled high with red and blue folders and a purse, with two large rings, anchored upright in front of her. It was a large purse. It looked like you could fit a typewriter in it. Mrs. Wedge touched her lips and then adjusted her glasses. "I heard that Danny and Mark gave you a hard time."

"Yeah." Nick felt puzzled. How did she know?

"Mr. Halket told me."

The history teacher. "I went to the library to check out the *Outsiders* but—"

"Sit down."

"—it was gone. So I'm reading Perry Mason and *In the Heat of the Night*."

Behind Mrs. Wedge hung faded portraits of the Presidents and inventors like Charles Richard Drew who did something or other with plasma and bloodbanks. Nick tried to read the fine print under Dr. Drew's name.

She nodded and opened her purse. Nick tried not to look—the purse seemed such a private thing—but he hoped he wouldn't glimpse a deck of cigarettes. He didn't want Mrs. Wedge to die from cancer or anything. There were no cigarettes, but he saw some Kleenex and wondered if she had been crying in other classes, too. "I just wanted to thank you, and let you know I'm okay. I'm a little emotional, and I let some of the kids get to me when they're misbehaving."

"Do you like teaching?"

"Yes, I do."

Nick nodded. He wanted to tell her that he liked having her as a teacher.

"You know. I just have a hard time with disappointment. When I was a kid if my dad said we were going to do something and then we didn't, I cried."

"You mean like going to an amusement park?"

"Yes. Coney Island? A promise broken like that. Rides. Tilt-a-Whirl, Bumper Cars, Ferris wheels. That would be hard to overcome." She reached into her purse for her lunch, a brown bag. She peeled back the plastic wrap on a sandwich. The crusts were all shaved off. She offered Nick half. "Here."

"Thanks." He slid his chair back from the desk a little. He didn't want to get any crumbs on it.

She pulled out a thermos. "This is coffee, so I don't know if I can offer you any."

"I like it."

"Well, a little bit of coffee won't hurt." She gave him the top cup to the thermos to drink out of while she poured coffee into a black mug that sported a gold treble clef. "One time, Dad promised to take us to this posh restaurant near the waterfront. I'm from New Jersey. Originally. Anyway, I had my menu all planned, Zuppa Toscana soup, spinach ravioli, and even that sparkling water from Italy, San Pellegrino, I think, and we drove by and there was a huge line and Dad was hungry and didn't want to wait." She wiped specks of crumbs from the corners of her lips. "So we went to a fish and chips place and I cried, thinking

about what I had looked forward to." She shrugged.

The coffee had a dark flavor. "Do you get sad when you read books too, like when the characters do things you don't want them to?"

"Oh, yes. Many novels never end right or they take a wrong turn half way through. That makes me sad. And I cry when characters die, especially those I love."

"Like Johnny in the *Outsiders*."

"Like Johnny."



Seven years after Mrs. Wedge left Mitchell Junior High, Nick was in a college roots rock band, doing a blend of Johnny Cash and rockabilly blues. Nick played rhythm guitar and sang occasionally. One of his songs, "Pony Boy's Blues," was a tribute to his seventh-grade English teacher. He mentioned her by name to the smoke-filled hall on the campus of South Dakota State, mumbling something about how some people were gold and some weren't and she was, and as he sang, "Johnny killed Bob Sheldon he was one mad soc / then he rescued kids from a burning church / died broken back he was *Gone with the Wind* / 'Why should I live,' was all that he said," he imagined Mrs. Wedge, older, standing against a back wall. Her face was longer, the fleshy part of her upper cheeks thinned, her mouth still a firm but sensuous line, and she was reluctantly smiling, as if she were afraid of upstaging the singer. The song slowed to a mild military rat-a-tat, and Nick's shoulders hurt and his eyes were cindered with sadness.

"Okay, Nick, are we ready?" asks Leonard Hall. He has a full face and small dark eyes. "You got your lollipop?"

"Got it." Swados loves to chew on lollipops, especially the fuzzy stick when the shards of candy grit are worn down. He breathes deeply. Nick just read the scene, and studied the lines. There is no antidote. He dies.

The director goes over it again. Rick Furey knocks out some communist pilots, the Dravec brothers by way of Yugoslavia, commandeers their plane, and, unable to defuse the bomb, decides to save Los Angeles by crashing the Cessna into a barren stretch of Arizona's desert. But Chris Swados has also stolen his way onto the plane, and he confronts Rick, encourages him to jump free, while he sacrifices himself. After all "radiation is a one way ticket, a final taxi," Swados says.

"It's a great moment. It's going to make you famous." The director rushes his words, his breath full of Polo mints. He shakes Nick's shoulders. His hair never looks combed.

Nick is disappointed. He's never asked for more money, never showed up late, and his colleagues consider him an actor's actor—at least that's what he read in last year's *TV Guide*. Colin Dewars by contrast is difficult. He shows up late, drinks too heavily, and is moody when falling in and out of love with various starlets. Of course Colin's the star—he was on the cover of *TV Guide*, arms folded across his chest, Rolex watch glinting with privilege, and Colin's blue eyes, embued with menace and charm, stared confidently into the camera. He was also buffed, having shed ten pounds off his first-year physique. Colin Dewars: sex bomb.

Colin gently slaps Nick on the shoulder. "Hey, sorry partner. I really thought I was going to find that antidote."

"Yeah." Nick shakes Colin's hand. He's not sure why—he just does it.

"Come on. Let's kick ass on this scene, now. This is going to be your moment." Colin points at him and then hugs him roughly around the neck. Nick can feel the ridged edges of the Rolex, and he tries to suppress a laugh along the inside of his upper lip. Furey always punctuates orders with a "now." "I need it, now." "Get it, now." "I'm going in, now." And here's Dewars indiscriminately throwing a Fureyesque "now" into this intimate moment. *Let's kick ass, now*. Characters, actors, they meld and mix, taking on each other's personalities and personas. Nick does the same thing with Swados.

Colin promises to let the point of view, the sympathy factor,

be all Nick's. "No Shatner moments here, pal. I'll be understated. This'll probably win you a fuckin' Emmy."

Nick smiles. He was nominated nine years ago in a supporting role for playing Henry Morgenthau in a biographical mini-series on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and America's culpability during the Holocaust. Colin is a two-time Golden-Globe winner for best actor in a dramatic series for *Hard Rain*.

The director, with dust veiled over the edges of his riding boots, leads them to their places, a mocked-up, cutaway interior of a Cessna on soundstage twelve. Hall wants to do a lot of hand-held with the steadicam for this sequence. Usually he uses a telephoto lens and sits far away from the actors, like in another county, but today he's going to be up close. At first the distance and Hall's telephoto bothered Nick—it lacked intimacy—but today, Hall seems too intimate. "It's so intense. The scene demands it." He knocks back two more Polo mints. Hall is from Chicago but he spent three years at Oxford, and has a penchant for all things English, including reading P. G. Wodehouse, eating scones and clotted cream on the set, and wearing jodhpurs as if he were about to dash off to an equestrian meet.

Nick breathes deep. The soundstage lights seem extra heavy today, sending out white bright arc glares. This is going to be Nick's last scene for the series. He checks the marks and knows where to get on what line. The last scene. "Rock on, dominate," he says, to say something. Some of the tech people, key grips and gaffers, nod at Nick, knowing this is it. Paul Bass, a director's assistant, fresh out of film school, smiles feebly from the other side of the actor's marks and gives Nick a thumbs up.



It's hard leaving a character behind. That's what Nick told Susan a few days ago, as they sipped ice tea on their back patio and watched the Saturday sun dip behind the Pacific. It was an odd day, to have free from work. It wasn't a religious Sabbath thing—Dewars just insisted on surfing Big Sur and so the set



was shut down.

"I mean, I've lived with Swados for three years now. I know him. I like him."

Susan adjusted her sunglasses, the red of the sky catching in the lenses. "I like him, too." She patted Nick's hand and recalled how much the character grew in sixty plus episodes from a stuffy by-the-book suit to a compassionate man. Susan's favorite episode was three weeks ago, when Swados had a warm reconciliation with his son. The son at first was standoffish, "you can't be out of my life for fourteen years and suddenly be back in—it just doesn't work like that," but Swados pleaded softly with his eyebrows. "You do that so well. That eyebrow thing."

Nick demonstrated, bending his head to the left, and arching the eyebrows down like forlorn cats draped on a backyard fence, and then he shrugged—his tea, caramel swirls in a glass.

"But I knew that you knew that Swados wasn't coming back. That was a scene of a dying man. The emotion in the eyes, the desperation—" She tugged at her white shorts and rubbed the back of her legs, which were sore from sitting on a lawn chair.

"They haven't told me anything. The writers are keeping it all hush-hush. The final four episodes. No leaks. Surprise, surprise." He placed quote marks around the last four words.

"Well, your character knows the truth, if you don't."

"Yeah. Swados has kind of suspected it." Nick chuckled over how often Chris Swados enters his consciousness. "You know how he likes lollipops? I don't even eat lollipops, but twice now, at Safeway, I've bought lollipops and eaten them on the way home. Me, Nick Patterson. And I even use some of Swados's expressions like 'rock on, dominate.' I just throw it into conversations, mindlessly."

"At least you haven't become a Republican like he is."

"No. That's true. But there's all these little things that were a part of Swados that are now a part of me. They both like their ties loose around their necks with one shirt button undone." Swados is also a Lakers fan and Nick has become one, too. He listed the team's field-goal percentage from last night and the

scoring averages of the starting five. And Swados hates bottled water. He won't pay for water. He drinks strictly from the fountain or tap. "You notice I haven't been buying Evian lately?"

"No wonder you're dying from radiation poisoning," Susan said.



It wasn't a smart decision, but Nick felt he had no choice. After Mrs. Wedge cried twice more in front of Gunnerson and company, and Principal Leland had to come in and give them all a talking to, and Danny snickered into the dingy shoulder of his football jersey, Nick took action.

He stole Mrs. Wedge's purse.

She had left it on the desk after English class to run some ditto copies and Nick cut back from lunch and took it. He dashed down the halls, and then hid it in his locker and told Abigail Smith, the best girl in English who wrote the longest compositions, and she told somebody or other, and Nick was called out from math class and asked by the principal to open his locker. They found the purse. His locker smelled of chewing gum and wet gym towels.

His parents were called in and he was suspended for three days.

When he came back to school he was called the "purse perv." Mark started it, and it lasted for several weeks. "Hey, purse perv, you got any tampons on you?" They also called him "Tampon Boy."

Truth was, Nick didn't intend to look in the purse, but he wanted to make sure there weren't any cigarettes in it, and as he peered between the rings, he thought of Mrs. Wedge's face, the wide, expansive eyes, and the breasts behind the Danksin, and he kind of got excited by it all. He found a box of assorted Chiclets, Kleenex, lipstick, keys, French perfume, a pocketbook, a check book, two tens (which he didn't take), and two tampons. He confessed to all that in the principal's office. He didn't confess to

gifting two of the Chiclets, a red and a white one.

"What possessed you to do this?" Principal Leland asked, dumbfounded, his hands folded in front of him. He was bald with two half bowls of black hair on either side of his head.

Nick shrugged and Mrs. Wedge sat far to the side of him. She wore black slacks, and a Danksin top, covered with a thin-crocheted jacket. Nick's parents looked at their shoes. Nick didn't tell them, but he wanted to divert attention from Mrs. Wedge to himself—if he looked weird, maybe they'd just quit picking on her. The plan worked and for six weeks, Nick took a lot of ridicule—shovings in gym lockers, two more broken thermoses, a black eye, a split lip—and then during the last week of seventh grade, after gym, in the showers, Danny Heritage popped an excruciating boner and all that negative energy and anger was displaced to him and Danny would be marked as strange throughout the rest of his public-school life.

"Well what have you got to say for yourself? Are you sorry?"

Nick nodded.

"I believe he doesn't know why he did it," Mrs. Wedge said. She looked over at Nick and he wanted to tell her why, but it wouldn't be the total truth. He also stole the purse because he had wanted to, and why he wanted to was a little unknown. But he could see forgiveness in her eyes, a murky understanding. "He, we, like *The Outsiders*, and students develop crushes on their teachers."

"But a purse," Nick's father said, his voice angry and exasperated.

"A purse is a very feminine thing," Mrs. Wedge said.

Nick felt his face flush and ears tingling. He looked at his hands. He really did like Mrs. Wedge, more than just a teacher, and he loved her even years later, and he never could tell Susan about the purse and the Chiclets.

"It's perfectly natural."

Principal Leland didn't agree. He pointed to the filing cabinets behind him. They were full of the records of the misbehaved. Now Nick would join those ranks. The Principal hoped Nick's

escapades weren't going to continue. "Three days. Suspension." He gestured back at the black cabinets behind him.

"Nothing was taken from my purse," Mrs. Wedge said in Nick's defense. "And I'm not angry, Nick. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm angry," said Nick's father, who worked for the DOT and studied road formations and gradations, and made sure that the minimum amount of illumens was being emitted by various highway lights. His life was ordered, rational, and he didn't have time for anything abnormal, and a boy stealing a woman's purse to get a charge, that was chaotic. "I didn't raise no son to go looking in women's purses."

"It's just a healthy curiosity," Mrs. Wedge said. "Seventh grade boys are curious."

"Curious," Nick's father smacked Nick on the back of the head. "That's what curious will get you. You understand me?"

Nick said nothing.

"Do you understand me?"

"Will you please, please, please just stop," Mrs. Wedge said in a sad, quiet voice "Just stop."



Nick's final scene took twelve hours and twenty-seven minutes. It was two pages long and Hall ran it once with a point of view on Swados, and then did a turn around with a point of view on Furey. The series often used multiple split screens for dramatic impact, and Hall insisted on tons of coverage shots and a whole lot of hot-head steadicam work. But twelve hours felt like only two hours. Damn, it was fast. And Nick felt alive the whole time.

He now sips Evian and the director and the rest are giving him a moment by himself, by his chair. The special effects fellas will make the background look like a nuclear dawn and the crash will be spectacular. The final scene was quick—hell, three years on *Hard Rain* felt quick, and Jessica's going to be thinking about

colleges in the fall, USC-Davis probably, and he'll be watching her films some day. She doesn't want to act, she wants to write, and the SF material she's shown him is really good. It relies less on pyrotechnics and action and more on relationships and the border crossings between human beings and machines. A question of souls.

The bottle's finished and he slinks back in his chair. His eyes are heavy and he wants to cry, but he doesn't want anyone to see him. Twenty minutes pass, and some of the crew, having observed his privacy, now approach Nick, including Paul asking for an autograph. Nick obliges, smiling. "So it looked pretty good?"

"Awesome." Paul's hair is parted in a central wave, and the upper parts of his cheeks are hard and bright, and then he tells Nick the highlight for him.

"Rick Furey, sweat splotching his forehead and hands, heads the Cessna to the desert sands, and then you confront him, and you're right in his face, bam!, and the dialogue is so Chris Swados. Something like, 'You've had a hard-on to die since your wife was killed. Well, this doesn't make you a hero. Living for your daughter does. Think of her.' Great beat change there. Rick's face registers what you're saying and then you give the best line of the show, 'Now get out of that damn chair.' I love that line. 'Get out of that damn chair.' Awesome."

The rest of crew around Nick agrees, nodding. Swados is the ultimate hero, putting Furey's family first. "What about the lollipop?" Nick asks.

"Oh, classic. Totally," says Paul.

After reluctantly sliding out of the chair, and strapping on a parachute, Rick punched Swados twice in the right shoulder and then, in a grand gesture of friendship, took the lollipop from Chris's mouth, wiped it on his own shirt and placed it in his pocket, a memento, his eyes brimming over. "That wasn't too much?" It wasn't in the script. It was purely Colin Dewar's invention.

"No. It was touching. I mean, it humanized you even more," Paul says.

Nick isn't so sure. Colin probably just won himself the goddamn Emmy. It was a brilliant moment, but it seemed to pull focus, making a Chris Swados scene into a Rick Furey one.

"Well thanks everyone." He opens another Evian. "I think I just want to be alone for awhile."

"Sure." Paul nods, his gray eyes dim with emotion, and a few pat Nick's shoulders and then move off the set. The grips shut down the lights and unplug cables and cords. The crew will be back on the soundstage tomorrow. Maybe Nick will drop in and say hello. He sits there for awhile. Mrs. Wedge left the school at the end of the year. For a long time, Nick feared the purse incident pushed her away, and he carried heavy guilt through eighth and ninth grade, but in his twenties he knew or felt that she really knew why he did it—a combination of sexual curiosity and genuine compassion for a woman that he really cared about. Maybe she eventually got a gig teaching nerdy gifted kids, the kind that could really appreciate her. Aw, hell, one can hope.

In forty-five minutes, Susan and Jessica arrive by the studio parking lot in their family Cressida. Nick doesn't say much as he approaches the car, but he can tell that Susan can tell by his shoulders and slow amble that Chris Swados has died. Jessica climbs out of the front seat. "Dad, you can sit in front," she says. She knows too.

"No sweetheart. That's okay." He sits in back and smiles awkwardly. The way his face feels—the jaw hanging loose, juttred, the lips slightly parted—makes him think he looks like an embarrassed Henry Fonda in the *Lady Eve* or *The Male Animal*.

"So—" Susan's hands clutch the top of the steering wheel. "It's eight and we haven't eaten supper. Where would you like to go?" She smells of strawberries.

Nick shrugs. He momentarily thinks about Zuppa Toscana soup, but opts for hamburgers.

"That's not good for your ticker, Daddy."

"Okay. How about low-carb pizza? Half the fat, half the cheese?"

"Pesto pizza, your favorite," Susan says. "We can afford the fat

and the cheese.”

“Pesto pizza, then.” Nick smiles feebly and looks out the window, envisioning soundstage twelve and a row of klieg lights shut down, traces of boom-tire tracks silted in the makeshift sand, and the remnants of a heavy airplane interior being carted away.



DREAM WALKER

John Smelcer

Silas Carries-a-Dream was spinning  
the hoop of his young dreams with a stick  
along a crumbling edge of highway—  
heatwaves melting the uncertain road ahead.

It was a good dream as dreams go.

He was rolling his dreams

rolling his dreams

toward a dark and crumbling horizon.

## NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV BUYS SHEETS

Nancy Thompson

Though one were to live a hundred years without  
seeing the rise and passing of things, the life of a single  
day is better if one sees the rise and passing of things.

*Dhammapada (113)*

Still unable to bear the thought  
of king or queen,  
he chooses full,  
dreams of bigger;

contemplates Egyptian  
cotton, finally lifts  
a lock-step knit.  
He checks the label—

Made in China—  
snubs the red,  
selects an inexplicable check.

Just for a moment, he wishes  
he could have it all back—  
Sputnik, the Berlin Wall,  
all the glorious subterfuge . . .

Maybe, he thinks,  
he should buy  
a comforter, too.  
He fingers the fabric.  
Too soft, he reckons,  
sliding pillowcases  
toward the register. Too soft.

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
HONORABLE MENTION

THE PAYING GUEST

Shivani Manghani

The first room you rented was on Marine Drive, in a flat that belonged to a new divorcée. She spent her days in a marble-floored bedroom, shouting at her ex-husband on the telephone. Her children looked at you like an intruder when you first occupied the front room, which was their old playroom. But you left your door open and asked their names. You let the boy sift through his old toys that were stored in boxes in your closet. The girl was heavy, with dark circles like half moons under her metal-colored eyes. The mother was always forcing her on a diet, scolding her when she reached for the extra *chapati* or spoonful of sugar in her cold coffee. One afternoon you came home in a tight dress and the mother was pinching the daughter's cheeks. —Don't you want to look like her? The mother had demanded hysterically, pointing at you, throwing the biscuit tin on the ground. —*Don't you? Don't you?*

The children cried when you left after only two months. They hugged your knees when you finished packing up suitcases that did not include your perfume, your most expensive, creamiest lipsticks, your laciest bras. An opal necklace given to you by your father when you turned 16. You didn't tell them their mother had stolen these things from you, that you had to leave quickly because you'd been in her bedroom while the cook was sleeping to steal everything back. You stole some things of hers too— French body lotion, rose scented bath cubes, a lavender camisole with pearl buttons, and wrapped everything together in a shoebox that you handed to the girl before you left.

—Keep this under your bed, you said, like you were giving her treasures, the answers to her questions. —Make sure no one ever takes anything from you.



The next room you rented was on Altamount Road, and the day you came to see it Mrs. Dutta studied you like a circus animal or a parcel from a mysterious sender. You made it a point to dress flamboyantly, in printed pants that skimmed your knees and a wide necked, tight fitting blouse. You wore long, shiny earrings and propped sunglasses on your head. You told her you were from Texas, the most American of all states, and that you were an English tutor. Your students were spread all over Bombay. —I will be gone a lot, you declared.

Mrs. Dutta said her son also lived in America, said “San Jose” like it was Paris. But he would be living here for a few months, through July. —I wish he would stay longer, Mrs. Dutta confessed. He worked in the room at the back of the house, where he was making a documentary, she said.

—On what? You were determined to seem friendly.

—Me.

You smiled. You said you loved her movies though you hadn’t seen any of them. You asked your aunt the night before about Mrs. Dutta, found out she was an industry favorite in the 60’s. She married a director who swindled away *crores* of her rupees and slept with countless leading ladies before dying. You rattled off a few movie titles your aunt had mentioned. —*Jewel in the Crown* was my absolute favorite, you said. She led you to the mantle, held up each little picture frame capturing her on the arms of politicians, actors you faintly recognized from your parents’ old videotapes. —Here’s Roshan, she said, my son, pointing to a light-skinned teenager in a hooded sweatshirt. It was the only photograph in color. —He’s much older now, she said, *almost forty*. She lowered her voice like it was a secret. In the photograph Roshan’s eyes darted sideways, deep set and half open. You liked his face, his overconfident smile.

After Mrs. Dutta went over the rent—200 dollars, and the rules—no boys, pay for your own laundry soap, tip the sweeper—she asked if you had relatives in the city. You didn’t want to tell

her about your trusty doctor aunt, your old uncles in the suburbs, your newly married cousins. Instead, you shook your head as the servant set down a tarnished silver tray with two teacups. Without asking, Mrs. Dutta dropped one sugar cube into your cup of milky tea. You couldn't tell her why you were spending so much to be alone.



You didn't come here to teach children to read, to vaccinate villages, help women leave their husbands or conduct archeological digs. You like train rides through the countryside, rivers the color of pea soup. Mostly you hope the men here will like you—you couldn't meet any in your Aunt's house, where you were expected to be home by 8 and in bed by 11. The divorced woman on Marine Drive wouldn't even give you your own key. She asked the watchmen what time you came and went, if any boys came to see you. You want to find someone to drive you through the parts of the city you're still afraid of, to make you eat things that normally, you wouldn't touch.



You move into Mrs. Dutta's house on Holi. You've watched the celebration before, played in college, at home, with your cousins on past trips when you were small and scared of India. Growing up in El Paso, your parents gave your nanny instructions on how to handle holidays when they were not present, which was often. For your first Holi, your nanny invited the neighborhood kids, freckled and loud, and brought her own daughter with her on a dusty bus from their *colonia* in Juárez to teach you and everyone else rich Hindu tradition. Your father had sent for color packets from India, and as you all threw handfuls of powder into the air, you heard someone say, *I had no idea Navajos were so much fun!*

This Holi, you decide, should feel like the first time. You step

into the living room where Roshan and his mother sit reading the paper. He lowers it, brings it back to his nose. The white hair swept behind his ears reminds you of waves. You ask why there's a tent set up outside the building, why boys are filling balloons with colored water. You do your best to look amazed, as if you are really learning, as Mrs. Dutta details the arrival of spring, the death of a demoness.

