

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 1

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June 2006

## Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 1, Summer 2006

Harpur Palate .  
*Binghamton University--SUNY*

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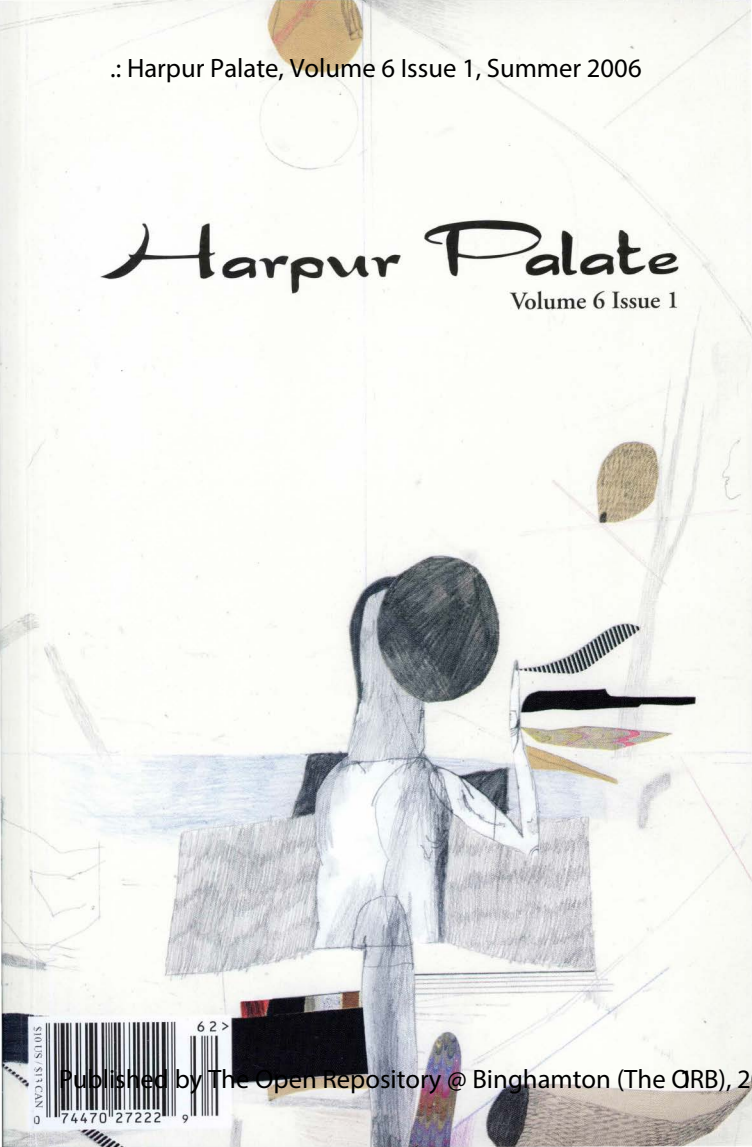
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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 1, Summer 2006

# Harpur Palate

Volume 6 Issue 1



Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB), 2



Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 6, Iss. 1 [2006], Art. 1

# Harpur Palate

Volume 6 Issue 1 Summer 2006

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*Harpur Palate* ISSN#: 1532-9046 (print); 1533-6301 (online) is published in Winter and Summer by the Department of English at Binghamton University, PO Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902. Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 2006. U.S. subscriptions are \$16 per year, \$30 for two years. Single copies of this issue: \$10; most available back issues: \$8 each. For all subscriptions outside U.S. add \$6 per year, remittance to be made by money order or a check drawn on a U.S. bank. Distributed in the U.S. by B. DeBoer, Inc. (Nutley, NJ 07110), and Ingram Periodicals, Inc. (La Vergne, TN 37086). Periodical postage paid at Montrose, PA and Binghamton, NY, and at additional mailing offices.

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Postmaster: Send address changes to Harpur Palate, Department of English, Binghamton University, PO Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902.