—You should wear white, Roshan instructs, with no emotion. You are glad to change into something transparent. Undressing, you think of Roshan's reddish lips, his wolfish, gray stubble.

Walking to the courtyard you stay a few steps ahead of Roshan so he can admire the soft slope of your hips. He warns you—the color will stay on your skin, stain your scalp for days, no matter how many showers. —Don't let it get in your eyes, he says, very serious. You bite your lip as a young boy thrusts packets of color in your hands.

The courtyard extends from the lobby all the way to the street, and under an orange tent women shuttle trays of food down a long table. Roshan keeps a safe distance from a group of boys attacking some girls in white *kurtas* with water balloons, watching bright pink explode across their bodies like juice from crushed pomegranates. You decide you don't need caring for and leave his side. A boy aims his water gun at you and you don't move away. Soaked, you wait under the tent with old men who sit on lawn chairs, their clothes clean and dry. The drums start and you expect Roshan to suddenly run to you, smear you with fistfuls of color. Instead he gently sprinkles your hair with orange. It trickles down your face like dust and stings your eyes. He dips into the purple and like a painter deciding his final stroke, brushes your cheeks. You can see around his mouth those deep lines your mother has, pulling her face down. You open your first packet and hold out a palm of royal blue. Roshan shakes you by the shoulders, and it spills on the grass, now so wet the powder forms a small, frothy pool at his feet.

—This stuff is pretty dangerous, Roshan says, this time more playful. He wiggles his toes in the grass. Turquoise seeps between

them. —There's mercury in it. He tugs at the bottom of your shirt. He can see your nipples, the dark dip of your belly button. Streams of water cascade from a young boy's hose. When Rohsan leads you up the stairs you think he's taking you back to the apartment, but you climb past the fifth floor until you're on the roof. You squint, bend under a drooping clothesline, shoo away mynahs. You gaze down onto other people's terraces. Some of them have swings, herb gardens. Roshan presses on your shoulders, signaling you to sit on a bench. The chunks of color embedded in the backs of your knees, your fingernails, the inside of your ears feel suddenly hot.

—I have someone else, he says flatly.

—A wife? You ask. He nods. You wonder why there are no signs that she exists.

—She's not here, he says. He wants you to know that he's left her in America, like a winter coat he has no use for.

—It's okay, you say, because no one has ever looked at you like this. Like they needed you.

Peeling off your heavy clothes, Roshan tells you how lost you looked that afternoon, holding bags of powdered color, afraid to throw it, as if you could hurt someone. You look over his shoulder, at the buildings streaked with black stains. Pots clang, a bicycle bell rings, someone must watch through the windows.

—I like how you felt when I smothered you, he says, lifting you by the hips so your skin doesn't touch the bench. You are shocked by your lightness.



The first days are the hardest. You wonder about his wife—you picture her as someone who works with clay, who wears ponytails and chunky turquoise. The type that likes boys from third world countries. You ask her name.

—Marian, Roshan whispers, like she's right around the corner. The way he says it makes her sound Persian, which you hope she is not. They are the most beautiful women on earth. In bed is



not the best time to imagine her. You pull the covers up to your nose so your voice muffles.

—Is she white?

He nods. —Do you have to say white? It sounds so bad when you say it like that. She's Irish.

You apologize, your body loosening. You would feel worse stealing an Indian woman's husband. Maybe you wouldn't even try, you tell yourself, you're better than that.

In the morning you make sure to leave the house with a wide shoulder bag and a serious, rushed look on your face. You have students to see, you lie, overdressing in crisp cottons that will melt and soil the moment you step outside. You hurry down the road until you can't see the building or the curious watchmen, and hail an air-conditioned cab. You hop from one expensive hotel to the next, drinking cappuccino and writing interesting observations in a leather diary.

You aren't beautiful, just different. Your hair is cut shorter than most girls on the street, your aunt says you walk with large steps and swinging arms; that you always look angry. You get whistles from cart owners and shopkeepers, occasionally a college boy who you tower over in platform sandals. Though it is difficult, you step daintily over corncobs and cow dung. You wander through districts you've read are historic and especially vibrant without pretending to have a purpose, buying chocolate bars to hide in your new drawers.

In other ways, the first days are the easiest. It is fun to dart Mrs. Dutta, to wait for her to take naps or leave the house to play bridge. Roshan bursts into your room where you appear to be reading or writing postcards but really, you're just waiting for him to invite you to his side. You've reapplied your gloss at least three times and are wearing a fresh blouse and floss-like panties. You have to come across as though you've been pretty all day.

He leads you into his room, which is twice the size of yours with slanted ceilings. It's in the back of his mother's so he puts his hands over your mouth. You make your body mummy-like, and the bed and floors squeak softly. Afterwards you are entwined,

curved like letters. He stares at you incredulously.

—What are you doing here? You're a college graduate, you explain, you have an excuse to be aimless.

—Marian wants a baby, Roshan says and covers his face with his hands, like he wants to hide. You don't even have pets.

In San José, Roshan makes wedding videos. He whips out a peach toned business card, this proof of his other life, and tucks it back into a drawer because he doesn't want you to see his phone number.

—That's funny you say, reassuring yourself that you are not the type to call ex-lovers. He looks hurt. —No, I mean, I just never met anyone who actually does that. You squeeze his arm. —I think it's wonderful.

Roshan wanted to be a filmmaker but his mom wouldn't let him. Still, he dreams of directing a love story between a maid and a high roller set in a Las Vegas hotel built like the Taj Mahal.

—That's a great idea, you say, though you hate Vegas. You kiss him sweetly and make sure he is breathing deeply before sneaking back down the hall. Under your carefully rumpled sheets, your hands linger between your thighs, your face burns from his cheeks.

Though you don't shower before breakfast, at the table you coo thanks yous and pleases to Mrs. Dutta and refuse the offer of a second fried egg. *One is really enough*, you lie. You don't ask for a second cup of tea and carry your dishes to the sink. You make your bed and offer to help with dusting when the maid comes. They both laugh, *Of course not! Silly!*

You want to appear independent, a hard worker. Every now and then, Mrs. Dutta checks on you. She brings coffee to your room in the afternoon when you pretend to plan lessons. Narayan, the servant, usually brings the coffee, but maybe Mrs. Dutta wants to show you that she is a hard worker too.



One night Roshan insists you sleep together in his king sized bed. —Are you sure? You ask, several times. —I mean, are you

*sure* sure? He rolls his eyes and tugs at your bra strap.

—Movie stars are used to this kind of thing. You assume he means adultery. You have never met a family like this. Yours has neatly arranged marriages, consults astrological charts before naming children.

You squirm when his mother blasts Pachelbel's Canon in D, just as he casually ties your arms to the bedposts with his undershirts. You wiggle your pelvis side to side, open your mouth to protest. Roshan keeps a finger to his lips.

When you run into Mrs. Dutta in the hall, you're wearing her son's t-shirt and white drawstring pajama pants. You avert your eyes while she gives you a quick once over. —Morning! She shouts, patting your back like you've just won a race. She starts humming, maybe a song from one of her movies where she played the heroine. She's still singing when you hurry to your room to shower. You keep your face under the hot, trickling water. Putting one hand on the wall, you wish there was a window to open, to breathe.

You and Roshan eat breakfast alone. The two of you wake up late, boldly lazy. When you hear Mrs. Dutta's keys jingling as she shuffles to the bathroom, the clatter of dishes being washed—you walk hand in hand to the dining room.

The house is quiet. The servants are tucked safely in the kitchen, frying eggs and boiling milk for their own morning meals. You remove clean plates from the cabinets and wipe down place mats. Roshan toasts slices of fresh bread. You're still a little nervous, reaching into the fridge for the orange marmalade. At any moment you expect someone to barge in and call you *kutti*! You can see the servants eyeing you like a thief. When you mention this to Roshan he calls you paranoid, a *nukrawalli*.

When the table is set you eat the leftover halves of the omelets Mrs. Dutta keeps covered with an upside downed plate. You poke at the soggy cantaloupes, the brown edged bananas she didn't finish. Mrs. Dutta likes you. —She thinks Indians are better, Roshan says. You had hoped it would be more complex. You hoped she would think of you as a daughter, that eventually, you

wouldn't have to pay for your laundry soap, or tip the boy who sweeps your room.

You drink lukewarm tea and feel sorry that Mrs. Dutta has to eat alone. Maybe you have a sad look on your face, thinking of his mother, because Roshan narrows his eyes. —You want to steal me, don't you? He says. You sip water loudly, swishing it back and forth in your mouth. You imagine him older, and you becoming the kind of woman he would want to massage and feed. You shake your head, roll your eyes.



You're sitting up in bed, watching two crows balance on the peeling paint of the outside sill.

—Aren't you curious? Roshan asks, sliding a palm under your hips

—About what?

—How different you are.

You face him, hair in your eyes. More than anything, you need to know what she looks like. You make yourself yawn.

—I mean, your bodies. Roshan smirks. He wants to upset you.

—How different they feel.

You could tell the first time on the roof, the way he kept kissing your knees and your ankles, that you were very new. Still, it is hard not to imagine Marian's red hair, clover eyes. You wonder how she wraps herself around him.

Roshan clears his throat, as if on the verge of divulging something very important. You throw an empty water bottle at the window and the crows flap away. The bottle bounces off the ledge and rolls noisily under the bed. That's the closest you'll ever come to throwing a tantrum. You don't want to seem worried about what Roshan might say, but you don't want to disappoint him either, so you try your best to look concerned, like a doctor listening to a patient rattle off symptoms.

—Her breasts are much bigger, he says. —I mean, I like yours. His eyes search your face for reaction. You pat his hand

encouragingly. —But I like hers a lot.

—I understand, I really do, you insist, because women with C and D cups look so very burdened to you. You grab your breasts with your hands, squeeze them together.

Roshan places an index finger under the left one. He draws a circle, slow and careful, like a child learning shapes. —Don't get me wrong. I like yours too. They're like little apples. If you were honest, you would tell him that two other men have told you this. But you want him to believe that he is the first to do everything right.

—What does she do anyway? You ask. Roshan won't tell you. He thinks you'll harass her. You laugh. —She must be rich if all you do is tape weddings, you say. —She must have a really important job if she couldn't come with you. Roshan pinches hard on your breast until you howl, slapping him lightly on the arm.

—Don't ever do that, he says, releasing his hold, pushing you down until you are flat on your back. Finally. You have hurt him.

—I've been stalked once, you lie, suddenly wanting him to think others have wanted you.

Roshan rolls away, gets up from bed. He touches his toes, bends back. His body is loose around the middle, he's covered with wiry, whitening hair. Porcupine shades. You get up to smoke, which his mother hates, especially if you leave the butt on the sill. He warns you about throwing things out the window, as if you might toss the pillows, the barbells he only lifts when you're watching. On the floor, you fold your legs under you, suck deeply on the cigarette. All of a sudden Roshan laughs, which is more like a snort, and quiets himself. This is your cue to ask what's so funny? But you don't. You're trying not to indulge him too much. You are sorry it has to be like this. You give in.

Roshan once dated a Muslim girl in college, but this was no scandal in the movie star family. Her name was Taslim. —She had a body like yours, he says, long and stretched out. Meaty. You flinch at this description, but only inside. —Tas-lim, Roshan

says her name slowly, drawing out the last syllable. She could really go for hours, in the stairwell, the elevator, in the sleeper of a deluxe coach they took to Goa. You try not to wonder if you have this kind of stamina.

Roshan raises his arms over his head, then leans to one side. You pick up his barbells, they're not heavy. Slowly, you do bicep curls. —Tell me something, he says. You don't have any stories about prowess or conquest.

—Once, I had an affair with a Russian who liked to pin me against his oriental rug. I was his reading tutor at the local community college. If you wanted to tell the truth you would have stopped there. —I loved him, you offer. —Even though he turned red in the summer. He said he couldn't live without me.

—Are you serious? Roshan asks.

When he gets in the shower, you wonder why he didn't ask you to join him. Standing in front of his mirror you pinch the skin around your waist, pull back the flesh of each thigh until you see a space between them. You go through his drawers, his closet, looking for photographs, a love letter, a journal. 39-year-olds don't write in journals, you remind yourself. You are frantic, pulling at his socks, his stack of white t-shirts, like someone throwing open the kitchen cupboards, digging into fridge drawers for food. You feel like you have been told not to eat.

When you hear the shower stop you perch on the edge of his bed, staring at the computer. You are afraid. It's hooked up to a video camera, a big metal drive. You settle, remind yourself of all your accomplishments—you were valedictorian. You've interned with *Vogue*. You can speak three languages.

Still, you rifle through the thin stack of papers on his desk—receipts, spreadsheets with phone numbers, scribbles: *interview mom at the Bombay Club before rainy season. Otherwise TOO HOT*. You can't picture Marian in this heat. Maybe she is more the temple and tomb type. She wants to see marble palaces built for dead lovers. She dreams of belly dancing for men with long, curled mustaches, pink palaces with pagodas and fountains.

You wonder what she loves about Roshan. It must have been



the way he said her name.



Roshan's bed is covered with magazine cutouts, tapes of uncut footage, digitally remastered classic collections where his mother is the star. He gives you the task of sifting through the sepia toned photographs, of finding the most flattering. You pinch the edges delicately with your fingernails, afraid to touch.

You don't think it's so impressive that Mrs. Dutta can cry on demand, which, Roshan informs you, is her specialty. Together you watch hours of scenes capturing this wonder—Mrs. Dutta sobbing at the foot of bellbottomed co-stars, tearing up dramatically during a careful waltz down a staircase in the clouds. When you come to a clip of Mrs. Dutta in a nurse's uniform, crying over the comatose body of the film's hero, you ask,

—Didn't your dad make this? Roshan clears his throat. He pours himself a whiskey. You stand behind him, put your palms gently on his shoulders. He swallows quickly, pours another.

—What was he like?

—Let's get out of here, he says, pushing the chair back.

Roshan knows you're afraid of the roads here and races down the hill, nearly crashing into a juice stand, a young girl selling *mogra*, a couple on a motorcycle.

—I'm hungry, you say, because he made you leave before dinner.

The car makes a quick left and you are in what looks like a maze of small huts, no lights. He jerks over bumps in the road, shifts gears to slow.

—Lock your doors, he says, a slight smile spreading. You think you may be buying drugs. Then you see the women—dark, small, standing in doorways, bellies drooping over their saris. There aren't red lights in the windows as you've heard. One steps to your side of the car, barely a teenager. She slaps the glass by your head, leaving a smudge. You bend down and cover your face.

—Look, he says, just LOOK. That's all I'm asking you to do.



Later you will forgive him. Roshan's father used to bring home other ladies. Sometimes he made his wife cook for them.' You remember that from your Aunt's stories, just as you will always remember these women—their nose rings like fishhooks, the way the girl who came up to the car glowed, full of hope.

Afterwards Roshan is proud that you didn't cry. He takes you to the coffee shop at the Taj Hotel—the only place where you would eat and use the bathroom when you were little. —Order anything you want! He says, tossing the menu to you the way rich people throw down bills. You want to vomit but devour a club sandwich and slurp through a chocolate milkshake. He holds your pinky under the table and reminds you of the rules.

—Be nice to me, he says.



You sit next to Roshan on his green couch, watching cricket. You have no idea who's winning or playing—you just follow the running bodies in white uniforms back and forth across the huge field. Mrs. Dutta walks in front of the T.V. dressed in a yellow robe with mirrored embroidery around the collar, carrying a tray with two cups and a jug of limejuice. She asks why you aren't touching the plate of potato wafers. They lie on the plate like a pile of petals, glistening with oil. She's sprinkled red chili powder on them, but not much, she says, she knows you can't take too much spice.

The phone rings and the servant brings Roshan the cordless. —*Aap ki bibi*, he says, grinning at you. You know the word that means wife. Even before saying "hello" Roshan rises from the couch.

You do your best to keep your expression blank. Mrs. Dutta emerges from the kitchen with a papaya and a cutting knife. She lifts up her robe and sits next to you. You picture Roshan in his room, unbuttoning his jeans, putting his hands just below his navel. This is how he relaxes.

Mrs. Dutta places the papaya on a plate and draws her knife

quickly through the middle. When you hear Roshan laugh you shift like you have to use the bathroom. You could barge in on him, yank away the phone, shout *He's mine he's mine!* into the receiver. Mrs. Dutta would probably let you. She scrapes away at the orange insides, spilling a few black seeds. She holds out a spoon of sun colored fruit. —This will be good for you, she says.

You lean forward and think you hear him making kissing noises. Be strong, you think, swallowing, looking for the seeds on the ground, bending your head between your legs like someone about to faint.

When Roshan finally returns he pats his tummy like he's stuffed. You hate how happy you are to see him again. His mother shakes her head as he pulls you off the couch, your knees shaking. —I want to go for a drive, he says, voice calm. —Let's get you changed. He holds your hand and takes you to your room, where he sifts through the clothes in your closet. Greedily, he fingers a salmon colored, silk shift with straps even you think are too thin to wear here. He watches you put it on while rolling a joint of hash and tobacco. You shake your head because you don't want any, but he places it between your lips, coaxing you.

Outside Roshan hails a cab and tells the driver, —Gateway. You have always wanted to go there. Pulling up to the brick archway on the border of the Arabian Sea, the cab scatters a flock of pigeons. Roshan straps his camera bag across his shoulders, then hugs it against his stomach like a shield as he pulls you up from the car. You are drowsy, watching lovers stroll under umbrellas and children tossing popcorn to the birds.

You move to the coastline where droves of men crowd along a wall, hanging on each other like clothes on a drying line. Some hold hands. —We call them the lookers, Roshan says, pulling you closer. —They come to watch foreign ladies in shorts. He laughs.

—Stand over there, he says, nudging you away. You pull up the straps of your dress. He gestures to a spot on the wall where you can sit. You hear men chuckle. In the heat, a thick line of

sweat collects above your lip. You hunch your shoulders as if to fold. —Go on, he says, pushing you towards the wall.

The men make clicking sounds with their lips when you sit. Roshan holds up the camera.

—Ok, but hurry, you say. The sun is in your face. A boy carrying postcards stops to watch as Roshan brings the camera to his eyes.

—Move to the left, just a little.

—Hurry, you say.

—Ok, stop right there.

—Hurry, you say again, and then he clicks. You are angry with Roshan for making you wear this dress. You jog over to him. You press his palm into your side.

—Let's go.

—One more thing, Roshan whispers. He pats your hair, runs his finger softly over your cheek. He looks at the row of men on the wall. They are clapping.

—Kiss me, he orders, parting his lips.



When you're together you look for people you think the other might like. It's a game. You sit at Hotel Sea Rock, on red plastic chairs, looking out over gray water. A large bottle of Kingfisher between you. Roshan picks the bones from his fish when a broad shouldered man walks past your table.

—That's your type, isn't it?

—You're wrong, you say, watching the man take out a slim cell phone. He speaks loudly, as all men with new electronic gadgets do. —You're wrong, you say again, because the man looks a little flushed, like Roshan, with bristly cheeks. A pointed nose that you call "regal" when he complains about its length.

You don't think any of the women here are Roshan's type. He dangles a prawn in front of you like bait. He bites off the tip and rolls his eyes.



—I wish you would talk more, he says. —You never say anything. Even Mom thinks so.

You wonder if Mrs. Dutta complains about you. Lately, you've been trying hard to appear rustic when you are at home. It's July, and you don't even need the air conditioner to sleep. You wake up sticky and dress in Roshan's pajama pants and worn undershirts. Like the servants, you walk without house *chappals* until your feet blacken.

You find Mrs. Dutta in her room, dyeing her hair, and suggest the two of you throw a surprise birthday party for Roshan. She beams. You nod enthusiastically to her menu choices of *boti kabob* and *gol guppa* and volunteer to pluck chickens. She laughs.

—I'm so happy you're here, she says. You already know that the chickens come cleaned. Even if you go down to the coop to pick them out, someone else, a poor person, a man, does the plucking.

Mrs. Dutta has made a guest list and you have selected the invitations—they are white with red balloons, with *Fantastic Forty!* written in black cursive across the middle. You wonder if Roshan is nervous about his age. He seems obsessed with yours. Every time you refuse to bring him water, or argue about where to eat dinner and what movie to see, he says, *that's because you're just twenty-two*. He says your age with annoyance and a bit of pride. You imagine him at home, examining his body, running his hands over the places where he is sagging, or spotting. Where the hairs turn silver. Against him you must be radiant.



When he picks up the phone and his voice turns babyish, you're already on the other side of the bed—but not before hearing her voice crackle through the line. Roshan's hand slides under the covers and you curl like a fist. If she hadn't called in the middle of the night, you may have slammed the door, stomped

down the hall. But you rise lightly from the bed, pad softly back to your room where your heart pounds like someone about to fight. Roshan comes minutes later, kisses your neck. He makes you stand facing the open window—your palms gripping the bars. You wonder what he said to her as you inhale the scent of mustard oil and petroleum. It's dark out. You can see right into a living room where a young woman sits with her feet in a bucket of water. She clutches her belly and her husband stands behind her. The husband presses into his wife's shoulders with both hands, his fingers kneed the sleeves of her blouse. You wonder if she's pregnant while Roshan takes his hand and slides it between your knees. He wraps an arm around your middle, clutching your thickening sides. You've become swollen since arriving at this house. He thrusts into you, harder than before, and you feel you could fall. He puts his mouth over your ear.

—I want them to see us. Under bright lights you would have cringed. You've done a good job of displaying confidence with Roshan, like the thirty-somethings you see at the gym, moving easily about the locker room in candy-colored thongs. Often you strut around his room in high heels, bending forward and back, avoiding the mirror.

In your bed, you don't put your hand over his chest. As the sun rises you think, *I can't remember the last time I woke in my own room.*

—The best birthday I ever had was my ninth, Roshan says, squinting at the ceiling. —I had a pool party. I spent the whole evening trying to lift my aunt's sari. He chuckles. Finally, Roshan tells you, his aunt took him to her bedroom. She pulled him so roughly by the arm the other children thought she was going to beat him. It was July, when the heat makes everything crooked. The aunt closed the door. Slowly, she unraveled the layers of blue silk. He still remembers lying down on the pile of soft, cool fabric she left on the bed. His aunt lifted up the petticoat, she pulled down her thick, white underpants. Roshan was glad she showed him.

—Now, he cups your chin with cold hands, tell me something

that happened to you when you were small.

You talk quickly, a little desperate. As if this is your last chance. You grew up in a desert. An old couple who lived down the block became your parents' first American friends when the neighborhood objected to your father's accent and the clothes your mother wore, the smell of cumin that always seemed to drift from your doors. The old man kept an eye on the house when the family took winter trips to India, to see grandparents you couldn't speak to or understand on your own. You saw them so rarely, your mom told you to call these new friends "grandpa" and "grandma." Grandpa held you in his lap and gave you silver dollars, and grandma brought over fruitcakes and taught your mom to make hot dogs and chicken potpie. As a vegetarian determined to raise you right, to make sure you never felt different, your mom bought a turkey and cried as she shoved it deep in the oven. Your new American grandparents came over to celebrate. It was a real Thanksgiving, and you were the real Indians. You wore your Halloween costume—a pilgrim's outfit your mother had sewn because you had just read about the Mayflower and were fascinated with the Puritans: their bonnets, their buggies. The grandfather called you *adorable*. He winked at you and told your parents that they better watch out—you were getting quite a figure. You were ten. While your father poured wine, while your mother showed grandma the new upstairs wing, the old man pulled down your skirt. *Ha ha!* he said, like it was a joke. You remember his glassy eyes, the quickness of his breath as he slapped your bare behind and said *good girl, good girl*, when you remained still.

This story doesn't make Roshan want to be with you. You sound so rehearsed, like you want the part too badly.



The night of the birthday party, you circle through the house like the help. The servants hiss when you enter the kitchen and shout at them to make more ice. They are not used to taking

orders from you. You made sure to dress simply—in a cotton *salwaar* and jeans. You only go the living room to offer drinks and refill trays of *pakoras*. You feel full, watching everyone eat and dance. No one asks what your name is or who you are. You make sangria and nachos and arrange the flowers guests hand you. In the center of the living room you created a surprise centerpiece using Mrs. Dutta's favorite picture. In it she and Roshan stand in front of a swimming pool lined with tiki torches. When Mrs. Dutta first saw it the tears were quick, just like in the movies.

Roshan winks at you throughout the evening, especially when he is talking to other women. Most are much older than you but wear sequined shirts and tight fitting pants. A dimpled one with hair like a triangle talks to him the longest. You smile back at Roshan and clear empty plates as he leans in closer to hear her. She keeps a polished hand on his shoulder. Tossing lipstick stained cups in the trash, you wish they were glass, so they could shatter.

After Mrs. Dutta leads everyone in singing and cutting the black forest cake you made but were disappointed with—the humidity made the frosting sweat and the middle droop—Roshan slinks away from the table and waves you into his room. He pushes you against the closed door.

—Close your eyes, he says. —Open your mouth. You feel him shove a piece of cake between your lips, taste the slightly burnt flour, the over-sugared cherry sauce. He smears your nose with frosting and you cringe.

—It's cold, you say.

—It's a sign of love, you know, it's what couples do to each other on their wedding night. He says the word "wedding" with a sneer.

You're a good sport. You wipe the stickiness away, make him lick your fingers. Roshan pecks your cheek when you hand him the card and the thin package. —You were great out there, he says. Like this is a play.

He opens the present first, which is a framed picture of you outside the Gateway. You are blurred, your hands pasted to your



sides. A half smile. —God I love that dress! He says. —Oh baby, I'm sorry. I can't bring this home. Even though I want to, to remember you. Your arms tighten around his waist as he opens the card. Silently he mouths the lines of the poem you've copied on the inside.

—Wow. He nods his head up and down. —This is good. You're really good. He sounds shocked.

—You like it? You don't tell him someone else wrote it.

—I can't believe you did all this. Why did you do this for me? He asks, suddenly desperate, crushing you. When you pull back it's as if he's seeing you for the first time. He smells like whiskey.

—I could stay here forever. Couldn't you?

It's impossible to believe him. You've been working so hard, with no food or water all night.



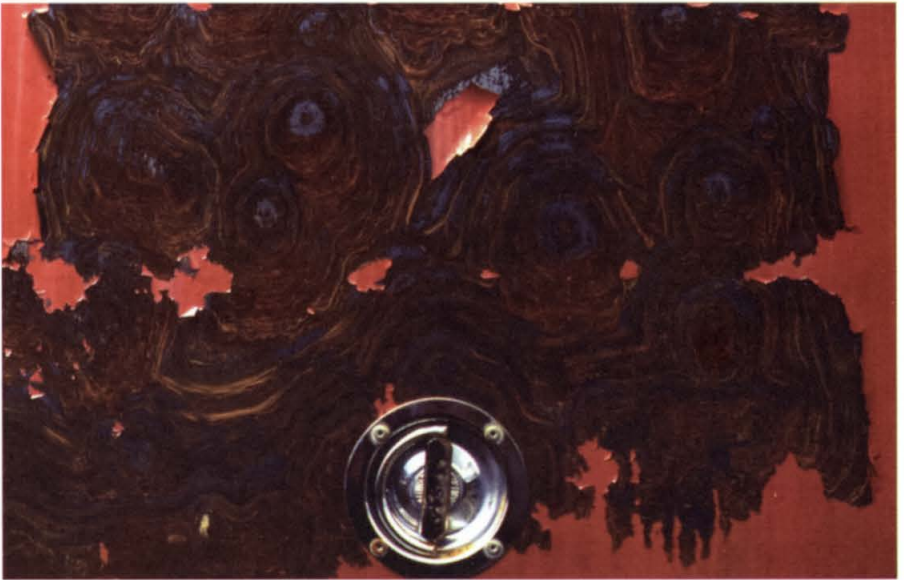
You take a taxi to your Aunt's house, in a dusty corner of Bombay cramped with fishermen and Christians. The servant is in the driveway to carry your luggage to the room next to your Aunt's, which never belonged to anyone. She's kept a small shrine there for your grandfather, who disowned her once she started her abortion clinic. He looks so much like your mother, who still sleeps on her side of the bed, refusing to believe that your father has left.

It's a good thing you left that house. Your Aunt has put new sheets on the bed and there are curtains over the windows. Still, it smells dank. The rain has started, at night it falls in needle like sheets over the city. When your Aunt comes back from her clinic, which is attached to the flat, she looks drawn, thinner. Even her eyebrows have whitened. When she embraces you, you smell bleach. —You've put on! She exclaims, patting your stomach. —Enjoyed? She asks, like you've been to Goa or the Maldives.

When you pulled away from the building on Altamount Road, no one was standing in the driveway. Mrs. Dutta shook your hand in the foyer, her cold fingers slipping away quickly. On the

roof, Roshan stood in his pajamas and smoked.

—I loved all the colors, you say. Your Aunt frowns, puzzled. Holi was so long ago. —I feel like the colors are still everywhere, on me. You scrape under your fingernails, tug at your hair. You pull back the collar of your shirt, searching for something that isn't there.



*Galvanized Steel, 1837*



*Sheet Glass, 1952*



*Fire Extinguisher, 1872*



*The veil that brings a blush to the cheek, 1890*

ALL NIGHT THE NIGHT HAS BEEN

Lyn Lifshin

lightening with moths

white behind the walnuts

If a woman couldn't sleep  
and came to this window  
in this light her skin  
would glow like bones

Clouds over the full moon  
even with the wind

What would have been  
nuts look like limes  
on the white stones,

it sounds like some  
one tapping on a glass  
coffin. It sounds

like someone tapping  
from within the tree



## AT THE ESTATE SALE

Mira Rosenthal

I am thinking of Bishop's fishhouses  
down by the sea with their peaked roofs and cleat  
studded gangplanks when my eye notices

A yellow sign tacked to a stick of wood  
that points me down Sacramento Street  
and leads here, a middle-class neighborhood:

square patches of lawn, small lots, closed shutters,  
sometimes a driveway of new laid concrete.  
At the house of the deceased, red stone stairs

lead up to the door and you can walk right in  
past a fat man smiling from his seat  
at a table, money box before him.

*Through the kitchen you'll find the den downstairs,  
all smiles and eagerness and conceit.  
And out the back there's more. Also upstairs.*

In the kitchen every cupboard stands bare  
for want of dishes, now tables replete  
with stacks of plates, glasses and silverware.

At an open drawer, a young woman stands  
head bent, hair mostly brown with one gray streak  
hanging forward as she inspects the brand

on a silver serving spoon. *How 'bout this?*  
*Is this one antique?* Her friend dismisses it  
and she looks again, not wanting to miss

anything. A stairwell leads to the den—  
dark, quiet, no one milling about,  
a paneled bar and blackness at one end,

at the other a door that leads outside.  
Between here and there, two male voices meet  
in conversation, as if meant to chide:

*It's a shame. It's such a shame*—their words bear  
knowledge that feeds on absence, burns through it—  
*I was her caretaker for 15 years.*

And it's like they're reciting a script, just  
what you would expect to hear, a receipt  
for the deceased, these voices, whirling, hushed

in the tenor of self-absorbed tragedy.  
Maybe she's still here, trying to retreat  
but unable, so soon, to fade away.

In the bathroom, a woman at the sink  
inspects a bottle of Aspirin, the sleek  
pills in her palm each perfect and distinct.

She keeps it, as if this common bottle  
held renewal for the living, a unique  
blessing to take from a house she will

only step into once. In the tangle  
of polyester clothes on the bed sheet  
there's a loose crocheted vest of gray wool.

It's handmade. By the chair a canvas  
bag spills full of yarn. This here is her seat.  
If you were to sit down here in her place,

your back would ache immediately, ache  
and begin to radiate a dull heat  
as if the chair were a back-breaking stake

to mark the dead in her ground. If you stay,  
her life wrapped around you in the quiet,  
you might feel her hand on your shoulder: *stay*.

It's how we expect the spirit to come in:  
knitting needles, blue yarn, stitching, a plate  
drawn from a different life, taken home, scavenged

from the dead, a vest, a word, a ladder  
to bring us further to the firmament  
even if our hands grasp only matter.

## THE OVERPASS OUTSIDE FORT WORTH

Fredrick Zydek

In this place the Interstate and all its daughters  
flay out into the universe like ribbons forming  
a perfect bow over the gifts of the city. This  
is the future written large—concrete and steel  
given such elegant form they appear as brush

strokes on a canvas of modern art destined for  
another century. We have urges to redirect our  
journey to experience these flying buttresses  
of the road, these sculptures that look as if they  
should grace a colony in outer space instead

of the outskirts of a city that began as a fort on  
the Texas plains. These ramps and cement hills  
might as well be the most gracefully conceived  
rollercoaster in the world. We determine we will  
bring a camera on the return trip so these images

can be captured and taken home, prizes as dear  
as our photographs of the Alamo, the hill country  
outside Blanco, the antlers and strange stone you  
found on the Hinton estate, and the sculpture of  
the great lone star in front of the Austin Museum.

In minutes we pass among and under these roads  
that seem to lead to the stars. We wonder if those  
who live here, long used to seeing these sure proofs  
of the genius of the human spirit, think of them as  
nothing more than the streets that lead to home.

# THE THREE MUSKY TEARS, OR, THREE DECADES AND REALMS OF EDITORIAL HAPPENSTANCE

Stephen Corey

On 18 July 2005 I celebrated my twenty-second anniversary as a member of the editorial staff of *The Georgia Review*, a journal of arts and letters founded at The University of Georgia in 1947 and published there quarterly ever since. I have served, variously, as assistant editor, associate editor, and acting editor. I have had a hand in the putting together of nearly ninety issues with a cumulative page count of about 20,000; to get those published pages our staff had to make its way through roughly 15,000 essays, 50,000 short stories, 200,000 poems, and a smattering—call it a few thousand—of book reviews.

What in the world did we think we were—are—doing? The learning curve is a long one, and the answers at its end lack the solidity of a nice pot of gold.

## I

Down a seldom-used back hallway of the Harpur College student center, there was a room. My newfound friend and fellow senior Stephen Denker took me there after I'd said yes to his invitation to help him edit the college's undergraduate literary magazine, *Clarendon*. The room appeared to be no more nor less than an abandoned junior administrative office: a large metal desk, a filing cabinet, a couple of chairs, bare walls, and a large uncurtained window looking out on a concrete courtyard holding the extruded mechanical guts of the building—lengths and curves of large pipe, an air conditioning unit, and so on. The only sign of past occupancy was an odd stack of papers on top of the cabinet: manuscripts, letters, fliers, past issues of *Clarendon*, and, most curious, a black and yellow woodcut print—apparently an

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Corey presented a version of this essay as a talk at Binghamton University in the spring of 2005.

original, since the paper was thin and unusually textured, quite unlike anything my small-town upbringing had shown me in my first two decades.\*

This was in the fall of 1970. Across the previous four years I had learned to be lonely—my girlfriend throughout high school having long since left me; had learned I was a pacifist—having applied for and received conscientious objector status at the height of the Vietnam War; and had learned to call myself—though not yet in public—a poet, one with twenty or twenty-five compositions to his credit. Helping to put out a magazine devoted to literature certainly seemed like something a poet would do, and something a soldier would not—and, at some far-removed, astonishingly silly emotional level, I probably saw doing this work as revenge on my old girlfriend, who had failed to see what a sensitive guy I was and would continue to be. (As the poet Peter Meinke has written in *The Night Train and the Golden Bird*, “Everything we do is for our first loves / whom we have lost irrevocably / who have married insurance salesmen / and moved to Topeka / and never think of us at all.”)

Denker and I put together that school year’s several issues of *Clarendon*, reading through however many poems showed up in response to our posters, our ads in the school newspaper *Pipe Dream*, and whatever announcements a few English professors may have made in their classes. I think we probably received a few dozen poems per semester—possibly a hundred—from which we chose about fifteen for each issue; because we were twenty years old and in charge, we made the usual novices’ mistake of printing our own work along with that which we had accepted from other writers.

I’ve held onto a couple of copies of *Clarendon*, and when I glance at them every few years I am pleased to find that I think we probably made some right decisions—about others’ poems, of course—given what we must have had as choices. An administrator named R. A. Pawlikowski (we didn’t limit ourselves

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\*The print is reproduced on the cover of this issue; see note on contents page.

to students) managed to teach us the value of a more mature view, as did such notable scholar-poets as Arthur Clements and William V. Spanos, and the whimsical lyrics of a then-young woman named Joni Sedaca still sing nicely:

Did he wear orange  
or did she  
I chose his face from afar for  
he was a pretty man  
and his face was a satisfied face  
while I had no one, no  
face for my own.  
He wore orange.  
But it does not matter  
Things like that  
don't matter at all.

This was editors' school, this reading and choosing what we liked best at a given moment in our lives, with nobody else anywhere near to say No or Yes. There was no other course of study in 1970, nor is there today; one cannot earn a degree in literary editing at any school in the United States.

Stephen Denker and I had great fun for a few months, with our love of words and our little senses of power and importance, and then we went our separate ways. I have never seen or heard from him since. The woodcut was still on the cabinet at the end of the year, unclaimed, and I reasoned that such mysterious beauty ought not to be wasted. Two cloaked and faceless figures, together and apart at once, sit hunched in a symbolic forest composed of wavering black and yellow vertical stripes. I placed the print between two large pieces of cardboard and took it away; nobody in the student center or anywhere else across the campus paid any attention.

## II

I was not then an editor—merely someone who had edited;



yet the bug had entered the wood and was not dead. Six full and complicated years went by. I got married; took a master's degree in English (also from Harpur College, but it was now called the State University of New York at Binghamton) with a small poetry collection as thesis, something scarcely heard of in that place and time; had two daughters; returned to my home town of Jamestown, New York, and did newspaper work; moved south with my family to enter the English PhD program at the University of Florida—which at that time, like SUNY Binghamton, did not have a creative writing program as such.

The bug was not dead. UF visiting writers Stephen Spender and Robert Dana were enough impressed by the poetic talent in the Gainesville area, both within and without the university community, that they decided to honor it with a self-published anthology, *A Local Muse*, in the spring of 1976. Next to the work of graduate and undergraduate students, university faculty, and assorted other Gainesville residents, Spender and Dana placed poems from past visiting writers—among them John Ciardi, Richard Eberhart, Robert Fitzgerald, and John Frederick Nims. The booklet was tall—6 ½ inches across and 12 inches high—and had a pebbled burgundy cover that sported a winged armadillo.

The following New Year's Eve, poet Edward Wilson and I had had enough to drink at a writer-filled party that we were finally able to recognize, along about 1 a.m., that *A Local Muse* was such a damned great idea that, goddamn it, it ought to be kept alive. The anthology ought to become a periodical! Spender and Dana were long gone back to England and Iowa, so Ed and I appointed ourselves co-editors, right there on the couch. After all, we both had editorial experience—his similar to mine, down I-75 at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg—we were both avid readers of poetry, and we were both poets. What need of a degree when one is self-anointed?

*A Local Muse II* came out in the spring of 1977, tall and bright green and featuring a Eustace Tilly sendup in alligator guise. Contributors included many of the previous year's locals, recent

visitors Maxine Kumin and Michael Mott, and—no, we still hadn't learned—Edward Wilson and Stephen Corey.

Ed moved on, and in 1978 poet Lola Haskins joined me as co-editor. Robert Dana asked that we "return" the name *A Local Muse*, since he was thinking of starting his own magazine under that moniker. Inspired by what we had just lost, Lola and I came up with *The Devil's Millhopper*, whose namesake was a huge and ancient sinkhole on the outskirts of Gainesville.

We decided to publish twice a year and to go "national." We placed, as I recall, a single classified ad, in the *CCLM Newsletter* (that's the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, predecessor of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses)—and we quickly learned that the country was full of poets ready to take a chance on submitting to a never-before-heard-of magazine. Hundreds of poems came in, and the number grew year by year. Supported annually by nickel-and-dime contributions from local patrons (including the co-editors), and one year by a small grant from CCLM, *The Devil's Millhopper* actually came to have several dozen subscribers by the time I left it in 1983.

When I departed from Florida in 1980 to take a three-year teaching job at the University of South Carolina, in Columbia, *TDM* went with me. I handled it on my own for a year, then took on a Columbia poet and new friend, Jim Peterson, as my assistant editor. The submission numbers continued to rise, as did the overall quality, and we also began to see something new: poetry books with *The Devil's Millhopper* listed on their acknowledgments pages along with *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, and so on. We had gradually injected ourselves into the quiet system to which we had always meant and hoped to contribute, consciously or not.

*The Devil's Millhopper* survived beyond my seven-year tenure for nearly fifteen more circuits of the sun, first under Jim Peterson and then with its final editor, Stephen Gardner of Aiken, South Carolina. When the magazine quietly succumbed in the late 1990s to the usual maladies of short funding, short staffing, and editorial

exhaustion, it had lived far longer than most of its brethren. Get yourself into any room full of middle-aged poets and mention the *Millhopper*, and even today you can be sure you'll raise a few eyebrows and smiles.

### III

Because my work at the University of South Carolina consisted almost entirely of teaching freshman composition to mostly indifferent special-needs students, my editing avocation came to feel more and more central to my literary and emotional well being. My little writing career was going tolerably well, despite my not having much sense of how to conduct it: I had published my first poem in 1976, the year after I moved to Florida, and in 1981 I won the fledgling Water Mark Poets First Book Award for a collection called *The Last Magician*. I had also begun trying to place reviews and essay-reviews, having early (1979) success with *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and with the journal that had become my favorite as I read around in the field—*The Georgia Review*.

When a paid editorial position with *GR* was nationally posted right around the time that my three-year contract was running out at USC, I barely dared hope that such an attractive job could come my way to replace all those days in front of freshman comp classes, but still I eagerly applied. After all, my editorial "education" now spanned a dozen years, and my aesthetic affinities with *The Georgia Review* seemed to be stacked up at least three deep: I liked most of what I read in the journal's mix of several genres, the editor Stanley W. Lindberg had seen fit to publish several of my reviews and a handful of my poems, and Lindberg had recently commissioned me to edit and introduce a selection from the correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Richard Eberhart, knowing that I knew Eberhart and his work from my University of Florida days.

Despite the odds, employment hope can spring almost eternal.

I landed the assistant editorship of *The Georgia Review*, a full-

time paid position, and began work in July, 1983, after about six weeks on the unemployment dole in South Carolina. *The Georgia Review* was not mine to create in the senses that *Clarendon* and *The Devil's Millhopper* had been; I would serve as screener and advisor for Stan, who had come to *GR* six years earlier and completely revamped it from what it had been under his predecessor, John T. Irwin. Stan had hired me because he sensed my literary tastes and interests were close enough to his that when I read manuscripts I would not reject works he would want the chance to see himself. And because his sense of our shared aesthetic was accurate, I never had to feel that I was serving Stan's interests and standards rather than my own: I simply followed my nose and ears to the works that most moved me, as I had done in my previous editing positions, and I passed those along for Stan's consideration. As the years went by, Stan gave more and more weight to my opinions and remarks, but at the deepest level this did not matter because what *did* matter was the constant, present-tense search for the new right words. As long as I was pulling from the paper piles those rare works that slammed my gut and my head at the same time, I was accomplishing what felt more and more like one of my destined functions in the world. (Melodramatic, this remark, but true.)

Editing so-called serious literature—writing that by intention of style and thought tries to set itself apart from all previous efforts—is a form of spiritual occupation, as is the creation of same. About this, for me, there is no doubt. Arthur Symonds, in his grimly stunning afterword to his compact group of essays entitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), argues that all the great human passions—for religious experience, for romantic and sexual human love, for art—are born of the same need, which is to counter and deny the fact of mortality. For better and worse, a literary editor—like a literary writer—must believe himself to be on a mission for the art of the written word, and it is this sense of mission that keeps him going even though he may have to count his journal's readers in the dozens or the hundreds, or perhaps in the several thousands if he is really

fortunate. (I'm quite sure the bookstores in Athens, Georgia, alone sell more copies of each new Harry Potter novel than *The Georgia Review* sells copies worldwide.) If the means to produce the journal exist, the editor—I should say *this* editor—will continue to seek the works to fill it.

The most profound pleasure in the profession is easily noted, but only with the greatest difficulty explained: it is to come upon that one story or poem among many hundreds that manages to sing and ring with a self-generated and sustained authority, a rightness that infuses the work from beginning to end—or that, if certain lapses intrude upon it, the editor can advise the author about how to repair. To choose a single example of such pleasure out of twenty-plus years at *The Georgia Review* is impossible, so let me do so.

I had been with *GR* for less than a year when I encountered a story called “The Gittel” by an unpublished young writer named Marjorie Sandor. Immediately upon finishing my first reading, I marched into Stan’s office and insisted that he listen to this opening paragraph:

There is a tradition in our family that once in a while a dreamer is born: an innocent whose confused imagination cannot keep up with the civilized world. This person walks around in a haze of dreams, walking eventually right into the arms of the current executioner, blind as Isaac going up the mountain with his father. Nobody knows who started this story—my mother used to say it was a second-rate scholar out to impress the neighbors—but apparently there are characteristics, traits peculiar to this person, and two hundred years ago people knew a catastrophe was on the way if such a person came into their midst. Once, when I was a little girl, I asked Papa to name the traits. He said he couldn’t; they’d been lost. All he knew was that this dreamer, before vanishing, always left behind a dreaming child, and that sometimes he thought he was such a child.

STEPHEN COREY

Stan went away with the manuscript that evening, and the next day he agreed we should accept it. This may not have been the quickest decision ever made at *The Georgia Review*, but certainly it came close. "The Gittel" was subsequently selected for reprinting in *The Best American Short Stories*, and it helped make *The Georgia Review* a finalist that year in the National Magazine Awards fiction category (along with *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Playboy*). In other words, I wasn't simply flighty or arbitrary when I heard the magical voice of controlled invention in Sandor's opening sentences and then throughout her tale. Such a voice, no other quite like it, clues us to its own grasp on some set of circumstances we have not quite encountered before, and begins immediately to persuade us that those circumstances are worth our time and consideration—are, in fact, a portion of our own lives.