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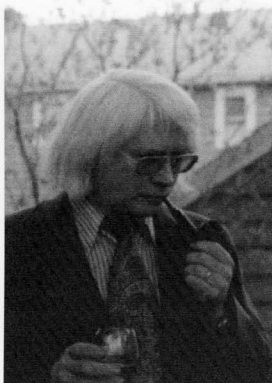
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## THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION





WINNER

A BROTHER, SOME SEX, AND AN OPTIC NERVE

Mona Houghton

The automatic sliding glass doors open and you spot your older brother sitting in his car at the curb. With his hands he pounds the steering wheel rhythmically, pretending it is some kind of drum, and his head moves with the beat. From an overhead speaker a pre-recorded voice repeats itself: "The white zone is for loading and unloading of passengers only. No parking." You breathe in the smog and the airplane engine exhaust and it smells like home.

When you were in college and came home for holidays your brother used to pick you up at the bus terminal in downtown Hollywood. One time you brought home some mushrooms that your roommate sold you—she called them "shrooms"—and you and Mike each ate some the next morning and spent the day out behind your mother's house, in an empty lot, looking at sow bugs, examining eucalyptus leaves, smelling dirt—again a boy and a girl. You don't have any drugs with you today. You are here because of an optic nerve, your mother's.

As you approach the car you can hear Jimi Hendrix's guitar screaming and you stop for a moment and watch your brother, gray at the temples, as he rocks out, looking insane to anyone who doesn't know him, and then you knock on the window. He turns, his eyes on yours, keeps up with the music for a bar or two, then reaches over and releases the lock.

You pull the door open and the music washes over you. You yell, "Cool dude."

He turns down the radio. "Say what?" he says.

"I said cool dude."

"Damn right," he says.

He gets out and you meet him at the back of the car and hug each other. He is a lot bigger than you are and for a moment you let yourself sink into his big-man, big-brother protection.



As he lifts the suitcase into the trunk, you lean forward and grab a handful of his hair.

You haven't seen Mike since you and your husband moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, four months ago. You and your husband are almost exactly the same size.

"So did L.A. look like a shit sandwich from up there?" Mike asks as he slides back in behind the wheel.

You pause before getting into the car. The palm trees, that hazy blue sky. Winter is a sobering event in Nebraska; here there is always the future; there are no boundaries.

Green surrounds the small house tucked into a corner of Laurel Canyon, high in the Hollywood Hills. Up until September you and Greg lived here and so when you walk in, it doesn't feel exactly right to see Mike's books in the bookshelf, and his socks on your old couch, and it smells different, kind of antiseptic, reminiscent of your grandparents' bathroom, and you wonder if your brother has taken to using Absorbine Junior, or some other liniment. The house is small, five, six hundred square feet at the most, but because of the windows it seems bigger. Eucalyptus trees, a grove of them, climb up the hill behind the house, and the ash tree in the patio, its thick trunk and huge canopy, seems like part of the living room, some huge sculpture.

Your brother puts the suitcase on the couch. "I made some room for you in the closet." He goes into the kitchen, which is connected to the room you are in by a counter, and starts to mix up a pitcher of white grapefruit juice. "So how's the mad scientist?"

You tell him about Greg's latest grant, funding to study the genetic links between scoliosis and epilepsy. Greg teaches at the University of Nebraska.

Mike pours two inches of vodka into a glass and tops it off with the grapefruit juice. "Want one?"

You hang up your skirt and blouse and leave your jeans and t-shirts and tennis shoes in the suitcase and put that on the floor near the guest bed, which is a mattress on the floor in



the alcove off the living room. You moved into this house right after graduating from college. At first you liked being alone, but then after a while sometimes you got lonelier than you thought possible and on those days you'd wrap your arms around the ash tree and press your ear up against the trunk and listen to it creak inside as the wind pushed its way through the branches way up high above you. Back then you wanted to believe the tree was talking, speaking sense.