A grim but amusing side note about style: In late 1973, under the acting editor Edward Krickel, *The Georgia Review* was "fortunate" enough to be able to feature the short story "Cannon!" by Donald Barthelme, who was about as hot a literary property as there was on the market at that time. Turned out, though, that "Cannon!" had in truth been set off by an unknown hoaxer—one who also published "Donald Barthelme stories" around that same time in at least two other journals, including the same story (i.e., "Cannon!") in *Carolina Quarterly*. Damned few of us can forge a genuine style, but plenty of us can imitate the real thing because its realness is usually so palpable.

I believe that one key to *The Georgia Review's* growing success during the past quarter century has been our insistence upon the equal importance of the four primary kinds of writing we feature: essays, poems, reviews, and short stories. The generous financial support of our home institution has given us, among other things, more pages to work with than many comparable journals can afford, which in turn allows us to feature in each issue 30-50 pages of work from each of the aforementioned genres. Readers can take in an entire issue, but they can also turn to just one or two areas and not feel shortchanged.



Another key has been our commitment to the expertly written general-interest essay, broadly defined. Reaching for informed studies in many disciplines, preferably with more than one discipline touched upon in any given essay, we have tried to open *The Review* to as many thoughtful readers as possible, though of course we never seem to be able to reach anywhere near as many as we are convinced would consistently peruse our pages if we could just get ourselves up under their noses.

When I began working with *The Georgia Review* there were scarcely any computers (as they are now defined) to be seen, to say nothing of no Internet. Up until a couple of years ago, our pages were still set in hot lead on Linotype machines and printed letterpress. Now we have in-house typesetting, are offset printed, and of course have a Web site and do all sorts of communicating via e-mail. I have watched my children, and recently my grandchildren, and they give me firm faith that books (and therefore journals) are not about to disappear, even though more and more activity will take place in on-line venues. We need the literal touch and feel and pressure of printed works just as we need the touch of other people; some things can be automated only so far before they curve back on themselves and journey into the territory they (and we) thought they had left behind. This is no Pollyannish talk, no Luddite avoidance. Imagine going to a "poetry reading" and finding that the voice you are expected to listen to is one of those you get when you are shunted into the automated telephone answering system of a large business. Imagine allowing such a voice to read your child to sleep.

That woodcut I lifted from the *Clarendon* office is framed and hung on a wall in my living room, just to one side of the front door. I see it every time I walk out into the world. I don't know who those ghostly figures in the print might be, nor do I have any idea about the identity of the artist who created this work that is an unspoken but never-forgotten piece of my daily life. However, I know that the work and the artist are important. They help me to move along; they help me to know I won't stop moving.



## EDITOR OF DEATH

Stephen Corey

In those earliest years I chose the line  
measuring the softest skin I knew, there  
along the crease of her uppermost thigh,  
at the edge of the pubic hair spreading  
inward to those other forms of softness.

Next I liked poems of further devotion,  
love that knew lust but peeped beyond its wall.  
Also, soon, the songs of new life grabbed me:  
babies in bloody emergence, toddlers  
on the grass or beach, first words on the air.

I saw where all of this was going,  
but still I made my choices, my holdings,  
cuts, and perfectings: "Drop *this*, polish *that*."  
There was no stopping my love for the art  
that told me what I loved, what never stopped.

Poems of fucking came to embarrass me,  
but only through those few brief years  
I pretended youth was gone, pretended aging.  
I sought out tryst and *triste* for opposing  
pages, mirrors of lovers and dying parents.

Past fifty, I started to think—poor boy—  
that thought could buy back sex, banish failure,  
run St. Elmo's fire up every mast . . .  
too old now to believe I was older,  
old enough to write the previous line.

One thing equals one poem—then move on:  
her astonishing ass, naked above me  
as we climbed the ladder to the loft;  
my father in the room I never saw,  
his last breaths at 3 a.m.—my birth time;  
my first child home in her bassinet, lying  
asleep since our trip from the hospital—  
her tininess so terrifying, the ten  
fingers of her hands fingers of *my* hands  
curling, stretching, editing death away.

## LUCK BE A LADY

Kristie M. Betts

Although we gasped and shook our heads when Jebediah Turner ended up in jail for stealing his wife's severed foot, we all wondered if we would do the same thing. Or more to the point: if anyone would love us enough to steal back our body parts from County General.

When his wife Edith testified that the foot was hers, though the hospital called it "medical waste," their lawyer argued that no one could be prosecuted for stealing something that legally belonged to his wife. We all knew that Mr. Thaddeus J. Ebbers Esq. hadn't made very compelling arguments ever since his wife left him for a high school senior, but we complimented his silver tongue after Jebediah's acquittal. More compelling than Thaddeus's grandstanding might have been Jebediah's arm down around Edith's waist as she hobbled into the courthouse.



In his youth, Jebediah Turner had broken both legs jumping off of a barn, joined the Navy for fourteen days, and sworn never to return to his hometown. We all hoped he would return, ready to marry any of us and to bring his fiery laughter back. No other black-haired boy before or after Jebediah had lit us up in quite the same way. But when he did return, by his side was a woman our age with the hair of a teenager: long, brown, and unrestrained. A bit like Cher in sensible clothes.

Her name was Edith. We never did find out her last name, since Jebediah kept calling her Mrs. Turner. Later Massie Rozinsky let it slip down at the post office that "Mrs. Turner" wasn't yet divorced from the man she left for Jebediah. Not that Jeb seemed to give a groundhog's granny. He wound his arm around Edith and would occasionally rest his chin on the top of her shiny brown hair. At least he hadn't come back with one of those tall blond

Amazon women. That would have been worse. The ankle we could handle.

He brought this small woman he called "wife" back to meet his parents, but ended up purchasing property. When Edith's foot started throbbing they turned the truck onto a dirt road and climbed through pine trees to the overlook, looking over a porous bowl of lush land, choked with viney vegetation and pocked with rumbling holes from underground streams. Jebediah stared in wonder while Edith's foot threatened to jump out of her shoe. "We'll find our fortunes here," she said, wrapping her arms tighter around Jebediah's waist. They bought the land the next morning (Ronnie Rexrode had been trying to sell it off for seven years) with the lottery money that resulted from Edith's itch in a Kentucky 7-11, and posted a plywood sign on the Ponderosa pine: "Turner's Point." Edith painted the sign with red toenail polish from her purse. They were home.



The first person Edith opened up to was Massie Rozinsky, who drove up to Turner's Point every day to deliver mail. Those of us on Massie's route knew she never kept a strict schedule or cared about the calories in proffered cups of hot chocolate, and Edith always had questions about the mail. Over several weeks, Massie dropped bits of information as she wound through the valley.

Ever since she was just a girl, Edith had a gift. When Edith was five years old, her mother could not find the wedding ring that she had flung away from her in a fury. After searching the entire house, the frayed woman threw herself across the couch and sobbed.

"Edie, Edie, what have I done?! I lost it. What I am going to do, baby?" Edith's mother cried. (When Massie Rozinsky told the story she did the mother's voice in a drunken Elizabeth Taylor kind of way.) Edith, her young, tangled-headed daughter, stood by her side for almost an hour before the woman paid attention.

"Mommy, my foot thinks the ring is in the disposal." Without questioning her daughter's sources, the red-faced woman thrust her hand into the potato and carrot scraps and came up with her cubic zirconium set in real gold. She squealed and hugged her daughter; she even bent down and showered kisses on Edith's small blue flip-flopped foot.

"You listen to your body, baby. It knows. It knows." Her young mother wiped a bit of sludge off of her ring, screwed it on, and splayed her fingers in front of them. They both smiled. Lifting the ringed hand, Edith's mother swept her thumb down her daughter's cheekbone. "Yes, Edie, it knows," she repeated. Ever since that day, Edith jumped foot first into her future. We all knew about Jebediah and the lottery, so the minute anyone saw Edith buying up something, even if it was just beef jerky, no one could help but buy some too. Just in case.



We came under the cover of casseroles, searching for secrets of their coupledness as we glanced inside their cabin, and invited Jebediah and Edith to various events. They started to accept. At baby showers and barbecues, Edith filled us in. We listened intently, but sometimes just to gather bits of evidence. The only thing that threw Edith off track was her first husband. For fifteen years Edith's foot went numb as she puttered around a clapboard house, playing wife to a Tom Jenkins from Ohio—a distant cousin to the Cass Jenkinsons. He ended up turning to taxidermy (partially in their kitchen) and other women.

"Didn't your ankle tell you not to marry that man?" we asked. "How could it lead you to Jebediah and not warn you about the wrong one?"

"I thought the fact that my ankle was silent was my answer," Edith replied in her slightly raspy voice (we imagined she had spent her dissolute youth smoking several packs a day even though she must have quit).

When they necked on the porch, behind Tom's barn and in

his car, Edith felt the same kind of itch she felt in her ankle, except in other places. "I thought that was the message," she told us. "Maybe the feeling I was supposed to get when I knew. After that I never felt a thing in my foot. I thought maybe because I had reached my destination." Even though apparently, from what Edith intimated in other conversations, those other currents barely rippled once the hot flush of adolescence faded.



Edith didn't love talking about Tom Jenkins, but we could always press her at Christmas parties to tell us about meeting Jebediah Turner in that parking lot. We would drag up someone who hadn't heard the story before, just as an excuse to get her to tell it again.

"I couldn't find my car," she always began. "A blue Ford." We all pictured a mall, a real one with more than just a Sears. In this real-mall parking lot, Edith walked in circles and could not remember for the life of her where she parked that car. Edith decided to close her eyes and spin around slowly, hoping to end up pointing in the right direction (this was where Edith's impracticality lived up to her younger-girl hair and flowing skirts). Spinning slowly as she counted, Edith planned to count to seven, her favorite number: the needles in her foot made her stop at two. Like something asleep coming back to life, Edith's lucky foot buzzed with a lunatic rhythm. She hadn't felt anything more meaningful than an ingrown toenail in more than ten years.

And there he was.

When Edith opened her eyes, Jebediah Turner stood transfixed in front of her. We could all picture this moment; his green eyes and Cherokee color from his mother's side. That tilt of his head that pokes his squarish jaw forward. The black tufts of hair swirling away from his cowlick. Neither one really remembered what kind of small talk they made (although we pressed them for their first words) but Edith left the blue Ford in the parking lot and never looked back. She wrote a polite letter to Tom,

telling him the general location of the car and asking would he please sign the divorce papers. According to Massie Rozinsky, who must have thanked her lucky stars for her new mail route, Edith asked everyday about official documents arriving from Ohio.

That jump out of the barn had busted Jebediah's left eardrum, which eventually gave him an excuse to leave the Navy. He told Edith that he had been hearing a ringing in his ears for close to a year now, like the whine of a drill four doors down. Earlier, he told his parents that the ringing was caused by them specifically (right before he hightailed it to the Navy). All we knew was just that he always was listening to something else, trying to shrug it off when we vied for his attention. That day in the parking lot the whine had gotten louder as he walked closer to the small woman turning with her shopping bags spinning out. When Edith opened her eyes, Jebediah's ears stopped ringing abruptly.

"That 'hello' was the cleanest sound in the world," Jebediah said to a bunch of us during Pioneer Days. We sighed and smiled.



Edith's foot did not go dead again. Anytime she was near Jebediah her toes prickled; we often stared at her shoes and longed for sandal weather, so we could see what changes Jeb wrought in that foot. The portentous whole-foot pin-and-needle ache would hit at key moments, like at the 7-11. As Jebediah waited in line to pay for the gas at a stop along the way, Edith grabbed sodas from the cooler. When she stepped next to her husband in line, her foot made so much ruckus that it threw her off balance. She thought at first that her right foot and ankle revisited the throes of her new love, but then she realized that Jebediah's left hand rested on the lottery machine. "We have to buy a lottery ticket, Jebediah," Edith said. Her husband ordered ten and when the next day's numbers were posted they were one hundred thousand dollars richer, minus tax.





Three days later, Edith turned her ankle in a sinkhole in the fertile porous valley beneath Turner's Point. As she left Jebediah that morning, she called, "Don't expect me to come walking back until I find more fortunes!" They both laughed and exchanged one more kiss. Edith was letting the palpitation in her foot and ankle lead in exploring the thirty-seven acres. Her ankle turned as her foot slid into the underground stream and her head hit a sharp outgrowth of rock on the way down. She realized that she had been with Jebediah for thirty-seven perfect days and smiled at her good fortune before her whole body was eclipsed by the pin-and-needle sensation emanating from both her ankle and the wound on her brow.

Busy putting a porch on their cabin, Jebediah didn't even worry about his wife until nightfall. When Massie Rozinsky walked their catalogues inside and asked after Edith, Jebediah just shrugged. He figured she was following her foot to the far reaches of the thirty-seven acres, looking in every tree hollow for the riches her body promised. When the day thickened into night, Jebediah began to worry and pace the thirty-seven acres.

Not until daylight helped him locate her small form pressed close to the ground did Jeb find her. When he saw her pale and crumpled, with her foot twisted in a sinkhole, he cursed his faith. Jebediah struggled with her body up the hill home, and drove to County General with her head in his lap, her lucky ankle poking out the truck window into the thick summertime air. A few of us drove past and thought the show of affection while driving a bit ostentatious, not knowing about the ankle of course.

In court, Jebediah told everyone that a high-pitched drone like a swarm of bees filled his ears. With tears in his eyes, he told everyone that he thought she was already dead. Why should he lift her body into someone else's arms? For someone else to sanitize and scrutinize? His Edith would not be delivered thus. No, even against the newfangled laws that wanted to keep you in order even after death, Jebediah would bury his wife himself. We all

felt our eyes filling up as he described the plan of his despair. He would get the shovel and find a beautiful spot so she could rest above the tips of the trees, sharp pine points made soft by the distance, trembling and shaking with the wind, making the whole valley shimmer like a body of water.

Perhaps as a reward for his virtuous decision, Edith opened her eyes before he turned around to find the shovel. "Baby my head hurts," she said. Jebediah skidded over to the side of the road and cradled his wife in a cloud of dust.

"It's your leg I'm worried about, Edie. You lost lots of blood."

"My leg doesn't hurt. I can't feel a thing."



Once they got to the hospital, we all knew what happened. The testimony at this point could have been spoken by any one of us sitting in that courtroom: she lost the foot, ankle included.

When the straight-backed Frances Rampling, R.N, with an angry line cutting across her broad forehead, approached Jebediah's plastic chair, he knew the news had to be bad.

"I'm sorry Mr. Turner, but we couldn't save her leg," Frances said shaking her head briskly. Several of us found ourselves shaking our heads in tempo with the story; Frances played herself on the stand and shook her head more vigorously so as to show off the new perm.

"But my wife—she's okay?" When Jebediah repeated his words in court, the judge stopped to mention that Edith Jenkins was not legally his wife. Jebediah pretended not to hear.

"She should be fine," Frances replied in her clipped "I'm a medical professional" tones. "We had to amputate below the left knee. She's weak from the blood loss and may experience shadow pains..." Frances continued to catalogue the medical specifics, but all Jebediah could do was smile.

"Mr. Turner? Sir?"

Frances's sharp voice penetrated his happy silent haze. She asked again if he would like to see Edith, who would be waking up

from the anesthesia any moment.

"Yes, yes of course. But I have a question." Jebediah shook his legs out of the small chair and tilted his head. Frances recalls the head tilt very clearly. When he stood up he realized that he stood a full foot taller than the severe nurse who had been the tyrannical majorette in his high school marching band.

"What did you do with it?" he asked.

"With what?"

"The foot. The leg. Did you throw it out already?"

"We have sophisticated and sanitary methods of disposal—you needn't worry about that."

"No, I'm wondering if we can keep it."

"There's no chance for reattachment. I assure you the doctors tried every available means to save the limb."

"Right, right. I realize they had to hack it. But can we have it? The leg?"

For a moment Frances Rampling's expression became entirely unprofessional, with not just the forehead thing but the full wrinkle of her beaky nose. She replicated that face when she was on the stand. Although she had an orderly life, Frances had gotten into several catfights in high school. All involving a lot of fingernail.

Perhaps Jebediah wanted to articulate a few more wishes, or maybe thought he could keep the foot pickled in a jar, like those two-headed babies in that Philadelphia oddity museum. When both Thaddeus J. Ebbers and the prosecuting attorney asked him to explain, he just said, "It belongs to Edith. I thought she would want it back." The wet shine in his eyes produced sympathy in the courtroom, but not from Frances Rampling with her passion for cleanliness and rules. Frances clicked her pointy tongue and said the word "unsanitary" five times in three sentences.



Edith seemed smaller under the scrutiny of the hospital's harsh lights. Jebediah had the foresight to buy his bride an orange soda.

"Thank you darling," she said shyly. "Is it terribly ugly?" She pulled back the crisp white sheet, uncovering a mess of bandages where her left knee used to continue.

"You are lovely. Just lovely." Jebediah kissed as close to the bandages as he dared. "Besides, your shoes will last twice as long."

After all the emotional moments, the whole courtroom cracked up at this one, releasing the tensions and bated breath. When Jebediah finally drove Edith away, he had already been released from County lockup on his own recognizance, and he acted as if he didn't miss that foot that got him arrested a bit.



The real acquittal came at the liquor store, two months after the "not guilty" allowed Jebediah back to fixing up the house for his (future) bride. On this Tuesday afternoon, with heavy air that smelled like snow, Jeb brought a bottle of Canadian whiskey to the counter, "for medicinal purposes." His eyes shone with his old sly humor, and his longer-than-ever hair flopped over his forehead comically.

"So how's everything going Jebediah? How's Edith?" Al Murray asked while sliding the whiskey into a brown paper bag. We waited for Jebediah to talk, outside of the official context. He and Edith had retreated to Turner's Point with only the occasional quick grocery sweeps.

"Well, I know now that I didn't need that foot," he said to Al Murray, knowing full well that three other people were in the store; plus Al Murray has a mouth the size of Seneca Caverns.

"Why's that?" Al asked for us all.

"We had enough good luck for any two people I guess," Jebediah said, bringing back that laughter that so many of us feel in the base of our spines. And then, no thanks to Thaddeus J. Ebberts Esq., we forgave them both.

QUICKEN

Kate Beles

How strongly  
you swing now,  
    my dangerous  
            dangling star—

*in your womb draped in red, closing-in  
on collapsing tapestries of filigreed flesh.*

And through this fisheye/skintaught/gasping  
sea of painpoints

I remember that  
*mis*  
implies one could  
*carry*  
    well.

(We *miss* so much  
but we *carry* even more . . .)

So I listen for the shaky rebirth  
of this belly's heart beat  
    stutter to a stop

while I'm powerless to keep

    my lungs from filling . . .

(breath breath *breathe*)

yours from falling . . .

But even as you go  
O tiny fish—

I inhale  
each sharpened  
nail with which you glitter.

SUTURE

Francine Conley

Says, with all his mental aching,  
his hands are loosening from  
his arms, his wife from him,  
and while he says this he parts  
the motel curtains with nervous fingers,  
his eye on a vacant air mattress  
floating in the pool's paradox-blue.

Sets the phone on his third  
lover's doughy belly,  
both naked as aces, dials up home  
but there's no answer.  
Mumbles something about *fire cats*,  
hide-and-seek, the wish  
behind the dream.

Wonders to himself if betrayal  
oozes out of every pore,  
flakes onto his shoulders each time  
he scratches his head in disbelief.

Figures he's trying hard to tie  
his shoes the way he learned,  
but the loops, the double-knots,  
he never got it.

Says, *No one is answering*.  
Clenches the receiver like a piece of bread,  
sweat in his palm making it hard  
to let go of the thing,  
incessant ring like a trigger cocked,  
his tongue wrapped in barbed wire.



Asks, *what to do*, as a slow arc  
of light rises up the window,  
his lover's forehead, and the wall.

She stares back, a pup in training,  
her impossible hair the beaded strings  
hung over a doorway he might enter.

She lifts her arm  
as if offering in place of answers  
her hand, then pulls him down,  
blinds and all, already tasting  
the rare burger she'll buy  
on her way back to the bank.

## IDIOMS (II)

Francine Conley

I am told that plates don't talk  
nor do trees whimper the chatter  
of tea cups.

I am told a father would never  
wash his kid's mouth out with soap,  
literally.

I am told my form is flabby,  
but I should review Plath  
or my ex-husband's poems:  
he has form down pat.

I am told the speakers in my poems  
are maniacs—that my lines inch  
problem-to-problem, that I look  
inside tornadoes and ignore  
the sharp shifts of everyday  
life: a maple in its first crux  
of green; a window open  
at the first blush of spring.

My problem is  
I never went to Church.  
I never met my mother.  
My past is a portrait  
without eyes. In fact,  
I was born in a motel  
named Marooned,  
my tongue a lost button  
shucked into the pocket  
of a cleaning lady

who took me home  
and sewed me into  
her daughter's unlucky  
blouse. Seriously, I mean it,  
literally. I was born to be an echo  
and seen from far away.

In my final portfolio  
the red pen says politely  
if I locate my authentic voice,  
my poems might find  
their true form, tense,  
and make more sense.

P.S. *I have promise.*

## IN THE BLACK POND, SWIMMING

Rachel May

When the water falls across our naked bodies, we moan or shriek or sigh or stay silent—any of these things will do, because it feels so good. Water on skin. The older kids come here to make out, but we don't. We only come for the sensation. Mom says we should enjoy our bodies because one day we'll be old like her, with sore knees and an aching back. She doesn't know we come here. This is sneaking out, in the nighttime when the world is sleeping. There's a delicious feeling to night-creeping when the whole world has gone to bed.

There are six of us—me and my three best girlfriends and two boys whose names are Jacob and Rob. Last year, Rob got a leech stuck on his penis, just like happens in that movie, only in real life his mother had to pull it off, and she called our mothers to check us for them, too.

No one lives near the pond. No one at all.

Down the road, there is a Girl Scout camp where I have gone every summer but will, finally, not go this year because I am older, and a mile away is Paulina Chepeski's house. She has raven-black hair and dark eyes, and everyone says her mother is a witch.

When we swim, we splash and play and make fun of one another. Sometimes, we'll rub arms with the boys on purpose, just to get a taste of how it feels, testing. We swim all the way out to the raft in the middle of the pond, and the water is cold, and the moon shines down on us, or the stars, or sometimes, once a month when it is cloudy, nothing at all—a moonless night. It's on these last nights that we tell ghost stories.

Everyone says the ghost of the girl who drowned here lives in the trees. Her name was Dara Singh, and she lived down the street from me in the blue house and hardly ever went outside. Her father was sick once, and my mother brought them a casserole. Mom went inside the house while I waited in the car. When she came back out, she wouldn't say anything at all about

what it was like inside.

"Normal," she said. "Just like our house."

But I didn't believe it. The little girl had blue eyes that stood out against her dark skin, like she'd been marked for something special in life, like she could see differently than the rest of us with our plain old matchy-matching skin and eyes. Mom said then that she'd grow up to be a real beauty, and that her brothers were all quite handsome, that I might keep that in mind for one day down the road. "Ew," I'd said.

But three years after the little girl's father got sick and then well again, and three years after Daniella's little sister was born, the little blue-eyed girl drowned in this pond. She was only seven then, three years younger than me. They said she was on a ventilator for two weeks, and then her family decided to let her go. That's how Mom said it. "Let her go."

The boys are daring me to swim to the other side of the lake now, saying, "Betcha can't."

I look back at them, treading water. "What do you know?" I say. "I've been on swim team all spring. Wanna race?"

The boys say yeah, and off we go, across the lake, my three girlfriends waiting on the raft, cheering for me. We can scream as loud as we like here, and no one will hear; that's the beauty of it.

We swim, my head in the black water, splashing, arms pushing, fifty yards, sixty, seventy-five, and I start to run out of breath. I raise my head out of the water to see where I am. There is the shadow of trees ahead of me. Not far now, and the two boys splashing beside me, just behind. I am fast. They'll see. I put my head back into the water, and I swim, pushing hard for proof of what I can do, cold water shushing all around my body, arms skimming my hips and then pushing back, pinkies up and out of the surface, hands thumb-side down at my ears. I fall into the rhythm, breath coming easy as I turn my head every other stroke.

And then, ahead of me, underwater, I see a fish—its white underside swaying. It rises up, out of the darkness of the depths, body bending in and out, fins pedaling, eager, like a child. I follow it all the way to the shore, and when we arrive, it bellies itself out

of the water, onto the sand, and grows legs and walks into the trees, white arm waving as it disappears. I stand there, water falling away from my shoulders, rolling in great drops off my skin, and I know who it is and am not afraid, because this is not a ghost story.

I can see her blue eyes now as if it is the night our car headlights fell upon her white-shirted body, me and my mother driving home, Dara alone in that big blue house, the single yellow light glowing upstairs. That night, all I could see of her face was the divots and round, dark shadows of the hollows, the sharp-edged brightness of her cheekbones, her forehead. But I could see her eyes in my mind. It's the same now. Those blue eyes. They haunt me. She is a shadow in the trees. She is in the periphery, always on the corners of my mind, even when I think I have forgotten. To my memory, it does not matter that I hardly knew her while she was alive. She will always, always be standing, a white shape in the headlights, her blue eyes looking out at me, knowing something I do not.

The boys splash up beside me, wade to the sandy shore, stand and catch their breath, hands on their knees.

"How'd you get here so fast?" they say.

I keep watching the woods.

No one could hear them scream that day, how she must have called out as she splashed, how her brother must have called as he pulled her in to shore, her lips already blue. It was April, too cold for everyone else to swim. They took a different school bus and got off here. The driver was fired for letting them off without a note, small recompense for a family aggrieved. I wonder how it is for him now, and more, for her brother.

When she was alive, I could tell she had a secret. It was in the way she moved—her hands so full of grace they seemed to float on the air, the careful set of her lips, the guarded blue eyes, the way she would not run and laugh and play with us in the neighborhood after school (those two years she went) but walked home alone, in even, steady steps that could not have belonged to any normal six-year-old. She is playful in death, at least.

One of the boys, Rob, steps up beside me and touches my shoulder, a cold shock. He has broad shoulders, and his black hair sticks to his forehead in thick, straightened strands.

"Wake up," he says.

I do not know it, but in two weeks I will kiss him, a sweet, awkward first kiss that will charge my whole body from my heels up through my swim-strong calves, through my spine, to my shoulders and my flushed cheeks.

I turn to him in the night, our skin still shedding drops from the shimmering black pond, and I touch his face, run my fingers down his forehead, his cheeks, over his two wet lips, just because I can, just because it feels so good to touch each other in this life.





*Young Boy, San Geronimo*



*Morning Sun, Peten*



*Stray Dog, Salama*



*Guitarista, Guatamala City*

PERSEPHONE'S POMEGRANATE

(EXCERPTED FROM CHAPTER VI, PASIPHAË'S BULL, CRETE,  
JUNE 1970)

William V. Spanos

Opposition unites. From what draws apart results the  
most beautiful harmony. All things take place by strife.

Heraclitus, *Fragments*

Strife is not a rift [*Riss*] as a mere cleft is ripped open;  
rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong  
to each other. This rift carries the opponents into the  
provenance of their unity by virtue of their common  
ground. It is a basic design, an outline sketch, that draws  
the basic features of the upsurge of the clearing of  
beings. This rift does not let the opponents break apart;  
it brings what opposes measure and boundary into its  
common outline.

Martin Heidegger,

"The Origin of the Work of Art"

My soul, your voyages have been your native land!

Niko Kazantzakis,

*The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, Bk.XVI

It would be inadequate to say that the richly diverse panoramic  
scene stretching out before our eyes under the deep blue Cretan  
sky was breathtaking. What we experienced was not simply a  
matter of sight, but also and simultaneously of smell, of touch,  
of sound, of taste—and of historical time. The air we breathed,  
which down below was on the edge of being hot and enervating,  
was cool and refreshing, almost uncomfortably stimulating; the  
mountainside smelled so strongly of wild herbs—*thimari*  
(thyme), *faskomilo* (chamomile), *vasilikos* (basil), *origanon*



(oregano)—that it seemed as if we were tasting its aroma; and the surrounding silence up there at the center and (literally) top of Crete spoke a disturbingly unknown language that, nevertheless, resonated with familiarity. It was, I thought, this surging, multidimensional and primal language—this dislocating language of excess—that we deracinated moderns had forgotten or, rather, repressed, in our frantic and murderous race to develop a technological discourse positively capable of domesticating and plundering the earth and that the awesome presence of Psiloriti was trying to remind us of. As I was pondering over this silent language, which I identified not with rational meaning but with *force*—the kind of subterranean force, for example, that infused Kazantzakis's language—I remembered my dream and Ioanna's reference to Psiloriti as the *omphalos* of the *omphalos* of the world and caught a faint glimpse of what she had really meant.

"So, Professor Spanos, what do you think of all this?" Ioanna asked, breaking the silence as she extended her arms in a gesture that seemed to be attempting to encompass the recalcitrantly uncontainable panorama. "Was the drive up here worth all the trouble?"

As I nodded in affirmation, she added, "I don't think you can understand Knossos and Phaistos and Aghia Triada—I mean I don't think you can know the Minoans—without making the pilgrimage to the summit of Psiloriti. She alone knows their secret."

Attuned by now to Ioanna's oracular language, I replied, "I think I got a hint of it standing here on the lips of her mouth."

"Perhaps, but you must enter her mouth willingly," she said with that estranging enigmatic smile—the *meidiama*—I had by then come to identify with the Kore. "And *that*, you'll get a chance to do after we've driven around that last curve," pointing to what appeared to be an opening on the terminal ridge of the peakless mountain.

We took one last look at the forbidding, but profoundly attractive, ragged panorama before us; then, turning our backs to its disconcerting lure, re-entered the car and proceeded with great

anticipation and anxiety toward the opening in the mountainside, though not knowing what to expect to find on the other side of the ridge. Reaching our destination, we made the last u-turn and I spontaneously braked. The vista was astonishing, another defamiliarizing border crossing. Down below, perhaps three or four hundred meters deep, a vast fertile oval-shaped plain, maybe two kilometers long and half a kilometer wide, surrounded protectively by the craggy ridge of the mountain, spread out before us like a gigantic green carpet interfused with yellow and red flowers. In various areas of the plain, we saw, in miniature, several shepherds, staffs in hand, tending their flocks of grazing sheep and goats, and at each end of the lush plain, low round huts made of stone piled on stone, which seemed to serve the shepherds as sleeping quarters. The contrast between the awe-inspiring scene to which we had been bearing witness for the last hour and a half (it took that long to drive up the mountain) and this one, which its facade concealed from view, was at first startling. Despite my better judgment, I couldn't, at that stunning moment, resist recalling the most memorable movie of my adolescence, *Lost Horizon*, which starred Ronald Coleman and Louise Rainer, particularly that wonderfully contrasting scene when the weather-battered remnant led by Coleman, after the airplane carrying them out of the political maelstrom in China has crashed somewhere in the relentlessly ferocious Himalayas, discovers Shangri-la, the Utopia, where humans never grow old as long as they remain within its protective precincts. What at first, in the process of our ascent of Psiloriti, seemed to me a yawning cannibalistic mouth, now, at the end, underwent a marvelous change into some rich, strange, and welcoming valley. I looked at Ioanna, and saw that she had been looking at me with that mysteriously knowing Minoan smile.

When the spell was broken, I drove slowly down the winding decline, and then, following Ioanna's directions, to the east end of the plain and parked alongside one of the stone huts, which, Ioanna informed us, was called a *mandhra*. This, she said, was not only her shepherd cousins' sleeping quarters, but also where



they made the famous Cretan goat cheese called *misithra*. One of the shepherds, who was tending a flock of sheep not far from the *mandhra*, had seen our maroon French station wagon drive into the bowl, and, curious to learn who from the outside world had dared to invade their space, began to walk towards us. A young man, between 30 and 35 years old, he sported the handlebar mustache that seemed to be the obligatory feature of the Cretan peasantry and was wearing brown riding pants, black knee-high boots, a black vest over a rough-textured white blouse, and a black head-band with the tassels dangling, like small soundless bells, from his forehead. He exuded the aura of what I could have called the heroic, but it was a heroism indissolubly associated with the force of the barbaric, which is the paradoxical definition I would give to the utterly untranslatable Greek word "*palikari*," which Greeks always use to refer to exuberant and fearless young men. Suddenly, he recognized Ioanna and, registering surprise, came running to greet her and to discover what had brought her up here "*pera ap' ton cosmon*" (beyond the world) so unexpectedly. As they were talking animatedly, I was struck by his resemblance to Ioanna, but also to the lithe young men in the Minoan frescoes: their long shining black hair, long delicate noses, supple athletic bodies, narrow waists, and, not least, their dark and intensely flashing almond-shaped eyes. This resemblance may have been wishful thinking, reflecting my perhaps illegitimate rejection of the prevailing theory that the highly developed Minoans were rendered extinct by one form of cataclysm or another. Not unlike the prejudice which radically distinguishes ancient from modern Greeks, this preference for the exotic ancient had allowed—or, rather, compelled—Henry Miller, for example, to measure and highlight the exquisite cultural refinement and joyous grace of the Minoans he "encountered" at Knossos by invoking the sharply contrasting cultural squalor and vulgarity of the modern Cretan villagers, summed up in the western, particularly American, stereotype of the contemporary Greek male: "Walking back to meet the bus [that would take him from Knossos to Heraklion] I stopped at a little village to get a drink. The contrast between

past and present was tremendous. The men who gathered around me took on the appearance of uncouth savages. They were friendly and hospitable, extraordinarily so, but by comparison with the Minoans they were like neglected domesticated animals. . . . As I sipped my glass of water, which had a strange taste, I listened to one of these glorified baboons reminisce about the glorious days he spent in Herkimer New York."

Wishful thinking or not, the uncanny resemblance between these young contemporary Cretans and the Minoans depicted in the frescoes made a strong impression on me, and it deepened rather than diminished as the day wore on. In putting it this way, I do not want to suggest that I was inadvertently backing into a racist position on the question of the origins of the Cretan people and their culture. No more than in my speculations about the national identity of the modern Greeks, I was not affirming the unbroken biological continuity of the Cretans. In registering this resemblance at the time, I was mindful of the cultural significance of the Cretan Kazantzakis's proud affirmation that his ancestors on his father's side were Arab. What I was intuiting, in opposition to the conventional view of the origins and "end" of the Minoans (which *is* racist), was not only that certain physical features of the Minoans survived in and dominated the mixed bodily makeup of the modern Cretans. It was also, and more important, that certain cultural traits, not least those paradoxical physical and verbal gestures that, from one perspective, seems like unnatural—aesthetic, even effete—refinement, but, from another, a monstrous natural ferocity, survived in and dominated the adulterated cultural identity of the modern Cretans. And, I thought, these physical and cultural characteristics endured, despite the Cretans' long, violent, and corrosive history of conquest and piratical plunder by their Mediterranean neighbors—Dorians, Mycenaeans, Arabs, Turks, Venetians, Germans—because of their abiding and fierce will to be free.

After this reunion, Ioanna, now glowing, introduced us to her handsome cousin. She told him in Greek that I was an American, one of her teachers at the University of Athens, whose

parents had emigrated to the United States from Thessaly, and that I was bearing witness to (*martirevi*) the military dictatorship's devastation of Greece and to America's complicity in that destructive process. Interrupting Ioanna, her cousin, whose name, regretfully, I have forgotten, took hold of my hand and, smiling approvingly, squeezed it firmly, and told her to tell me that the rule of the military junta was as brutal as the Turkish occupation—"Afti oi sintagmatarhi einai fovira skilia" (Those colonels are ferocious dogs)—and that the world outside of Greece needed to know about it. She told him that we had driven up to the summit of Psiloriti because she wanted to bring us to the womb of Crete, the womb that gave birth to Ellas; that only up here in the sacred place of the beginning, and not where the tourist buses go, would we be able to learn not only the secret of Knossos, but the meaning of Crete and Greece itself, in other words, the meaning of "*eleftheria*" (freedom). Her cousin nodded in agreement, and as he was ruffling my son's long black hair with one hand and pointing the shepherd's crook he was holding in the other in the direction of the ridge opposite to where we were standing, he told Ioanna in a Greek dialect that was far more Cretan than her's—he could neither understand nor speak English—to make sure she showed us the cave where Rhea saved Zeus from his murderous father, Chronos. He then excused himself, saying that he had to get back to his flock, but would return later. Ioanna told him that we had brought food and wine with us in the hope that he and his brother would join us before our descent. He replied that it was a splendid idea, and strode off.

About an hour later, after we had meandered through the lush green pastureland to the other end of the bowl, all the time listening to the faint mesmerizing contrapuntal tinkle of the many-sized goat bells and breathing the intoxicating thin air at the top of the world, Ioanna, her staff in hand, suggested that it was time to make our pilgrimage to the cave where Cretan—and Greek—history began. Before beginning, we refreshed ourselves at a watering trough fed by a mountain spring at the bottom of

the crags of the ridge across the way from the mandhra. To me, partly under the spell of Ioanna's oracular presence—and following the compelling example of the children, who, almost naturally, would often enact the myth associated with the particular place we visited in Greece—our drinking from the ice cold waters pouring out of the ancient mountain's ribs into the containing basin was like the ritual purification of a pilgrim drinking from the Castalian Spring at the foot of Delphi in the Parnassus range before mounting the sacred way and entering the sanctuary of the Pythian oracle of Apollo. With Ioanna in the lead, a bouquet of wild flowers she had picked in her hand, and me bringing up the rear of the procession, we began the ascent up the rocky slope of the ridge to the cave.

As we climbed, Ioanna told us that Cretans dispute the place of Zeus's birth. Those who live in the villages surrounding the Diktian mountain range (*Lassithiotika*) in the east claim he was born in one of the caves of that range, but those who live in the villages surrounding the Idean range (*Psiloriti*) insist he was born in the cave we were about to visit. She also added laconically that he could not possibly have been born in the Diktian range, because it was in the east, and Zeus was the god who determined what was East (*anatoli*) and what was West (*dhitikos*), morning and evening (*proi kai espera*), youth and old age (*neotis kai gerontia*), birth and death (*ghenesis kai thanatos*). In response, I asked her if that interpretation didn't make it sound as if Zeus was similar to the God of Christianity rather than a pagan god. Before she could answer, a piercing whistle came echoing from the plain below to interrupt our conversation. Turning, we saw two shepherds, the one we had been talking with and another, similarly dressed in the native manner, who turned out to be his younger brother, walking hurriedly towards us across the plain. When they arrived, the cousin we had met introduced us to the other, and told Ioanna that they had decided to accompany us to the cave where Zeus was born.

Ten minutes later, after a strenuous climb through rock and prickly scrub and some unidentified Cretan flora that defied the

stone out of which they seemed to grow, we arrived at the huge gaping mouth of a cave that seemed to lead downward into the earth's dark bowels.

We stopped for a while to rest. Then Ioanna turned to her cousins and told them to lead the way. Following them, we entered and began our descent into the reddish throat in silence, our footsteps echoing all around us as if, I imagined, they were the muffled bellowing of the wounded Minotaur. About fifty meters from the mouth, the dimming light turned into darkness. The shepherds reached into their pant pockets and pulled out several candles which they lit and handed to all of us. The dancing shadows thrown by the flickering candlelight against the broken contours of the walls, enhanced by the reverberation of our movements, disintegrated the world illumined by the light of day. We seemed to be entering another, forgotten, primeval time and reality, the vestiges of which we recognize only in our dreams. I remembered Plato's allegory of the cave. But unlike Plato, I did not identify the monstrous flickering shadows with the unreal, "sepulchral" world, as he puts it in *The Republic*, into which mankind had fallen from the eternal reality of the transcendent realm of pure forms. To me, now deeply immersed in the story of Crete, the shadows *were* symbolic of the inescapable reality of mankind's original, finite condition prior to its rationalization—or, better, to civilization—of being, the dreadful realm of the uncanny, where men and women are never at home, but also where that primal estrangement becomes the condition for the possibility of creative freedom. And then, in an associative leap that, by this time, our sojourns in Greece had made virtually inevitable, Persephone's abduction by Hades into the underworld

Suddenly, the older brother exclaimed, "Ekei!" (There!), pointing his gnarled shepherd's crook in the direction of a corridor of the cave that turned sharply to the right, "*Ekei genithikai o Zeus!*" (That's where Zeus was born!) In the dim light, we made out a sort of niche in the ragged wall of the cave, the shelf of which seemed to have been chiseled into the shape of an infant's body. We all stood there in the silence of awe. To me, it was an

encounter with what I can only call the temporal sublime, a movement that enlarged time's horizons beyond my mind's ability to contain it, accompanied by the diminution of my sense of self to the point where it seemed no longer to exist. I had had intimations of this awesome sense of time from the moment I stepped on Greek soil. In fact, I had felt its dislocating force deeply a couple of months earlier when we entered the cave on the island of Paros, where the ancients quarried the famous Parian marble, examples of which I had seen in the small museum at Epidauros, that, it was claimed, unlike the marble quarried on the slope of Mount Penteli near Athens, was diaphanous. The intimations of this temporal sublime were so dislocating that I was compelled by the experience eventually to write two antiphonal poems about the unnamable ambiguity it precipitated. The first one, "Paros I, Spring 1970," affirms it against Plato:

Had Plato,  
who preferred  
golden circles  
to poetry  
in that time,

really known  
that Parian marble  
was won  
by candlelight,

he might have  
understood  
the dark ravings  
of his prodigal teacher  
and we angels known  
this great-thighed earth.

The second, "Paros II, Spring 1970," answers this affirmation:



It's easy, my friend,  
to scorn his longing  
for angelic embraces

but look under  
the embroidered finery  
into that proliferating ditch

then lie down  
with her stinking body  
in your golden arms.

They quarried the marble  
by candlelight

and it shown diaphanous  
in the blazing sun.

Here, however, in the bowels of Psiloriti, as the flickering candles we were holding before us ignited the ancient labyrinthine past into awesomely present life, I came not only to accept the absence of a principle of presence—a center—in being and the alienation from civilization as we know it that this absence entails, but also to affirm its positive potentialities, not least the absolute, which is to say, terrible, freedom they enable.

As I was meditating on these matters in the volatile darkness of the cave, Ioanna asked the older brother to narrate the story associated with the sacred place to which he was pointing for their foreign guests (*oi xenoi mas*), telling him that she would translate his Greek words into English. At first, he demurred, saying that she was the educated one in the family and thus knew the story far better than he did. But in the end, after she had convinced him that his inhabitation of the summit of Psiloriti made him a more trustworthy authority than mere books conferred on her, Ioanna prevailed. I cannot, of course, remember exactly what this young Cretan shepherd told us about Zeus that



unforgettable afternoon in the Zeus's cave. But I do remember vividly the occasion, the gist of the story, and, not least, the time frame in which it was narrated, all of which Ioanna, knowingly, made every effort to preserve in her translation.



We—by which I mean in this case not only I, Peggy, and Ioanna, but also the children, Maria, Stephanía and Aristides—listened to this uneducated, simple shepherd's tale in silent rapture, as if he were an ancient bard, a Thales or a Homer, recalling first things to an audience who inhabited a later banalized world. And when he had finished, and the echoing of his last words were finally absorbed by the dark interior, a resonant silence fell over us. It spoke to me about familiar elemental things, but, as before at Knossos, it was in a foreign tongue which, like the Minoan scripts called Linear A and Linear B, I could not translate in the sophisticated language I had at my disposal. As I was contemplating what I took to be this impasse, Ioanna turned away from the cave wall she had been staring at and, holding the candle with both hands before her, said to us half seriously and half in jest, "There! The oracle has spoken." We all turned our gaze towards her and laughed, but my laughter was defensive. In that silent dark, flickering with spectral shadows, Ioanna and her shepherd cousin underwent a metamorphosis before my eyes. For an instant she became Rhea—or was it Demeter or Persephone?—in the form of the bare-breasted Minoan goddess holding snakes in both her upraised hands, and he, her priest.

As we were ascending out of the dark belly of the cave into the bright light of day, the story we had heard echoing in my head and feeling somehow "chosen," I couldn't help recalling for a second time Father Mapple's version of the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale, which Herman Melville turns upside down in *Moby-Dick*: "God came upon him in the whale, and swallowed him down to living gulfs of doom, and with swift slantings tore him along 'into the midst of the seas,' where the

eddy depths sucked him ten thousand fathoms down, and 'weeds were wrapped about his head,' and all the watery world of woe bowled over him. Yet even then, God heard the engulfed, repenting prophet when he cried. Then God spake unto the fish; and from the shuddering cold and blackness of the sea, the whale came breaching up towards the warm and pleasant sun, and all the delights of air and earth; and 'vomited out Jonah upon the dry land;' when the word of the Lord came a second time; and Jonah, bruised and beaten—his ears, like two sea-shells, still multitudinously murmuring of the ocean—Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!"

When we had climbed to the mouth of the cave, Ioanna's cousins told us that they had to return to their flock, but hoped that we would remain on the mountain until later in the day when they could come back to the *mandhra* to visit with us until it was time to descend. We thanked them warmly and replied that we did intend to explore the summit of Psiloriti a while longer and then, before departing, to have a picnic, to which we invited them. About two hours later, after we had circled the bowl on foot—it was now around four or five in the afternoon—we returned to the *mandhra* to prepare a country-style supper. We laid two colorful Cretan woolen blankets we had bought in a village near Aghia Triada on the lush green grass, brought out the picnic basket brimming with peasant bread, sausages, cold cuts, feta cheese, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, and the yellow melons Greeks call *piponi*, and sent the children to bring back the several bottles of homemade Cretan wine and soft drinks, which, on our arrival, we had submerged in the watering trough on the far side of the *mandhra* to cool. Shortly after, the two cousins returned to partake of the festive communal meal. To the fare we had brought, the shepherds contributed the fresh and exquisitely delicious *anthotiro* they were then making. This, the younger brother noted with pride, was the goat cheese the guardian shepherds fed the young stripling Zeus "in that time" (*s' afton ton kairon*).