Right now you and Mike go outside and sit in her shade, in low slung beach chairs. Once or twice a year Mike used to come and stay with you. He'd be between jobs, between apartments, between girlfriends, and end up in the alcove for weeks—once he slept in there for a month.

After snow boots and long underwear the late afternoon sun feels good on your legs. Mike talks about your mother and what the doctors expect to find tomorrow. Last week when he called you, told you what they had discovered inside your mother's head, you looked up eye and optic nerve in one of Greg's old biology books. You read about the compound eye, the camera eye. You read about some experiment where a scientist cut the optic nerve and eye muscles on a newt, then rotated the eye 180 degrees, and afterwards the newt moved its head in the opposite direction of stimulation. You had to wait until Greg finished teaching his class that day to find out what it all really meant.

Mike tells you why things ended between him and his old girlfriend. "I had an affair, she had an affair, I had another affair." It's a story Mike has told you more than once.

Then he talks about his new girlfriend (they met three weeks ago; she works in the office of the neurosurgeon who will be operating on your mother tomorrow). They celebrated her twenty-first birthday last week and she might be the one and they haven't been to bed yet. He's moving slowly this time, he says, because he wants it to work. When you start to tease him he insists that this is love. He tells you her hard little-girl tits turn him on like no others.



"Right Mike," you say, and breathe evenly, refusing to be drawn in. But later, after his third drink and your first, when he will ask you about married life, you will describe happiness in terms of your own breasts. You will be careful to go into vivid detail about their softness, and how you like to look down and see Greg's lips on them, and exactly how the nipples perk up as you watch Greg's tongue dance and tease, and how that makes a want in you that makes you think you've never wanted before. Mike will laugh and feel uncomfortable. You will feel uncomfortable too, embarrassed almost, but you will go on and on anyway, hoping your brother gets the point.

Your mother looks vulnerable in the hospital bed. She doesn't even try to smile when you and Mike walk into the room. You go to her, kiss her and pull the sheets that are soft from thousands of washings up close to her chin and you whisper into her ear, "I love you." She says, "Kiss my eyes," and as you press your lips against her cool skin a picture comes into your head of her doing the twist. She is earnest, trying hard to have fun. By then your father has been dead for three years and she has finally grieved all she can grieve.

Your brother stands on the other side of the bed. He's holding one of those sports bottles, the quart-sized ones with a straw coming up out of the lid. It is Day-Glo green and has a picture of a pole vaulter on it. Before leaving the house he filled it with ice and vodka and grapefruit juice and has been sucking on it ever since. He holds the bottle down and slips the straw into your mother's mouth. She takes a long pull.

You say, "Do you think this is smart?"

"Can't be any worse than what they plan to pump her full of tomorrow."

Mother says, "Really, Alice, it's the least of my worries."

You believe the tumor is benign and the doctor won't accidentally sever the optic nerve, and so you disagree. But since your mother knows her head is riddled with cancer, knows doctors always make mistakes, there is no telling her that to drink



vodka might not be good, might not be healthy.

On the way home Mike stops at Chef Ming's on the corner of Crescent Heights and Santa Monica Boulevard and picks up some takeout. At the house, while you zap the Chinese chicken in the microwave, Mike makes a phone call. "Hi Amber," he says and you know immediately that he is talking to his twenty-one-year-old girlfriend. The microwave bleats and Mike turns his back and starts to speak softly into the receiver. You spoon chunks of chicken and pieces of broccoli onto a plate and step outside. There is no moon and the stars are bright and the sweet smell of night blooming jasmine fills your head and you wonder about moving to Lincoln, Nebraska—into the heartland. Five years ago you couldn't have imagined yourself living in a three bedroom brick house on a block in a middle class neighborhood in the middle of the country. You never imagined yourself married to a geneticist. You thought the west coast, you thought Los Angeles, was Mecca. And now, your forty-fifth birthday a month away, you think maybe you belonged in Nebraska all along, that there is something real for you in a world covered in snow, in a white field and a meadow lark singing his song.

You go to bed early, page through a magazine. The phone rings and you hope it is Greg but then you can hear Mike, the low register of his voice. As you fall asleep you suspect Amber called and you wonder what she and your brother say to each other. Way late in the night you wake up to a high-pitched sound that you quickly identify as the voice of a woman, probably a young woman, climbing up towards an orgasm. As she hits the top your brother starts to sing along with her. And then suddenly it is quiet again, and you find yourself wanting Greg to be there in the bed with you. You hug the pillow to yourself and that old loneliness seeps in and you wonder if those feelings have been here inside the walls, behind the sheetrock, waiting for you.

In the morning you walk out onto the patio and a young woman, in one of Mike's shirts, is sitting in a beach chair.



Her hair, so long, almost touches the ground. You look at her chest—her hard little-girl tits.

She says, “You must be Alice.”

“And you . . .” but you don’t finish the sentence because it suddenly crosses your mind that maybe this isn’t Amber.

She stands up and extends her hand. “Amber,” she says. Her legs are brown and smooth.

You shake hands and Mike comes out onto the patio with two cups of coffee.

He swaggers. “Hi, Alice.”

“Morning,” you say and you lean up against the ash tree.

After giving Amber one of the cups of coffee he turns and offers the other to you. He winks and smiles and when you say you’ll get your own he insists that you take his. You want to ask Mike if Amber is the one.

“Amber’s bringing a friend over with her tonight,” Mike tells you. “He’s the radiologist in her office.” Mike is driving through the parking structure at the hospital.

Amber’s quiet demeanor startled you and you wonder why Mike doesn’t pick on someone his own size for a change. Amber should be in Nebraska, on a college campus, falling in love with some boy who started shaving two years ago.

Mike says, “Isn’t she something?”

You nod. And it is the truth.

“You’re speechless, huh?”

“Speechless,” you say. You are thinking about the inside of your mother’s head, about the neurosurgeon probing in there—easing past sections of the brain, hearing and speaking, pausing at memory, sixty-three encapsulated years—then heading on toward the tumor, small, no bigger than the end of your finger, that sits there on the optic nerve, two millimeters in front of the optic chiasm.

When you and Mike finally stumble into the right waiting room and find a nurse who knows your mother, she says your mother is still on the table. Your mother should have been in



recovery by now, so the comment makes your stomach turn over, and the nurse knows nothing, has no explanation for the delay, nothing except a “Maybe the doctor started late.”

Mike likes this excuse. He throws an old *Time* magazine at you and says, “Chill out,” and drifts back over to the nurses’ station.

But as it turns out the doctor did not start late. “Your mother,” the doctor says, “should have had this done months ago.” He goes on, “The nerve is atrophied.” At the end he says, “It is unfortunate that she let her fear get in the way.”

This conference with the doctor sobers your brother up (the two of you had lunch at the bar across the street). The tumor, glistening, the color of a ripe plum, is at this very moment on its way to pathology. The doctor assures you that it is benign; he is certain the pathologist will confirm this.

Complete blindness in one eye, partial blindness in the other. You and Mike come to the conclusion that she will adapt. But when you step into the intensive care unit and find your mother struggling to come out from under the anesthetic, her head wrapped, her arms secured to the sides of the bed, you can’t imagine her ever going back to anything like her normal life—walks at the beach, bridge, the occasional trip to Costa Rica. You watch Mike and he pales. You haven’t seen this happen since he was in fourth grade and the principal humiliated him in front of the whole grammar school for having stolen a tray of milk.

You go to him. “Hey, Mike, it’s okay.”

He steps back, laughs, goes over to a phone on a desk in the middle of the room. You can hear him as he leaves a message on Amber’s answering machine, something about calling back later and reminding her to bring her doctor friend along for dinner.