After we had seated ourselves cross-legged in a circle around the square blankets, I poured wine into everyone's paper cup, and, raising mine, proposed a toast, which Ioanna translated into Greek, to our hospitable hosts: "May Zeus, the thunderer, guard his guardians and their beautiful and sacred earth until the end of time." And the older brother reciprocated in Greek: "*stous Amerikanoi episkeptis mas, ghia kai hara*," and, as he traced a wide circle with his outstretched hand holding the cup of wine, added, "*Pothoumai o Zeus na sas harisi haris 'sto onoma tou Psiloriti*" (To our American guests, health and joy; may Zeus grant you grace in the name of Psiloriti). I have thought that beautiful but untranslatable ancient Greek word—*haris*—ever since, having felt that, coming from this particular Cretan toaster's mouth, it was the greatest of all possible gifts.

As we ate and drank, we conversed exuberantly about many things, thanks, in part, to the wine and the thin intoxicating air of that altitude—and to Ioanna's abilities as a translator. Our hosts talked about their lives as shepherds, the Cretan earth, the military dictatorship, America, and, surprisingly, their poets. We, in turn, talked about our lives as academics, the America earth, American democracy, America's role in Greece and the rest of the world, Athens, and, more specifically, about the Rita Pipinopoulou affair, which had absorbed so much of our time, thought, and energies that year. What filtered through to me in the process of our conversation was not simply a sense of these Cretans' contemporaneity—their radical politics, their hatred of the Greek colonels and the police state they were fanatically bent on building, and their disappointment in the United States' policies concerning Greece and Cyprus—but also and simultaneously a sense of their Janus-like antiquity. It was, on one side, their fierce love of the austere and ungiving Cretan earth, their resonant elemental language, their unencumbered attunement, too, to an unspoken "something" deeper even than their Cretan or Greek nationality and Orthodox Christian religion, a "something" that rendered the words they spoke and their bodily gestures primal and poetic. On the other side, it was a narrowness of horizon that manifested

itself as a ferocious barbarism latent with violence. Both Kazantzakis's wonderfully live Zorba and the cruel villagers who stone the widow; both the Minoan acrobat and the charging bull; both man and beast: Minotaur.

After we had drunk several glasses of wine and the vestiges of the inhibiting distance between two entirely different ways of life had melted away, the younger brother, who had said very little thus far, spontaneously began to sing a beautiful Cretan folk song about his village, Anoghia—something having to do with its resistance to the Turkish occupation. Ioanna and his older brother joined in, and soon the three were dancing in a circle, their arms on each other's shoulders and their feet tracing an intricate pattern of forward and backward movement, which, it seemed to me, was very different from—somehow more sophisticated and elegant than—the simple patterns of the various dances of the mainland, at least those, like the *tsamiko* and the *sirto*, with which I was familiar. Eventually, the dancers invited us to join their airy circular chain. We were reluctant at first, but after studying the complex steps intently for a while, we—the *xenoi*—rashly succumbed to the temptation to levitate with our Cretan hosts. The consequence, however, was far different from our hope. Our self-conscious, arrhythmic stumbling, which held up the forward motion of the chain, reintroduced the gravity which their bodies seemed to defy. But our American ungainliness, certainly the result of our alienation from the earth and the sky, fire and water—the very elements invoked by most demotic Cretan songs—was not entirely disastrous, since it was received by our hosts with amused delight.

These good spirits and the laughter reverberating across the green plain must have been contagious, since it wasn't long before several other shepherds, quite young and quite old, having heard the commotion we were making in our corner of the bowl—no doubt unusual on the remote reaches of Psiloriti—came to participate in these pastoral festivities. They sang about love and life and death, about exile from the homeland (the *xenitia*), about the Turkish occupation, about their mountains, their flowers,

their animals, and their birds. Having seen and admired the fresco of the partridges from what Arthur Evans, no doubt mistakenly, called the "caravanserai" (a rest house with baths) at Knossos, I was especially struck by the repeated references in their songs to the partridge (*perdika*), which invariably was a metaphor for both the sought-after, hard to domesticate, or deeply loved girl (*kore*), and, especially in the *mirologhia* (the songs of lamentation over the dead), the soul that had departed from the dead body. Despite my awareness of the unlikeliness of this identification, I couldn't help feeling that these Minoan partridges were the ancestors of the ubiquitous partridges in the folk songs the Cretan shepherds were singing, another instance, to me, of the uncanny continuity between the Minoans and the modern Cretans.



At a certain point in the festivities on Psiloriti, one of the newcomers, a middle-aged man whose darkly bronzed weather-beaten, bearded face and burley body made him look more like the Minotaur than a man, began, to our amazement, to sing the *Erotocritos*, the beautiful long dramatic poem in fifteen syllable couplets about the love affair between Erotocritos and Arethusa, which the seventeenth-century Cretan poet, Vincenzo Cournaros modeled on the story of Romeo and Juliet. I knew of this poem only from the numerous portraits of the two lovers by the great itinerant Greek primitive painter Theophilos. (Not incidentally, the partridge is also a prominent motif in his paintings.) But we were even more amazed when one after another of this motley company picked up the verses where the previous singer left off until they had gotten through a large portion of this poem. Where in the United States, I thought, or in Europe for that matter, was this fusion of folk, song, and space, this elemental communal comportment towards the earth and its rhythms any longer possible? Even in rural Greece, as I had come to realize earlier in the spring, when we had accompanied my mother on her first visit to her native village since her childhood, the kind of

familiarity with the music and poetry of one's home region to which we were privileged to bear witness that afternoon was gradually but distinctly fading from the people's memory in the face of official Greece's rush to become modernized.

They drank Cretan wine, they told Cretan stories, they sang Cretan songs, they danced Cretan dances, and we foreigners, unequivocally welcomed, joined them there at the summit of the Cretan world in the neighborhood of the birth of the protean Zeus and the labyrinthine Olympian dispensation. It was, for us, certainly an example of the *filoxenia* that came so naturally to the Cretans, but to put it that way is not adequate, at least for me. What I was experiencing that afternoon was more than something natural; it was a natural event that transformed itself into the mythical. Or, to try to be more precise, it was an experience in which the self's awareness of its ultimate alienation from being and thus its compulsion to bend the primal errancy of being to its own will gradually metamorphosed into an awareness that the self's alienation from being is precisely what constitutes its oneness with being. Once again, though now in a more intense way than before, we had magically become a community of solitudes singing and dancing around the edge of the abyss:

Keeping time,  
 Keeping the rhythm in the dancing  
 As in their living in the living seasons  
 The time of the seasons and the constellations  
 The time of milking and the time of harvest  
 The time of the coupling of man and woman  
 And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
 Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

What more could tourists ask for? But when the sun began to fall towards the west, and we realized that, like it or not, it was time for us to descend to the lower world, we were given something more. As we were clearing away the remains of our communal supper and packing them into the back of the Peugeot,



the older brother began to recite what we took to be a poem until we realized that what he was “reciting” was about us and our visit to Psiloriti and therefore, that he was improvising. It was in fact a *mantinadha*, the fifteen syllable rhymed couplet basic to traditional Cretan prosody, whether of the communally composed folk songs we heard that afternoon or the consciously composed *Erotokritos*, that, I had been told back in Athens, Cretans were famous for making up spontaneously. As soon as he had finished his verse, the younger brother responded by offering another that continued the inaugural motif. And this antiphonal improvisation went on until virtually everyone of the shepherds had made one up.

Unfortunately, I can't recall any of the verses they improvised that extraordinary afternoon. They all had to do with the honor these lowly shepherds felt and the great pleasure they and the mountain Psiloriti took from our visit, the desolation they would feel at our departure, and the anticipation of our redemptive return in some future time. And this in a simple and unselfconscious language that reflected the vast scope and depth of time with which the natural surroundings, the historical context, the talk, and the conditions of the occasion resonated. Which is to say, it was a language that endowed this event with an unforgettable mythic aura. Needless to say, we were both astounded and thrilled by this utterly unexpected gesture that made us feel as if we, like the shepherds and their sheep and goats, were organic and larger than life parts of this astonishing mountain. I remember now, even after the lapse of thirty years, turning to Ioanna, looking into her amused eyes, and saying, “Now I understand what you meant when you told me this morning that Psiloriti was a sacred mountain.”



# WHAT WE KEEP

Sean Thomas Dougherty

Gray-blue rain far from your fingers tap tapping the letters of your name. In the blue hills above the graveyard we found at the edge of the woods, the fireflies we chased through the trees, drinking rum—were we singing or laughing when we fell soaked into the shadows of the grass? The chair in the corner of the bar in Budapest, Pittsburgh, Kalamazoo—in the old cities in the old places where we leaned against the wall, in the smoky haze of bar smoke and breath, in the rooms at the top of the twisting stairs where we slept and fucked in the lullaby of the radiator's hiss. What we keep is small change in a child's palm. What we keep is our tongues clucked in our cheeks. I sip glasses of harsh gold, mash my teeth, my hand reaching for that dress you wore, like a factory girl on a Friday after she's quit on the last day of summer. What keeps us from worms is this tough, rough-handed kiss. To swing against slag, the purple hills of mid-autumn outside the city of bridges and blue sun, the distant tintinnabulation of church bells, blur of twilight, candles lit by widows in the windows of old farm houses. Falling into the full grapevines along the lake, the fields our hands furrowed. In the cluttered cupboards where we keep what comes. Someone turns out the kitchen light, walks through the rooms we once rented, walks away from the unraveling rain. The dime-thin dust on the windowsills where with fingers we traced our names.

## TRYING TO MAKE A LONG STORY SHORT

Matt Zambito

Et cetera, forever. Then a hullabaloo, a *whoosh!*  
into your single cell, & a cleaving, an exponential  
reaching of a neck & hands, of eyes & a mind fresh  
as a honeydew, wet music, a wail, a name. Suck milk

& shit leftovers every-when. Words arrive to a tongue,  
unpack suitcases slowly. Thirteen years picking up fear.  
Church here & there. Check the time. The zoo, city, one  
lovely explosion of the heart after another. Cash, trash, beer,

blah, blah something, & blah. Too much of the tube. Lubed sex.  
A recurring dream of raspberries. Find the one & other. Floss more.  
Get mugged for too many forty hours & get a new job. Finally examine  
the blah. Pray to stay sane. Buy a home, save for later. Antibiotics galore

almost fail once, twice. Kidney stones, retire, inspire grandkids. Pain killers  
in bed. Maybe a last chance to choose—one way or another—*which* forever,  
etc.

## A DAY AT CONEY ISLAND, 1999

Sean Prentiss

The wooden roller coaster serpents  
and shudders in late morning.  
The old tracks rattle Bones  
and me until our necks and backs kink.  
She kneads my muscles loose,  
and still I know  
I shouldn't be in love  
with the Cyclone or her for the pains  
they've caused over the years.  
But they're the oldest:  
The Cyclone began in '27.  
Bones and I first fell  
in love in '89.

We step over diapers  
and food cartons  
to enter the mid-day salt water  
of her home, where the East bleeds  
into Lower New York Bay.  
We join throngs of lovers  
bathing in polluted  
waters. Bones floats  
on her back  
as my hand steadies  
from underneath. Her small breasts  
and bent knees femur  
slight above the waves.

Kosher hot dog vendors  
camp on the boardwalk.  
I pay \$2.75. The white-capped  
cook tongs one from the grill and hands

it to Bones. She lathers  
her side in ketchup  
mine in spicy mustard.  
Dinner. She holds the meal  
and we takes bites from either end.

Above ground, the F-Train journeys  
from Stillwell Ave. to her Park Slope brownstone.  
We shudder past nighttime  
fields of Greenwood Cemetery.  
With cigarette-stained fingertips, Bones  
draws constellations across  
rows of marble.  
I rest my head  
on her slender shoulder  
and inhale coaster exhaust,  
knishes, sesame seeds, and hotdogs  
all scented with sea.  
As the car rattles  
me to sleep, from her neck  
I tongue the day.

## WAITING IN THE WAITING ROOM

Sharon Mollerus

They walked in while I was reading a six-month old copy of *People*. Somebody has anorexia; a 35-year-old pop star married again. No one subscribes; we just read the mangled copies in waiting rooms, the staples falling out, pages ripped; it makes us feel better. There's a cheery gas fire on with fake logs, and the décor is pasteled winter scenes hanging from papered walls.

She was an old woman short of breath, but not too hampered in the volume of her voice. "I wish I could just die and get it over with," she yelled. Her nice neighbor brought her in, a lady with an enormous purse who can't be any younger. "How long you been feeling this way?" the triage nurse asks. "For years." She's been taking nitroglycerin for her heart; her friends share it. "But it's expired," she's told. "You can tell when it doesn't tingle anymore under your tongue. Who's your doctor?" "Doctors kill you," she said. "That's why I don't have one. They stuck a needle in my mother, and she died right then. I saw it all." She gives over her hand to have her pulse taken.

The old guy in the bright blue vest at the volunteer desk shrugs. His shoulders are hunched as he slowly gets up and circles the room, turning on the lights. It's storming outside, long wires of lightning, hard cracks of thunder, brought down like a hammer on cement. All the flower arrangements are in silk; the drooping star-like white flowers fall over the reception desk.

I wait for my son to finish his visit, then I'll wheel  
him to the car. At his house I'll help him into  
the hospital bed that's set up in their living room.  
I'll stay until his wife comes home from work  
and back from picking up their little girl from  
daycare; the child's too young to understand that  
her father, on the other hand, doesn't want to die.  
I hand the old magazine off to the old woman's  
nice neighbor.

## JOHN HENRY'S HEADLAMP

Josh Weil

An excerpt from the novel *Swimming Season*

When I try to recall my father in those years before I turned nine, I mainly see him leaving and returning. As far back as I can remember, he went on business trips—Philadelphia, Baltimore, sometimes all the way out to Minneapolis or even Chicago. He wouldn't tell me he was going until he was already at the door holding his carry-on bag and alligator skin briefcase, but I'd know as soon he sat down to breakfast.

From the top of the stairs that led to my bedroom, I'd crouch behind the dieffenbachia plant's broad leaves and watch him. A paper napkin tucked in his collar to protect his tie, he would absently scrape a teaspoon inside the shell of a soft boiled egg while he read the *Eagle*. Mom would sit next to him, her face already made up despite her bathrobe and slippers, tracing her fingers over the veins on the back of his hand. When he finished eating, he would rise, walk behind Mom, and let his hands drift from her shoulders down the whole length of her arms until his fingers had enveloped hers. He'd kiss the nape of her neck. She'd close her eyes. When she stood, Dad would wrap his arms around her waist and rest his chin on the top of her head, and they would gaze together out at the grey slate patio and the red begonias in wet, dark soil, the oriental maple with its burgundy leaves almost still.

Then I'd hear the car moaning up the driveway, and whoever was picking Dad up would honk a couple times. Dad would untouch his chest from Mom's back and walk to the front door, shoes clacking away the quiet. That was my cue. I'd hurl myself down the stairs and land in his hug.

He was never gone for more than a couple days, but he always returned with the fanfare of a homecoming, as if he'd been



caravanning across the Sahara instead of just fighting traffic in Trenton. And he always brought me gifts, old-looking things he claimed had belonged to famous men: Billy the Kid's boots, Al Capone's wristwatch, the nose-ring from Paul Bunyan's ox.

When he left Schipler Architects to make a go of it on his own, it didn't mean much to me except that he took more business trips. But it was worse for Mom. He started going on weekends, and, before long, he was leaving almost every other Friday. I'd come home on the bus, and Mom would be waiting for me by the mailboxes, trying too hard to look happy, talking in a high, excited voice that wasn't quite hers. She'd take my hand as we walked up the driveway, and, if she was already missing him badly enough, she'd swing our arms as if trying to work up enough momentum to skip. Those weekends were the only times she let me taste wine. She'd pour herself a glass at dinner and give me sips. Afterwards, we'd push the coffee table aside in the living room, draw the curtains open over Dad's picture window, turn the floodlights on. She'd put on a folk music record—Serbian, Turkish, Israeli—take my hands, her fingers still damp from the dishwater, and spin me around the room, teaching me the steps.

Everyone must have a fault line in their childhood, a year or summer or moment when fate reaches into a pathless landscape and nudges them in a direction for the first time. For me, it was a Thursday night when I was nine. The last time Dad had come home he'd brought me John Henry's headlamp, and I was outside, creeping around with it strapped to my head, an arrow notched in the string of my bow, trying to find toads so I could shoot them. When I heard my parents yelling, I clicked off the lamp. The light from their bedroom window felt like high beams on me. I crouched down, wishing I hadn't been sneaking around in the woods. I wouldn't have heard them; they wouldn't have been fighting. Their voices were compressed into shards as they came through the window.

"I run a business. Sweetheart. Lilly. What do you want? Me to go back to the—"

"No."

"They wouldn't take me."

"I don't want you to go back to the fucking firm."

"Lil."

"I want you to stop going on those trips."

"I've always had to go on trips. How am I going to run a—"

"Who does business on the weekend? All the time on the weekend, Harold? Who?"

"My clients."

"What do they do that I can't?"

For a moment, Dad didn't answer. Then he said, "Who?"

"Oh, fuck you."

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Fuck you, Harold."

They were quiet. My legs hurt from crouching but I didn't want to move. It seemed like if I broke the silence I might start them again.

When Dad spoke, he sounded as if he were going to cry. "Jesus," he said. "Jesus, you're the most perfect woman I've ever known."

I don't know what passed between them above my head and behind that wall, but when Mom finally said, "Tell me," she sounded almost sick with fear. "Tell me this once the whole goddamn truth."

"Lilly," Dad's voice was just breath. "I'm not."

"We'll get through it," she said.

"Lilly..."

"Tell me the—"

"I am not cheating on you, Lilly. I am doing business. Making a go of this. On my own. You know I'm...you know I've never been the little guy. But I am now. And I have to go to the clients. They won't come to me. I have to. Do you see that? Lilly? The one thing I can do that the Schipler Brothers won't do is go there and meet them whenever and wherever they want. And sometimes—sometimes that means weekends. Okay? Lil?"

In the silence that followed, I tried not to breathe.

"What do I have to say here?" Dad's voice was so low I could hardly hear it. "What do you want me to do?"

Mom's voice wasn't frantic; it wasn't even angry; it was strong. "I want you to take Seth with you," she said.



Dad's Cadillac was cream-colored, sparked with glinting chrome. The seats were real leather and the steering wheel was wrapped in the stuff; the whole car smelled of it. When we'd get in, Dad would slip on his driving gloves and ease his sunglasses over his eyes as if they were an F-16 pilot's helmet. He'd start flicking imaginary switches on the sun-visor. "Firing engine number one," he'd say. I'd make the engine firing noise. We'd hold our hands to our mouths and say "Cleared for take-off" or "Let's rip" or "Roger that" before giving Mom the thumbs-up signal through the windshield and rocketing off down the driveway.

On that first trip out, Dad pulled into an auto store's lot before we had gone even twenty minutes. He parked by a wall of stacked tires, left me sitting in the car, and ran into the store. When he came back out, he was grinning. He tossed me a paper bag and pulled out onto the road again. He'd bought me a pair of leather driving gloves.

"Seth-o," he said, "How about you take the wheel?"

I climbed on his lap. He told me to grab just below his hands, and I gripped the wheel tight, staring straight ahead, my eyes strained with concentration. Every time a car zipped by, my whole body clenched. Dad eased off the gas a little. I could feel the muscle in his thigh move under me. He spoke like a racecar announcer, his breath on my cheek, his cologne strong. Gradually, I relaxed, sank against his chest, and just drove. Everything that had seemed terrifyingly fast—signs blurring by, oncoming cars, sudden curves—slowed. We drifted by, almost seemed to glide.

The next morning, Dad dropped me off at what he called "the daycare center" but was really just an old Asian lady's house. I still remember the smell of that place: day-old fish cooked in oil, a greasiness to the air so strong it seemed to bog down the

old lady's sentences as much as her accent did. As soon as Dad left, she put her fish-smelling hands on my shoulders and told me I'd have to help her watch the other kids. There were four of them, not one over six years old. After five hours squeezed on a plastic-covered couch watching TV shows meant for kids half my age and sucking in greasy fish smell (even the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were steeped in it) while the old lady whirled away on a sewing machine, I hated that place and I hated her.

That afternoon, Dad seemed tired when he picked me up. We went swimming in the hotel's indoor pool but he just sat on the side with his legs dangling, checking his watch when he thought I wasn't looking. Back in the room, he asked if I'd be okay if he went out for a couple hours, just to see some friends. I threw a fit. Eventually, he gave in and left me in the room while he went down to the lobby to make a phone call. I remember wondering why he couldn't use the phone by the bed.

It was pretty much the same on Sunday, but that evening when he picked me up from the Asian lady's he was humming. I asked him how work had gone. "Great," he said, "Superbo, great." He was grinning around at everything and I didn't want to ruin that, so I told him that my day had been great too. On the way home from Pittsburgh, he let me drive again, but it was night and scarier with the lights coming at us, and I didn't like it so much. Plus, he smelled strange up close. His hands smelled kind of rotten. When we stopped at a diner, I told him we'd better wash our hands. He looked at me quizzically, but he followed me into the bathroom. While we were drying our fingers under the hot air I leaned over and sniffed his and told him they didn't stink anymore. He jerked his hands away and wiped them hard on his pants. "Don't you ever do that again," he said. "Ever."



When I got home from school on Monday, Mom was waiting for me at the bottom of the driveway. The kids I was sitting with laughed at me and shouted that I had to have my Mom walk me

home and one of them asked if she was going to hold my hand too. I told him, "Screw you, penis breath." But when I got off the bus I walked right past Mom and growled, "You always have to do that."

She said she just wanted to walk with me a little, that she'd missed me all weekend. Red and yellow and brown leaves had fallen over the driveway, wet and shiny from the rain. I kicked at them as we walked.

"How was the trip?" Mom asked after a while.

"Good," I said.

"You had fun?"

"Sure."

She seemed to want to talk and not to want to talk at the same time. Finally, she said, "Well, aren't you going to tell me what you did?"

"We went to Pittsburgh and stayed at a hotel and watched this movie. . ."

"What movie?"

"You wouldn't have liked it."

"Oh. What else?"

"I don't know. We had Chinese food."

"Well that's one night," she said. She seemed relieved.

"The next day I had to stay at this crappy lady's crappy house while Dad went to his meeting."

She didn't seem to hear about the crappy lady's place. "Did he look nice?" she asked. "Did he have his briefcase?"

I looked at her like she was crazy. "Course he had his briefcase."

She was quiet the rest of the way until we were almost at the house and then she stopped walking. I kept going. After a few seconds, she called to me. I stopped and turned and said, "What now, Mom?" but, as soon as I said it, I was sorry. She looked scared. She walked quickly up to me and squatted down so she could look me right in the face. She put her hands on my shoulders. They were shaking.

"I have to ask you something, Seth," she said. "Okay? It doesn't mean anything."

I nodded, as if I knew what that was supposed to mean.

She took a deep breath. "Did you see anything strange, I mean, did Dad do anything strange, act strange in any way that you noticed, I mean did it seem like he was really going to those meetings?"

All I knew was that nothing had seemed very normal about the whole trip at all. I didn't know if he was going to those meetings; I hadn't even considered until then that maybe he wasn't. Standing there on the driveway with her, I almost told Mom about the night he'd gotten mad because he couldn't be with his friends, and the way he'd gone to the lobby to use the phone, and how Dad had smelled weird in the car after he'd picked me up, but I could tell that if I said any of that she was going to cry.

"Dad wasn't strange," I said. "He was just Dad."