While he is on the phone your mother slips up through the fog and talks nonsense, something about being in a neighbor’s house, taking a bath, using the towels, and then being arrested on her way out the door. Your father’s name bubbles into the narrative.



You and Mike don't get away from the hospital until 7:30. By then Mike has called Amber four times. She left work at five, and her phone machine picks up at the apartment. This more than frustrates your brother.

On the way home he stops at a Japanese restaurant. The sake with a beer chaser hits the spot and you feel the anxious day bleed out of you. You drink one on one with Mike—and within an hour more raw fish slips down your throat than you thought possible.

Somehow Mike manages to drive up through the hills to the house. You are far too drunk to have accomplished this. He goes straight to the phone machine. You're hoping Greg has called, but the only message is from Eddie, who wants Mike to crew on a friend's sailboat this Saturday. "Dammit," Mike says, and goes into the kitchen and mixes up a batch of grapefruit juice.

You and your brother sit outside in the beach chairs, under a sliver moon, and drink some more. He's pulled the phone out there and punches in Amber's number every once in a while.

The booze has mellowed you out and you find yourself talking to Mike about your plan to try to get pregnant, to take an extended leave from your job at the university medical clinic and start a family.

When he questions you, you say, "Yeah, yeah we do want to."

Mike sees kids as the padlock on the chain. "Capitalism has you then," he says.

You make a stumbling argument to support your decision, trying hard to express these new feelings about intimacy and faith and belief in the future.

Mike won't engage, accuses you of buying into the party line, then tries Amber again and you say, "No thanks," when he pushes himself up out of the chair and goes in to fix himself another drink. You reach for the phone and then realize it is almost midnight in Nebraska, that he has probably been asleep for an hour, maybe two.

With your head straight back you can make out Orion in



the southern sky. You hear Mike, ice rattling against glass. He slips a fresh drink into your hand as he sits back down next to you, and you're glad to have the burn of alcohol at the back of your throat again.

"Check this out," Mike says.

You look over and see a gun in your brother's hand—huge and black.

You say, "What the hell?"

".44 Magnum," he says. "I just got it the other day."

He has always had guns, but this? You say, "It's a fucking cannon."

He drops it in your lap and you jump.

He says, "Go on, pick it up."

You feel like you are ten years old again, and Mike is bullying you, calling you a sissy-girl without saying the words. You aren't afraid of the gun and so you reach down into your lap and wrap your fingers around the butt. Heavy and well balanced, it sits in your hand like it belongs there. This surprises you.

"Ruger Blackhawk," your brother says. "It'd blow someone's head right off their shoulders."

"Great," you say.

He says, "Go on. Shoot it off."

You aim out into the night and say, "Bang."

He says, "I'm serious."

And you say, "Are you nuts? We're in the city limits here."

He says, "Fuck it," and grabs the gun. He takes aim, pointing it at the ash tree.

As you yell, "No," a huge explosion fills up all the night around you, and you see fire coming out the end of the barrel and gun-powder smells sear the inside of your nose.

"You are crazy, Mike." You jump up. He doesn't move. He is still in the beach chair, the revolver pointed out in front of him. Your ears are ringing and you realize how drunk you really are. You go to the tree, run your fingers over the trunk until you find the place where the bullet entered. The hole is ragged, and warm. There is no evidence of the bullet having come out the



other side and so it must be inside, wedged somewhere in the bruised pulp.

You hear Mike stand and then he says, "Come on." He has his keys in one hand and the gun in the other.

Mike staggers down the path toward the car. You follow, trying to talk Mike into coming back to the house, but he wants to take you somewhere where you can fire the gun off too. You tell him you don't care about it, but he is determined. "We'll be there in five minutes," he promises and you find yourself sitting in the passenger seat as Mike, for the second time that day, backs out of the driveway.