"He didn't go out at night without you?"

"No. We got Chinese food."

"You didn't see any women with him?"

"No," I said and I was so glad to be able to tell the truth that I said, "I didn't see him with anybody at all the whole time. He just went to work and picked me up and he was tired from work and said it was a good meeting and we went out to dinner and then came home."

She was smiling at me and she didn't look like she was going to cry anymore. She took my hands. "Didn't you have any fun at all?"

I felt weird standing there holding Mom's hands. "Well, Dad let me sit on his lap and drive." As soon as I'd said it, I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. But she just laughed and said, "That idiot." She stood up. "Your father's an idiot, Seth, but I love him."

Later that night, Dad took my driving gloves away. He said he and Mom had decided I shouldn't drive. He smiled. "Not for another seven years." I learned right then and there what happened when I told Mom about our trips.

That's about how it went for the next three months—maybe five trips in all. Dad would find somebody to take care of me during the day while he went off to meetings and then we'd eat

dinner and come home and watch a movie on the TV at night. We never went anywhere fun. We never went to Denver or New Orleans or even Detroit. We just went to Philadelphia and Baltimore and Trenton—places a couple hours away. But on the fifth trip, when Dad told me we were going back to Pittsburgh, I thought of the crappy Asian lady and the babies and told him no way.

“What do you mean, no way?” he said. We were a half-hour outside of Reading. “We’re going to Pittsburgh. I’ve got meetings in Pittsburgh.”

“I hate that place.”

“What’s to hate about Pittsburgh?”

“I hate that Asian lady and her shitty place and all the babies I have to stay with. I’m way too old for that.”

We were passing a section of fast food joints and shopping malls, and I watched the signs zip by against the grey sky. Dad still didn’t say anything, so I said, “And she’s mean.”

“She is?” Dad said.

“She yells all the time. She has to finish her sewing.”

“Okay,” Dad said. “Alright, then.” He turned a sharp right, and we pulled into a Roy Rogers parking lot. “Let’s get something to eat.”

I wasn’t hungry but I got a strawberry milkshake and a large fries because Dad usually doesn’t like fast food and I knew this was going to be my only chance for a while. The place was mostly empty, and we sat at a table by the window. Dad brushed the crumbs off with a napkin. He looked at me while I ate my fries. Then he reached into his and ate one. We watched the traffic go by on the highway.

“Tell you what,” he said suddenly, “maybe we can work this whole thing out a little better than we’ve been doing. What do you think?”

I thought there were a lot of ways it could be better. “Sure,” I said. The fries were good.

“You remember how you told Mom about driving on my lap?”



"Yeah," I said.

"And she—and we couldn't do it anymore?"

"She's afraid I'll get hurt," I said.

"Sure," Dad said. "Of course she is. But it's safe, we know that, right?"

I was starting to think he was going to let me drive again. "Totally," I said.

"Right," he said. "So, the point is, there are some things, like driving the Caddy, that are perfectly okay if Mom doesn't know about them but aren't okay if she does. See?"

"Can I drive the Caddy again?" I said.

Dad unwrapped his fish sandwich and took a bite. "Maybe," he said.

"Now?"

"Maybe."

"Cool."

"And maybe you don't have to stay with Mrs. Tong."

I just ate my fries and watched Dad and didn't say anything. I didn't want to screw this up.

"This is the thing," Dad said. "I know you're not a baby. I know you're a mature kid. Heck, you're more mature than I am sometimes." He was excited about something, I could tell, and I was glad because that meant there was a better chance that this plan, whatever he was thinking, was going to stick. "Do you think," he said, "that when I have to go to my meetings I could give you some money, and let you out at the mall, or downtown for the day—or maybe even some evenings—and we'd arrange a meeting place and time and I could just pick you up?"

"Definitely," I said.

"You could play at the arcade, see a movie, get something to eat, hang out."

"Sure," I said. "Yeah." I could not believe how lucky I was. My parents never let me hang out at the mall or go to the movies alone. I'd gone from being baby-sat by that crappy Asian lady to this.

"Okay," Dad said. "Okay, then. We'll do that."

"Okay," I said.

"But Mom can't know about it."

"Sure." I had already figured that part out.

"I mean it."

"I know, Dad."

"About any of it." I stopped sucking on the straw of my milkshake because Dad's tone had shifted and he had put down his fish sandwich. He was looking right at me in the eyes now. "Seth," he said, "I'm very serious about this. She has to think that things are just like they've been up until now. Do you understand? Because if not, this isn't going to work and we'll just have to stick with things the way they are."

"I won't tell her anything."

"I'm very serious about this," Dad said. He watched me for a second. Then he nodded as if he had made his mind up. He unwrapped his straw and stabbed it through the lid on his milkshake.

"You can tell her about the meetings and the daycare and stuff," he said.

"I know," I said. "Just nothing different."

Dad looked at me for a while, then reached across the table and ruffled my hair. "You're a good kid, Seth," he said. "I wish to God you didn't have to deal with this. Someday you'll understand. You're one hell of a good kid."

I patted my hair back into place.

"You're a good Dad," I said, because it seemed wrong not to say anything.

We sat there, me in my parachute pants and green Philadelphia Eagles sweatshirt and Dad in his grey suit, sipping our milkshakes and watching all the different kinds of people who came into Roy Rogers, and it was strange to me, all of a sudden, that there they were buying food and sitting down and eating it all around me, and I didn't know one thing about any of them.

## THE LAST SAMURAI

David Thornbrugh

One evening while watching TV in Japan,  
I saw an ad starring Toshiro Mifune,  
the great actor of *Shichi Nin No Samurai*,  
*Sanjuro, Yojimbo*,  
one of the reasons I fell in love with Japanese culture,  
one of the reasons I came to Japan  
and stayed seven years.

Toshiro was behind the wheel  
of a vintage 1930s American roadster,  
maybe a Dusenburg or Stutz Bearcat,  
all hood and chrome exhaust pipes roaring down a country road.  
Lights of a city behind beneath a starry sky.

Curled around Toshiro like a blonde anaconda  
was a beautiful young *gaijin* woman  
nibbling his stoic ear.

Jump to view of the woman's undulant buttocks  
in clinging gown seen from below climbing carpeted stairs,  
falling in slo-mo, rolling on bed,  
breasts surging under tight gown,  
soft focus on smile rubbing against bedspread.  
Fade out.

Cut to Mifune, still in car, smoking,  
close up of very smug smile.  
He says: "Nete mi tai."  
Roughly, "I want to sleep, but won't be able to."

Toshiro Mifune, the unstoppable swordsman,  
the greatest actor of his generation,  
sold mattresses on TV.

## VERBAL NARCOTIC

Kevin M. Gould

Illegal is all the rage lately.  
Rage is mostly illegal, too.

*How can a brand name signify love?  
How can a cluster of letters & sounds  
signify anything?*

Yeah.

If I were Jesus, I would've asked  
for a crown that was:

- a) greater in size
- b) made of something softer than thorns.

Or, if they couldn't do that, I would've asked  
that they put the crown  
on top of—not underneath—  
my Starter baseball cap.

A sign of the times.

That way, everything would've been  
just fine—  
the punishment as meaningless  
as the words that caused it.

## BEASTS OF EDEN

Jennifer Spiegel

Picture me. I have flaming red hair and a kick-ass body. A body that says, "Beg me." Once, when I was living in Manhattan, I was walking down the street, eating some frozen yogurt really smothered in hot fudge (just because I could) and this guy passed me on the sidewalk and said, "Man, you're so gorgeous—I don't know what to say." Okay, he was a guy off the street. Still, I remember him.

Killer red hair and a kick-ass body. My kick-ass body, however, is fatally flawed.

I have a mangled arm. It's grotesque, discolored, an anomaly, something to make you reconsider. All of your previous fantasies contested. This monstrosity hangs from my left shoulder, non-functional, mannequin-like; I think of it as raw meat, chewed-up hide left over from a rabid dog's midnight snack. A different color than the rest of my body (the red-wound color seen on most TV hospital dramas), the curves and crevices are smooth now, having healed in a twisted tree trunk fashion. It moves at my volition, but I keep it still; I keep it silenced and secretive.

I don't mean to dwell on the details. I just can't help it.

My first date after the mangled arm (another secret: farming accident or unexpected encounter involving a sliding glass door and an apologetic little brother?) is with this guy I originally gave the once-over to in my diva days. I gave him the once-over and said, "Not gonna happen." I thought, "Girlie shoes." I added, "Can't carry a tune."

We met in church (that's how I know he can't carry a tune). I've always liked the juxtaposition of my alarming good looks with the House of God. The tension between outer and inner beauty *gets* me. The Bible is filled with juxtaposition: a *crown* of thorns, a serpent in a *garden*.

I never spoke to him before the mangled arm. We lived in Upstate New York, I was twenty-eight, and I went to church

because I was raised to do that. I even left town for about six months to teach a cooking class on a cruise ship. He didn't miss me and I didn't miss him, either.

I specialize in Thai. I'm a bona fide chef. I used to be able to cook anything—hummus, Ethiopian, curry, shrimp in garlic sauce. Now, I stay away from the kitchen (working as a high school librarian). I hate the sight of blenders, food processors, and microwave ovens. All of them are bloody neon signs announcing my inadequacies as a redhead with a kick-ass body who cooks.



The boys, all of them sixteen (I look to see if they shave yet, if they have hair on their chests), try to name their new band. We're in the library at the high school they attend and at which I work. I'm anonymous behind my desk, ink pad and pencils nearby.

*Diddle-dragon, Dead Beat Dad, For Crying Out Loud, Losing Sleep, Gonzo.*

These are some of their suggestions.

"But none of us is a father!" Sixteen-Year-Old Boy #1 says.

"Our parents are all still married, except for Jason's and your dad pays child support, right?" Sixteen-Year-Old Boy #2 says.

They turn to the Garden of Eden in the Bible. I listen, curious about their exegesis.

"Adam names the animals," says Sixteen-Year-Old Boy #3.

"Why *hippopotamus*? Or *toucan*?" asks Sixteen Year Old Boy #4.

"In order to name something, you have to know it," #3 declares: shadow on his lip.

"That explains why your mother named you *Richard*," #2 interjects. "You're a dick."

Thus ends the exegesis.

Richard and his friends check out two books: *Of Mice and Men* and *Paradise Lost*. "Required," one of them tells me. Just in case I assume they're reading for pleasure.



This mangled arm happened after the cruise, when I was twenty-three. I hid away for a long, long time at my parents' place. I practiced using only my right arm. I experimented with long sleeves.

When I'm on the verge of emerging from my shell, I target David. It's deliberate and preconceived. Now, I'm twenty-five.

"It seems sort of clinical," my friend Meredith says. Meredith loves the Brontës. Love is something like a punch in the gut, a smack in the face. It *hits* you. It never arrives or takes the bus or sits around and waits.

"Look, Meredith, all my previous entanglements were based on washboard stomachs and warm fuzzies. They're gone—every single one of them."

"Why David?" she asks. "Why not someone who can at least carry a tune?"

"There are a number of reasons," I say. Meredith, who dates a ski instructor, gets up to make more coffee. We're in her kitchen and she knows how I feel about kitchens. I tend to watch her with envy as she does things with both hands. I'm continually amazed at how two of everything is taken for granted. One hand lifts the coffee pot; the other slides the cup over. "He has a child—a daughter—from a failed marriage."

"He must have been eleven when he was married."

"Just out of high school," I say. "It lasted less than a year."

"Should we be sorry?"

"I'm not."

Meredith tries to add two and two together. "He's a single father. That's why you're pursuing him?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," I say. "This daughter has many implications. It means *baggage*."

"You're a little pathetic," Meredith says.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."





I once pictured first loves and white weddings and herb gardens and strawberry patches. Everything would be new, new, new. Mr. Right would hold my hand during labor. My face would be red and there'd be no kids from first marriages and all limbs would be whole.

I have to reconsider what I want.

Before long, my clinical crush actually does become an unreasonable infatuation; this makes me feel normal. It happens before I can even say, "I have a mangled arm." Which is always the first thing I need to say. *Don't get too close. I'm fucked up.*

I think of clever ways to approach David.

"I'm not the ideal in womanhood, but I give a mean blow-job."

That won't do. We met in church.

"I'm great with kids."

He'll think I'm a user.

"Are those new shoes?"

Suggests I have a foot fetish.

"Middle C—one, two, three, go!"

I need to hide my mean streak.

"Good preaching today."

That's good. Appeal to his religious convictions.

One morning, my roommate and I are in our tiny backyard, which consists of a couple square feet of grass and fern along with three pots of flowers. We're watering stuff. Miles says, "I invited David over for dinner on Friday. He's looking at my computer. Can you be home?"

"Yeah," I say. I'm the master of one-handed plant watering. I look over at Miles, my computer-owning, church-going roommate. He's one of those guys people always want to fix up with single friends. Any day now, he'll become seriously involved with someone's single friend, and leave me empty-handed. There may be a pun in there.

"Oh, he's bringing his kid." My roommate steps over the hose and fiddles with something near the faucet. "Are you getting enough water pressure?"



I was seeing someone when the mangled arm hit me the way Meredith would have love strike. I was seeing this guy who sort of epitomized the candies-and-flowers kind of guy. The relationship, though full of lyricism, was nothing. I clung to the rose bouquets and boxes of chocolates—just to experience them, just to taste the flippancy of the casual. In our months together, my life seemed like a blurry mesh of dinners for two, full moons and shooting stars, three-day weekends in small towns, and sex during thunderstorms.

He left me immediately after the mangled arm—citing other inconveniences.

One day, prior to tragedy, we were sitting by the pool in his backyard, our legs dangling over the edge. "I'd gone over to the neighbor's to help him move a couch," he said, telling me a story. "I took the dog."

"And?" I asked, kicking my leg (which seemed oh-so-much longer back then) to send a spray of water out of the pool.

"While I was inside with the guy, the dog must have cornered the cat. Apparently, the dog attacked the cat and killed him. I don't know exactly."

"What did you do?" My leg froze in the air.

"When I came out of the house, I looked around for Fred and I called him several times. 'Fred! Fred!' I shouted. Fred came flying out of the bushes. His mouth was all bloody and, when I looked around, I saw a dead cat nearby."

I was speechless, horrified.

"Fred and I fled," he said.

"You didn't say anything?" I felt mildly—only *mildly*—indignant.

"No. It was better this way."

I was way too far gone in girlfriend-haze to protest. Now, though, the image of him, the dog with the bloody mouth, and the dead cat nearby haunts me. I keep picturing him fleeing, silently and secretly, saying, *It was better this way. It was better this way. It was better.*



When I put on make-up, I stand very close to the mirror. For the first few months, I gave up on it completely, thinking: *Why not look like shit?* Then, I thought: *This is it. I have no choice.*

I used to switch hands when I put mascara on each eye. Right hand for the right eye, left hand for the left eye. Now my right hand does it all. I twist it around, like a snake being charmed. Every vessel of liquid or color is picked up and put down. One thing at a time. I never juggle bottles or vials from one hand to the other.

When I wake up, my first thought is this: *Oh, my arm. It's mangled.*

I put my belt through the loops conscientiously. I zip my pants carefully. The left extremity is a prop by which I hang things, pull things, suspend them too. If I have to go to the bathroom quickly, I'm screwed. I must plan ahead, allowing for time with belt buckle and zipper.

I rip dozens of pairs of nylons.

I file the nails on one hand only. Like a duffel bag or a dirty towel, I thrust my right hand into my mother's palm at Sunday dinners at her place. A nail file clasped between my fingers.

When I go to the movies, I carry the drink or the popcorn—not both. When I eat the popcorn, the other hand is lifeless in my lap like the paper napkin covering my purse, all salty, all wrinkled.



I go to Meredith's apartment for hot-tubbing. We drink wine coolers. My toes are polished. There are six of us in the tub.

Everyone tries not to stare at my arm. I pretend not to care. Again, I have to think, *This is it. I have no choice.*

Here I am, able to sit without fat rolls appearing on my stomach. I'm witty. I'm educated. I used to be a lot of fun at parties. None of that matters anymore.

I sit in the bubbles, sipping my wine cooler, and being very quiet. I whisper over to Meredith, "I think I'm being boiled alive."



Friday night arrives. Miles cooks. I work on the cleavage. If I seem body-obsessed, it's because I am. I'm afraid no one knows its real importance. Moralizers and fat people often lament society's obsession with the body and decry its cultural importance. But they don't know. They don't. Body *is* significant. One must use what one has. You gotta work it. We don't have hips for nothing. Immediately after the advent of the mangled arm, I knew I could never allow myself the luxury of a fat ass. What would people think?

Miles makes stir fry like a good single man. David arrives, daughter in tow. Her name is Rebecca and she's seven.

Rebecca. She's a little nymph, she's angel food cake, she's stars around distant planets. Fantasy incarnate. Here is a pretty little girl, done with things like potty training and bad manners. She even knows how to swim. Short, skinny, cute, with pigtails.

It didn't really hit me till a few days after the mangled arm. I was still in the hospital when I realized: "Oh my God. I may never have children." Suddenly, I had a maternal instinct. Suddenly, I had this goal. All I wanted was that which I had previously scorned: a white picket fence, a man equipped with a love of prime time television and Tom Clancy novels, and a baby with diaper rash.

Rebecca says things like *no thank you* and *yes please*. She's been coached on the arm. Her eyes avoid intersecting with any raw or

exposed meat. She doesn't want to touch it. She sits to my right.

I sit across from David. I check him out. Once upon a time, we would have been considered physically incompatible. I'd be considered a better-looking woman than he is a man. My mangled arm evens things out.

David is neither attractive nor unattractive. He's exceptionally normal. Wispy brown hair, not terribly piercing green eyes. Broad shoulders. Inoffensive. I tend to be drawn to slashes across cheeks and birthmarks like moons on upper lips. He, though, has the face of a weatherman; it tells me it'll be sunny on Friday with a chance for showers on Monday. In between, a mystery. There is something comfortable about the reliability of regularity.

Miles fiddles with the wok in the kitchen, muttering things like "water chestnuts" and "chopped mushrooms." He never asks my advice, for which I'm thankful. David and I discuss education and managed health care, while Rebecca leans into him on the couch.

"Rebecca goes to a private school," David says, having told me all about his HMO.

"Which one?" I ask. "I probably tried to get a job there."

"Rosewood. How are you liking this librarian thing?"

"I like books." I stare at David and Rebecca. David speaks into my eyes. Rebecca's eyes travel and hop, like insects touching down on peanut butter and jelly at picnics. She looks at my arm, looks at the coffee table, looks at her dad's knee.

"Is that why you changed careers? You liked books?" David asks.

He doesn't think about the question, really. I don't feel like explaining. "Yes, I like books. 'You can't judge a book by its cover.' That's something about books."

David surprises me then. "I agree, but sometimes it's the name that makes me judge. I've heard it's good—*great*, even—but I can't get past the title: *The Catcher in the Rye*. It's the name. I'm instantly bored. I'd never pick up *Gone with the Wind*. I might, however, read *The Sun Also Rises*."

I think of Eden. Animals in the garden: the emphasis on the

naming, not their beastliness.

I think about this man and his child. I'm absorbed by the image. I think about how David and I are still kids ourselves. He can still eat whatever he wants, and I can still walk around without a bra. But while I was play-acting unrequited love, he was changing shitty diapers. When I was wearing bandannas on overnight hikes in South American rainforests, he tried very hard to get peaches and sweet potatoes into a wet, little mouth. When I made the rounds at poetry readings in coffee houses wearing go-go boots, he worked two jobs. I am mesmerized by these truths.

He picks her up from school every day. Demands that she buckle her seat belt and take the lollipop out of her mouth. He brushes her hair. Puts in barrettes. Tells her to stay still and keep her gum in her mouth. He teaches her about vowels and consonants. Spells "d-a-d" and "w-o-w" for her. As she plodded through "r-e-b-e-c-c-a" and its phonetic ups and downs, I sat on some man's bed and smoked pot. I leaned back on pillows and cushions and I said, "My head is spinning."

"Then sit up," the man with whom I was smoking pot said.



After dinner, we talk. Rebecca sits next to me, so willing to be kind to strangers. She doesn't lean into me, but she shares my chair. "I saw your cats," she says.

"They're not really mine. They belong to Miles."

"Let's go find them."

I take her by the hand and we head into the bedrooms.

I get on the floor, peering under beds for cats who have no desire to be held. "They're not here," I tell her. I look at the disappointed child. I've ruined her day at the beach, rained on her wedding, mangled her arm. "We'll check again in fifteen minutes, okay?"

Sitting across from David, I twist my ankle in perfect circles. The light from above the dining room table skids over the smooth skin from my knee to my ankle. In absurd internal thought, I

think how my mangled arm must be envious of my long legs. I try to will David to give them a look. He doesn't.

"I think it's time to check again," Rebecca says.

"We have five minutes," I say. "We don't want to make them crazy."

"I think I can get them, though."

She follows me into my room and checks out the decor. I still have stuffed animals on my bed and pictures on the wall of people I never speak to. This room is a relic.

"Nice room," she says. *Who the hell taught her to say things like that?*

"Thank you." A child with whom I can converse.

I grab the bra dangling from a chair in my room. I figure I can throw it onto the floor and lure Smudge and Crackle Pants out from under the bed. This bra is hitting the ground.

Throwing it under the bed and dragging it out slowly as if I were fishing, I tell her, "Smudge and Crackle Pants aren't budging."

"We'll give them another five minutes," she says, in frustration.

The kid is obsessed.

This goes on all night. Smudge makes a brief appearance, back claws extended, not particularly desirous of any little girl's attention. David doesn't check out my legs even once.



Rebecca pees in her pants at the end of the evening.

I guess she was having such a good time that she forgot to excuse herself and go to the bathroom. It happens. I've done it.

Afterwards, she heads into the toilet for an ungodly amount of time.

"Where's Rebecca?" David asks.

"In the bathroom," I tell him.

When she's gone for over fifteen minutes, I head down the hall, wondering if she's taken it upon herself to retrieve Smudge and Crackle Pants. I see the light on under the bathroom door and return to the living room.



I only figure the whole thing out after they've left. Clues like her refusal to sit down after she returns from the bathroom, a trickle of liquid running from under her dress to her sandal, and the strong, pungent smell of urine are sure giveaways. Miles knows, too, but we don't discuss it.

I admire her. I admire her deeply for the way she disappears into the bathroom, wanting to handle it quietly and privately. I respect this. Already, she understands the privacy of mourning and loss. She knows discretion. Only later will she tell David and then the two of them will handle it gracefully, between themselves. He will tell her to get in the shower. He will get her new panties. Rebecca doesn't cry or say, "Dad, could you come here?" She thinks, "I have peed in my pants," and she moves on.

When David and Rebecca leave, Rebecca says, "Thank you for having us over."

This blows me away.

Miles sends them off with warm chocolate-chip cookies he got in a wrapped-up tube at the store. He opened it, sliced it, and baked it. This is his specialty. We each have ours.



David calls me, and I'm shy on the phone. "Are you free this weekend?" he asks.

I never fantasized about being someone's stepmother. I envisioned lengthy trips to the Islands. Which islands, I wasn't sure. We'd spend months and months abroad, drinking cocktails with umbrellas in them, dancing to local bands, and snorkeling in clear water filled with fluorescent fish. Getting home in time for his joint-custody weekends wouldn't be an issue. I never wanted to tell a man to bring his daughter along on dates. I never wanted to suggest miniature golf or animated movies about barnyard animals, Greek myths, or old wives' tales. I didn't want to be confined to living in one state. I wanted to paint the town red and I wanted to do it with both hands.