He didn't lie. In five minutes your brother drives into the park up at the top of Laurel Canyon, off of Mulholland Drive. You and Greg had a picnic here one afternoon last summer, five acres, some of it in grass, most of it in native brush. You notice an old Pontiac in the lot, but it is dark and isolated here. Mike explains the vehicle away—"Probably abandoned." You see the lights of the city way down below and now the idea of firing off the gun doesn't seem impossible. You actually want to hold it in your hand again.

You feel like an outlaw as you walk, side by side with your brother, across the grass, past the jungle gym and the swing set and out into the middle of the park. You can smell sage and Orion has moved east. When Mike presses the gun into your hands suddenly you don't need any more encouragement. You hold it out in front of you and blast off one fiery shot and you are amazed at the kick, at the way the power travels back up your arm and into your body. The very sense of this thrills you, and even as it shames you, you let go with another explosion.

You whoop and say, "We'd better get out of here," and start dancing back toward the car. Mike follows you. Like a movie cowboy you pop one off into the air. The kick drills you back into the ground.

As you come up the rise to the parking lot Mike grabs the gun out of your hand. He shoots it straight up into the air too. At the same moment the light in that old Pontiac comes



on, and you see a young man standing at the car, holding the door open. A woman is beside him; she has a blanket wrapped around her. They are frozen there, caught in the flash. In that instant you know you have terrified the two of them, and you feel terrible for it. Your brother starts to laugh, and shoots the gun again. You yell to the couple, "We're just fooling around," and you take hold of Mike's sleeve and pull him toward his car. Mike pushes you away and is about to pull the trigger again, but you run back into him and somehow your legs get tangled up with his and the two of you fall to the ground. The gun flies out of his hand and skids across the asphalt.

Mike hollers, "What the fuck?"

"Let's just get out of here." But you feel Mike's shoes pressing into your stomach, the toe digging into your solar plexus and then you are gagging for air. Finally, when you sit up you see Mike next to you, still on the ground too. The man from the Pontiac stands nearby, one white tennis shoe on top of the gun.

The woman calls out from the car, "Joseph?"

"We don't want to hurt anyone," you yell. To the man you say, "I'm sorry." You sound weak and senseless.

"Don't worry," he yells over his shoulder.

"Look," you say as you try to stand up, "I'm Alice. . . ."

"Keep your butt on the ground."

"Okay. Okay, and this is my brother, Mike."

"Nice manners."

"Hey, man," says Mike, "we didn't mean to interrupt."

He yells, "Interrupt?" The woman comes up beside him.

You say, "Shut up, Mike."

The man says, "Go back to the car."

The woman says, "Come with me." She puts an arm around the man's waist. "Come on." The man doesn't move. She is a small woman with lots of dark hair around her face. She looks at you, at Mike. "They're just a couple of dumb drunks."

It dawns on you that there are no more bullets in the gun, that all six shots have been fired. You double check, thinking



through the sequence again, and then you start to laugh at your own fear.

"Nothing's funny here," the man says.

This time when you push yourself up, you don't stop when the man yells. Instead you tell him to relax, that the gun is empty.

"Not by my count," the man says. He moves fast, pushing the woman behind him, bending and picking up the gun. He doesn't handle the gun with any comfort.

Mike is on his knees. You help him up. "Let's go home."

But Mike digs into his pocket. He wants to keep going. "I've got some more bullets here if you want."

"Are you nuts?" the woman says.

You say, "He is." You turn to Mike and see that he's holding his hand out, palm up, with three shiny new bullets lined up in it. He has never known when to stop.

"Take 'em," he says. "Go on, Joe, try the gun out. Pull the trigger. It'll get her hot all over again." Your brother wolf whistles, a high, piercing sound. "Believe me. I know." Now he is really scaring the woman. He whistles again, and you look at him and think of Amber (now she seems like some kind of show he performed for you) and re-see over the grinning raw face beside you, the pale way his skin went when he saw his mother earlier.