I think about the rules for our first date. No walks in the woods. I need a certain level of comfort to tread on difficult terrain, just in case I need to suddenly grab onto some bark or drop to my knees on some acorns, pine cones, or a patch of thorns. Dinner must be a one-utensil-only event. A fork *and* a knife must not be required. Forks. Just forks. Salads are always good. Steak is very, very bad. No dancing. I hate the thought of a lifeless limb dangling in the breeze, Madonna singing in the background. Ugh. No horseback-riding. And absolutely no sex. I don't do sex. Such vulnerability horrifies me, makes me more mangled than I already am. Salad and a movie. He'll carry the popcorn.



He picks me up at eight.

"Do you wanna know why I asked you out?" he says over pizza—a slightly treacherous meal, depending on the company, pizza temperature, napkin availability, and chosen toppings.

"Why?"

"Because Rebecca told me you used your dirty bra to lure the cats out from under the bed."

"It wasn't dirty. It was clean. I could have worn it again."

"Even better. That's a fine thing to do."

We eat a lot of pizza. We see a movie. We go to a coffeehouse. He orders an éclair and two cups of decaf. "Tell me about your arm, Kara," he says. This throws me for a loop.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, cautiously.

David bites into his éclair and wipes yellow sugar from his mouth. The naturalness of this act tells me where Rebecca got her naturalness in the presence of strangers. "What are the emotional consequences of having had this thing happen to you? What really happened to you?"

No one asks that. There is always conjecture, silence, false

modesty. No one ever asks anything close to *What the hell happened?*

"The emotional consequences," I begin. I stop. "I spend a lot of time asking 'Why me?'" I set my spoon down next to coffee cup. "If I hear one more person say, 'Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger,' I may have a near-death experience."

"What else do people say?"

Cigarette smoke, coffee beans, chess boards, folk guitar, scary hair, and off-kilter fads fill the room. It's dark and black and purple like a bruise and sweet like cheesecake and bitter like espresso and sad like a love song and melodramatic like a college relationship. The coffeehouse has a name: The Cheshire Cat.

"They tell me I need to be strong. Stronger than this." I put a finger in my mouth, like I'm trying to gag myself. "They suggest that strength can overcome anything." I sip my cooled coffee. "I *hate* that. Do you think I ever wanted to be strong enough to overcome *this*? I wasn't so miserable working on cruises in the Bahamas. It wasn't a bad life."

"I may be about to say something trite," David says.

"That could be dangerous. Maybe you shouldn't."

"I think you should name it. Right now."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, possibly insulted.

"Put it on the table, so I can see it in the light. Maybe we can name it after someone."

"No." I *am* insulted.

"Come on. I swear, I won't touch, taunt, or tease."

The table is a dark oak. Rings from saucers stain its surface. We've brushed away cookie crumbs and cupcake papers.

He wants to see my arm, put it on display. This goes against the grain. It isn't a once-in-a-lifetime Monet art exhibit. Nor are there any stirrups, like at a gynecologist's office. This isn't a medical exam, a possible remedy. He wants to draw attention to that which I'm quiet about.

I don't exactly hoist it onto the table, but I shift a little, so he might better see the appendage.

"What would be a good name for it?" he asks.

"I don't know. I've only named pets and a few stuffed animals."

"You gotta name it," he says.

"Some things don't have names, David. They don't need them," I say. "There's *The Artist Formerly Known As Prince*, you know."

David leans closer to my dead limb. "People name stillborn babies. They name male genitalia and old cars. Books have titles. Books are your favorite."

"This is no beloved car."

"Nor is it a stillborn baby. It's just a reality."

"I hate it."

"You choose," he says. "*Marsha Brady* or *Farrah Fawcett*."

I stop and consider, suddenly wanting to play. "*Marsha Brady*." I pause. "What kind of name is that?"

"We once loved Marsha, didn't we? Now, her absence doesn't kill us."

"I'm not the same without my arm."

"Don't be silly."

"What if I had chosen *Farrah*?" I ask.

"We all had those posters, remember? Gone now." He smiles. "You lost the teenage boy demographic." He pauses. "That's all."



In bed that night, I think about names. I am *Kara*. I live with *Miles*. I had dinner with *David*. His daughter is named *Rebecca*. Miles has two cats, *Smudge* and *Crackle Pants*. There are *hippos* and *toucans*.

I think of Rebecca peeing in her pants and quietly handling it.

There are lions and grizzly bears, caterpillars and salamanders. My arm is named *Marsha Brady*. Maybe when I dress up, I'll call it *Farrah*.

## ONE INTO TWO

Elizabeth Rees

*Noah . . . What are you doing?*  
one of the two-year-old twins crackles  
over the baby monitor. A few beats later,  
her brother: *Talia . . . What happened?*

They lie five feet apart  
in identical cribs. After months  
of bobbing head to toe,  
five feet apart must feel vast.

*What are you doing, Talia?*  
Every so often, a yawn, yet  
they push away sleep as if  
it were a washcloth. *Noah?* Talia says.

Then, stillness rich as snow.  
Noah flies over the white-sloped hill  
into the bottom of sleep, always first  
to squeeze into a corner.

Talia starts to sing rhymes  
in sounds instead of words.  
Like a magician, she knows  
how to make herself disappear.

## THE WOMEN IN MY HOUSEHOLD

Anis Shivani

They showed me how to tie silken scarves over my head.  
They cried on Friday nights, after the ill muezzin's beat.  
I heard them through shuttered windows, as I threw stones  
in the garden. The heat, the buzzing flies, the moldering

moon, it hurt to plan existence beyond the duration  
of the next lesson. Language was passage to euphemism.  
I used to say, for instance, when asking for a kiss or hug:  
What more did the prince discover about Cinderella

when he had done with the meal? A cramp, an ache,  
a sudden gripe in the bones, they thought of as punishment  
deserved, from almighty Allah whose business it was  
to be on the watch. I only begged to be one of them.

## BURNED UP HEROES

Robert Vivian

T.R. Rose had hands that were colored different than the rest of his body, more like pink erasers that had rubbed out all his skin. The pink looked like the insides of a fish or shells you find at the bottom of the ocean that had come at so deep a price that there was no way to get back what the pink had cost him, a hundred thousand dollars in insurance money alone for the rest of his smoldering life. He took drugs to keep the pain away, but it had a strange way of fucking up his mind, the pain the only thing he wanted to communicate to other people, washing through him back and forth in waves of shifting dread. He spent his nights down at Spinner's telling anyone who would listen how he got burned and maimed holding on to Daisy Hayes as she burned up in her car.

They'd been drinking all night and were having an argument when she took a turn too fast and rolled her jeep out near Canyon Gate. Rose managed to crawl out though blood poured from his broken nose. Daisy Hayes was crammed between the ground and her seat with a broken collarbone, but otherwise she was okay because she started to cuss him out even then. Rose said one of her tits was hanging out like a wedge of quivering Jell-O a few inches above the ground. They sat there for a second in silence and then picked up the fight where they left off when the jeep caught on fire. They weren't aware of it at first but slowly the jeep kept getting hotter and hotter and then they smelled the smoke. That's when she started begging him to get her out of there, but the best T.R. Rose could do was to hold on to her throughout the fire until she curled up like a giant moth. Did it take long? Someone would always ask, but Rose just shook his head and said he didn't know. Couldn't remember, couldn't be sure. He was hazy about certain details. And though no one came right out and said it, you know they wanted to ask, Why didn't you try to put out the fire instead? But Rose insisted the only



thing he could do was not let go of her, even when she began to burn, and then he'd hold up his pink hands to prove it.

You could tell not letting go was the best thing he had ever done, the last few minutes of Daisy's melting face scorched in his mind forever. He described her burning up with such love and tenderness that it took on a life of its own, circling the streetlights outside Spinner's in halos full of gold. First her lips popped from the heat and then it was like her cheekbones were made of paper for how fast they went up in flames, her nose dissolving in front of him to leave a gaping hole like a brand new mouth. He started to tell her how much he loved her, how sorry he was that she had to die in an agonizing fireball while his own hands fried. He shouted apologies and regrets and tried to whisper sweet nothings in the wasp socket of her raging ear that nothing would ever separate them again, the fire had made them one as the smoke of her flesh and bones filled up his lungs. You wondered if he wasn't making certain parts of it up to cover himself somehow, things that kept coming back to convince him that was the way it had to be. He had those pink hands to back him up, and they told their own story, like two small trophies from a spaced-out planet, something he brought back from another world called Pain and Suffering that became his pride and joy.

I felt her agony, he'd say by way of explanation, slamming his see-through fist on the table, I was right down there in the fire with her. His hands didn't lie, testifying every day of his life to what he had been through, the morphine pills he took and the way those hands revolved around his head like sparks from a campfire. Being next to someone who roasted to death was about the only thing Rose could talk about anymore, the fire that crept up her spine and the fire that devoured her long blond hair. He must have been strong to hold on to her like he did, with the judgment of iron in them as her eyes exploded from the heat. That's when Rose started to call himself a burned up hero for the way he endured the furnace of those flames. And it was good to hear him say it somehow and believe it with all his heart because of what it meant for the rest of us, the ones without health

insurance and the ones laid off from work, the ones strung out on meth and the ones that couldn't keep their jobs. We needed a burned up hero and he provided us one with his pink hands, which were just about the only bright spot in the dim, smoky light as you kept wondering if you would have been like him and held on to the bitter end, no matter how bad the heat waves got or the flames that lashed you back and forth like hot chains.

You didn't get tired of the story and could almost smell her burning flesh mixed with cheap perfume and booze, enough to make you sick and keep you enthralled for days. Because what gives a man the courage to hold on to a burning woman or any burning thing at all but heroism that don't know boundaries, like the hard bare truth exposed for the rest of the world to see? Sometimes it got to the point where Rose told his story to no one in particular just to hear himself talk, the rest of the bar packed and bustling while he went on with his brimstone monologue, his blistered hands making gestures like semaphores on aircraft carriers waving in the planes. He'd talk hour after hour and the whole story was right there in the afterglow of his fingertips, the way they took out after you like buds from a glowing tree. He held them up like pieces of raw meat, like they should have belonged to a different person almost or a dime-store manikin because they were a hundred shades brighter than any skin should be. He lathered them up with baby oil and other kinds of ointments so they glistened like something slightly obscene, open-heart surgery or naked lobsters, something that came out of the depths of a frothing ocean.

After awhile it reached a point where you almost wanted to be burned yourself, to see if you could stand the heat or if you could only take so much before you yanked your hands away. The only other guy I knew who had been burned like Rose did it to himself after his wife had left him. His name was Rodriguez and he went down into the basement and branded his chest with a pair of pliers he heated with a blowtorch. He wanted to commemorate her leaving him so he'd never forget the pain. But even he didn't keep at it the way T.R. Rose did. With a pool cue

in his pink hands under the blinking lights of a neon Bud Light sign, he went over every gruesome part in loving detail, and though you'd heard it all before, you always came away with tingles up and down your spine and feeling in the presence of God's own judgment. Then you'd want to touch those pink hands and maybe test them out with your mouth, see what they tasted like and if they really were like skin or some other false plastic that kept the water from coming in.

After a few drinks, T.R. set himself up to be the butt of a lot of jokes, how he could go hunting without reflective clothing as long as he held his hands out in front of him, how they glowed in the dark and how the ladies came to pity him and wanted those burned up hands all over their luscious bodies because you knew they had to be soft and sensitive, smooth as glass. He had a peacock's eye for fire and no matter how painful it was to keep holding on to Daisy Hayes, he did it for her and he did it for us and everyone else across America, all these burned up heroes coming out of the woodwork and spreading themselves across the continent, feeding the flames of imagination in a patriotic fervor that never quit. We were all burned up heroes one way or another because someone was always on fire and singing their sad songs, cauterizing their wounds the best way they knew how. He never lit anything on fire on purpose, but he had to admit he liked burning little plastic Army men when he was a kid, maybe the odd grasshopper or two, and once even a live rabbit that he regretted afterward. He had to learn about fire by playing with it, to see how much pain it caused so he could build up some respect. He had no way of knowing that it would lead all the way to Daisy Hayes.

Sometimes his hands turned a slighter shade of purple, like they were pissed off or fuming about something. Then T.R.'d make one of his hands talk by holding it up in front of him. He became a one-man puppet show, and his hand would talk about rage and disappointment and the first time it had sex in the back of a car, nothing it wouldn't talk about, nothing it wouldn't say. If he got really drunk, he'd make his hand say something like,

I'm just a burned up hero. Can't you see that? The best thing about it is the afterglow, the way you remembered her face burning as the love of your life. You held on because you had to. You held on and almost passed out from the pain but then there was a clarity like nothing you had ever seen on earth, her soul rising up from her body with the roar of F-14s in your ears. You saw how the pain was killing her and then how it finished the job in waves of grooving fire that moved through pockets of air as close and intimate as a baby breathing. Then your name was written up there and burned into the rafters with all the rest who've been burned up over the years and you say to yourself, Not just my hands, Lord, but my whole body. But He chooses only to take the flesh off your hands. So hush now, Daisy. Don't tell them anything more about the fire. You're the burning Buddhist monk of my soul, except that you're an American girl, Daisy, just a burned up hero like me.

Then his pink hand would dry up and he wouldn't make it talk no more. He'd put his head down on the table, his pink hands out in front of him like a giant pair of moist, red lips. He was done talking about it for the night. But you couldn't get rid of what he had said, how his hand talked about the state of the country and the state of God's own mercy. His pink hands would sit there on the table and start to glow like embers from a bonfire as we went away one by one, fighting, fucking, and weeping our hearts out until the place died down and he was the last one to leave, sitting there in the corner by the pool table, him and the ghost of Daisy Hayes trading secrets in the dark about holding on to each other in the flames as the rest of us scattered woebegone and restless into the night, never knowing which one of us would be burned up next, which one of us was about to go down in a heap of flames no amount of rain and thunder could ever put out.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Kate Beles grew up in Olympia and Vashon Island, Washington. She has just completed an MA in English at Western Washington University, where she writes, teaches, and serves as a poetry editor for *The Bellingham Review*. This fall she will enter the MFA program at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has published in *Jeopardy Magazine*, *Inside Kung Fu*, and *Touchstone*.

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Francine Conley is the author of a chapbook of poems, *How Dumb the Stars* (Parallel Press, 2000). She has written, produced and performed her own plays since 1991, including the current, *Lost & Found*. A Ph.D. in French and Theatre from University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin, she teaches all things French at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, MN.

Stephen Corey has published ten poetry collections, most recently *All These Lands You Call One Country* (White Pine Press, 2003) and *Greatest Hits, 1980-2000* (Pudding House Publications, 2000). His poems and essays have appeared widely in such periodicals as *Poetry*, *Poets and Writers*, *Shenandoah*, and *Yellow Silk*. He has also edited three literary collections in as many genres, the latest being (with Warren Slesinger) a book of essays, *Spreading the Word: Editors on Poetry* (The Bench Press, 2001). Corey is associate editor of *The Georgia Review*, with which he has worked since 1983. He earned two of his three English degrees at Binghamton University, in its Harpur College days—BA 1971, MA 1974.

Sean Thomas Dougherty is the author of seven full-length books of prose and poems including *Nightshift Belonging to Lorca*

(Mammoth Books, 2004) the forthcoming *Your Voice After Desnos* (Boa Editions) and the critical book *Maria Mazziotti Gillan* (Guernica Editions, 2005). His awards include a 2004 PA Council for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry. He teaches all three genres in the BFA Program for Creative Writing at Penn State, Erie.

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Lyn Lifshin's recent prizewinning book (Paterson Poetry Award) *Before It's Light* was published winter 1999-2000 by Black Sparrow Press, following their publication of *Cold Comfort* in 1997. *Another Woman Who Looks Like Me* will be published by Black Sparrow-David Godine in 2005. Texas Review Press will publish her book about a beautiful, tragic racehorse: *The Licorice Daughter: My Year With Ruffian*.

Shivani Manghnani was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai'i. She holds an MFA in fiction from Columbia University and lives in New York City, where she is completing a collection of short stories.



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Sean Prentiss is a mountain biker and backpacker who lives in northern Idaho, where he writes and teaches. He was recently awarded honorable mention by the *Atlantic Monthly's* Student Writers' Contest 2004 in Nonfiction and has had his work published in *AIM*, *Talking River Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and other literary journals.

Elizabeth Rees's poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Agni*, *New England Review*, *North American Review*, and *Kenyon Review*, among others. Her first chapbook, *Balancing China*, won Sow's Ear Review's national contest in 1998. A second chapbook, *Hard Characters*, was published in 2002 by March Street Press.

Jack Ridl's collection *Broken Symmetry* will be published by Wayne State University Press. He is co-author with Peter Schakel



of *Approaching Literature in the 21st Century* (Bedford/St. Martin's Press). Ridl lives along Lake Michigan with his wife Julie, writer of *The Skinny Daily Post*.

Mira Rosenthal is a poet, translator, and editor of *Lyric*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Seneca Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. In 2003-04, she was a Fulbright Fellow in Poland. Recently, she selected and edited a special issue of *Lyric* on new Polish poetry in translation. She holds an MFA from the University of Houston and will be a Ph.D. student in Comparative literature at Indiana University in the fall.

Anis Shivani's poetry appears recently or is forthcoming in the *Iowa Review*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Barrow Street*, *MARGIE*, *CrossConnect*, *LUNA*, *Good Foot*, *Borderlands*, *Wasafiri*, the *Yalobusha Review*, and elsewhere. His poems have been finalists in the 2004 *Crab Orchard Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, St. Louis Poetry Center, and Writers at Work competitions, and in the 2005 Bright Hill Press chapbook competition. His story collection, *The Abscess of the World*, will be published in 2006 by Toby Press.

John Smelcer is the author of over two dozen books. His nonfiction books include *In the Shadows of Mountains*, *The Raven and the Totem*, *A Cycle of Myths*, and *The Day That Cries Forever*. His poetry books include *Changing Seasons*, *Riversongs*, *Songs from an Outcast*, *Without Reservation* (winner of the 2004 Western Writers of America Award for Poetry and Binghamton University's 2004 Milton Kessler Prize for Poetry), and *Loonsong*. His novel, *The Trap*, forthcoming from Henry Holt, received the 2004 James Jones Prize for a First Novel.

William V. Spanos is Distinguished Professor of English at SUNY-Binghamton. He was the founding editor of *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture* and the author

of a number of books on postmodern theory and literature, including *The End of Education: Toward Posthumanism*; *Heidegger and Criticism: Retrieving the Cultural Politics of Destruction*; *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies*; and *America's Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire*. He has recently completed a book on the literature of the Vietnam, and is working on a second book on Herman Melville, which focuses on the fiction following Moby-Dick. The piece included here is excerpted from his memoir, *Persephone's Pomegranate: Fragment of a Greek-American's Journey in the Rift* forthcoming from Nefelis, Athens, Greece.

Jennifer Spiegel has an MA in Politics from New York University, and an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from Arizona State. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in anthologies and journals including *Image, you are here*, *Controlled Burn*, *Frostproof Review*, *New York Stories*, *Nimrod*, *The Seattle Review*, and *Fresh Boiled Peanuts*. She's hoping to see her novel, *Love Slave*, in print. "Beasts of Eden" is part of an unpublished collection called *The Freak Chronicles*.

Nancy Thompson currently lives in Portland, Oregon, and teaches creative writing in Vermont. She is a former editor at *Salmon Poetry*, and has received several grants and awards for her work. Her collection *Killing the Buddha* is scheduled for publication next year.

David Thornbrugh is an American poet now living in Poland, getting some distance from Rome and absorbing "Old European" values, sights, experiences. He wasn't there in time to attend Milosz's funeral, but has begun an open mic venue in a local English-language bookstore.

Grant Tracey edits *North American Review* and has two collections of stories from Pocol Press: *Parallel Lines and the Hockey Universe* (2003) and *Playing Mac and Other Scenes* (forthcoming 2006).

He's also an amateur actor, recently appearing as Elwood P. Dowd in the Cedar Falls Community production of *Harvey*.

Robert Vivian is the author of *Cold Snap As Yearning*. His first novel, *The Mover Of Bones*, will be forthcoming in the fall of 2006 from the University of Nebraska Press. Over twenty of his plays have been produced in NYC. He currently teaches writing at Alma College in Michigan.

Josh Weil holds an MFA from the creative writing program at Columbia University. He has published fiction in *Carve Magazine* and been a finalist in The Pirate's Alley William Faulkner Novella Competition, and in the Raymond Carver Short Story Competition. One of his screenplays was a runner-up for the 2003 Sundance Writer's Lab, and a stage play was produced in Edinburgh, Scotland. He made a film that won Best Short and Best Actor at the Chicago Alternative Film Festival. Weil has completed two novels: *Swimming Season* and *River Horse*.

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Fredrick Zydek has authored eight collections of poetry. *T'Kopechuck: the Buckley Poems* is forthcoming from Winthrop Press. Formerly a professor at the University of Nebraska and later at the College of Saint Mary, he is now a gentleman farmer. Most recently he accepted the post as editor for Lone Willow Press.

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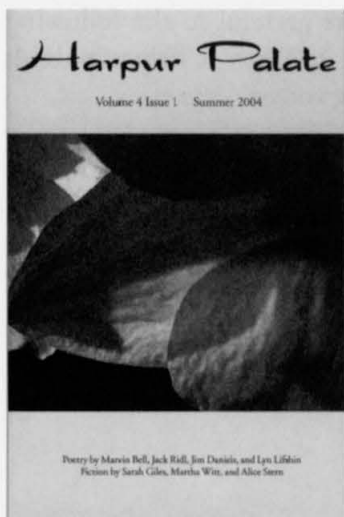
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Send a copy of your manuscript, a cover letter, and a business-sized self-addressed stamped envelope. Manuscripts without SASEs will be discarded unread. Copies of manuscripts will not be returned. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable as long as you let us know in your cover letter that you are simultaneously submitting; also, if your work is accepted elsewhere, please let us know immediately. Due to the number of submissions we receive, we cannot respond to questions about whether your work has been read. Our response time is approximately 4 to 8 months.

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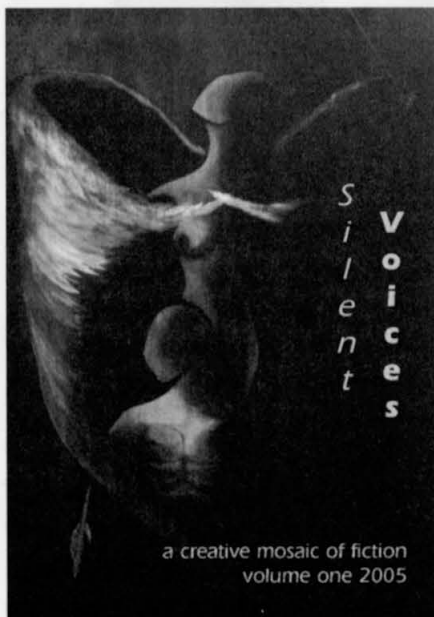
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Photos by Catherine Dent

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