"Leave the nice people alone," you say.

"Nobody's nice," Mike says. His voice goes cold. "Remember that, little sister." He puts the bullets back into his pants pocket. "Now, why don't you give me the gun."

The man takes a hold of the barrel and throws the gun as hard as he can. You can see it, its darkness blacker than the night, spinning like a boomerang, and then you can hear it as it crashes into the dry brush down in the ravine beside the parking lot.

"Fuck you," the man says. He's scared. He grabs the woman by the arm and the two of them run back to the Pontiac.

Your brother chases after them, taking only a couple of steps and making frightening sounds. He laughs and looks at you to join him; the sound is shrill and only makes you feel sad.



But Mike is still laughing when the man revs the Pontiac as it passes by.

Your brother goes to the trunk of the car, opens it and gets a flashlight out of the tool kit. "Let's see if we can find that goddamn gun," he says.

You don't move to help him. Instead you walk back into the park, over to the jungle gym. You wrap you hands around the cold pipe and pull yourself up and climb to the top. You stand there, your knees braced against the last rung, and look out into the night.



THE PIANO DOWNSTAIRS

James Pate

There's the piano downstairs  
not a small one either  
the size of a rotting Buick with water inside and fish in the  
windows  
and the old woman who stays there with it  
as if she's its keeper its prisoner  
while most everything else around them is in stacks of leaning  
columns  
newspapers scratched up by cat claws and boxes crammed  
with armies of broken figurines illegible photographs  
is playing that piano as if she's never heard a song before  
just one note and a long break and another  
until the passing train behind our building  
speeds by with its pulse of yellow windows  
beating against the evening air  
and as the silence after the train settles  
across the streetlights the snow-caked courtyards  
another note and then  
a long stretch of nothing  
again

The piano is enormous  
I've seen it in the downstairs windows as I go along searching  
for someplace cheap  
where the waiters have a reclusive kind of despair  
chiseled in their brows the cooks cough from the kitchen like  
diseased dragons  
where fish steams up from clay bowls  
the breath of garlic and salt  
from the display of meat and bone  
the other fish codes of violet floating in the windows  
in their coma of water



the glass pane a slow blink between light and dark  
I've seen that piano so many nights they thaw into one  
and I've seen her in that mood she gets into around it  
her on the bench in a parka even in the hothouse of July  
striking one note  
and then another  
leading to no place  
you'd ever want to think about yourself  
where one tree stands and there are no birds around in the  
wind  
but you can't help but speculate  
she's almost there  
just one more note  
and there



EVENING TRAVEL

James Pate

1

The train smelled of the ghosts of hairy animals.  
The windows were bright then dark then cold.  
I curled across the seat and my thoughts marched  
off to sleep on little wooden legs gnarled by frost.  
My right hand turned off and my left hand stayed  
on guard. I dreamt we were going down  
and then up, but never across or back and forth.  
The stations stood out from strips of smoke and mud,  
the mountains curved their backs  
along icy shores, the lakes were carpets  
of moon. Underneath the local currency were bones  
enough for another day. I walked along the street  
with my hands in my fists, my head in my teeth.  
No dog ever returns to lose what it began with.

2

From far away it didn't matter but around here it partially  
did. I heard the last part  
over breakfast. No one cared how it started. No one  
heard the records in the room she  
smoked in  
in the hotel where the nights  
stood in for furniture. There was the song of  
the black mirror. The song of ankles  
and shredded wigs. The song of war  
and snow. The song of fingertips and spilt bourbon. The song  
of the floating wedding dress. The song of the thigh  
on the TV screen. The song of the shoe  
on the floor. The song of pissing in  
the fire. The song of flies snapping  
in the flame.



3

We moved along with the shadow of the train.  
You watched a moth, I waited by the window.  
The idea of sleeping too long is similar  
to the idea of walking naked through a zoo  
where the animals are bald and hungry.  
Their eyes stare back in the old photographs.  
Their voices are waiting like teeth in the grass.  
When we arrive our suitcases will be empty. We'll  
open them to collect the rain. We'll bury them  
up to their grins and shoot the zippers  
from their smiles. It's late but never late enough.



VIEW OF HOME

Carrie Shippers

The town seemed smaller  
after the water had gone.  
At its worst, it stood ten feet deep  
on Main, and the view  
from river bridge to river bridge  
was *lovely*, I want to say:  
water, houses, the top halves  
of trees. What trash there was  
went by so quickly in the current  
it almost wasn't there.  
But to watch the river retreat  
was to see, again, junkyards filled  
with tail-finned Fords,  
house trailers sagging  
at their centers, grain sacks  
and beer cans lining the ditches,  
the town's refuse only slightly  
rearranged. We scrubbed for days  
to remove the mud  
and a smell I still can't name,  
everything left to sour in the sun.



JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
FINALIST

THESE WOODS  
Tara Mantel

Hibernation

In these woods, trees sway in the wind like tentacles. They are new growth, they know how to begin from nothing. In time their roots reach far down into the claylike layers of the earth, unfurling stringlike roothairs that grope the raw dirt, hold on tightly for life.

Nadja stands amid the highbrush cranberry growing at the base of a young oak, its highest branch thrusting crookedly into the dawn. The wet leaves below her feet are inches thick, cushioning her step. In this season of transition, she feels her shape shift: she is bulkier in her heavy clothes, and her sluggish body craves breads and grains, the starch her cells will need throughout the winter.

Sister Sky, Nadja's older half-sister, is here too. All the way from the New Mexico side of the reservation. She is bulky all the time. She pushes through these North Dakota windchills like a snowplow clearing drifts. In the middle of a rock-weathering January, her hands are warm and pulsing. She eats fresh root vegetables as long as they are available, and red meat for breakfast. Sometimes she fixes a batch of *sopaipilla*, but she eats it with raw garlic, not honey. She says that garlic is a charm. Nadja, who knows that the caseworker would not approve of charms, adds, also an antioxidant.

Arrivals

How long had Nadja been in these woods? She and her husband purchased the drafty yellow farmhouse something like eight autumns ago, in 1979. They hadn't discussed having



children, but when, on the way back from Chief Looking's Village, Nadja found an abandoned baby girl in the Bismarck bus station, they believed they had received a sign.

The baby was carried off by security personnel—Nadja couldn't get the image out of her mind—and one night she breathed the name "Zola" into the bedroom air and wanted it to be the baby's name. But when, a week after her training had ended, Nadja called the department inquiring about the child, she discovered that the baby's heart, like that of her husband, was a pulsing flesh grenade quickly counting down to zero. In time, both failed.

The mourning chipped away at Nadja's bones, carved out in the sticky marrow a deep nesting place. She had to remember to move her body forward, preferably into physical labor of some kind, and so directed all her energy into unnecessary home improvement projects, beginning with the interior of the creaky farmhouse. She drove to the hardware store for cans of paint, rollers, angled nylon brushes, sandpaper, spackle. After a breakfast of banana and oatmeal, she would sand and wipe the walls, carefully paint the trim, roll on slabs of color—teal, magenta, gold. While the walls dried she went outside to weed or mulch or prune the rose bushes that hung over the stone wall.

But even the freshly painted walls held the energy of grief; they spoke in the night of their emptiness, and when Nadja pushed against them, she decided to believe in ghosts.

One day the department called Nadja with a possible placement: a young girl waiting, it seemed, especially for her. This stringy-haired girl with post-traumatic stress disorder arrived as planned, but Nadja barely had time to get to know her when another arrival came knocking. Nadja had not seen Sky in nine years. Her hair was still long and straight and raven-colored, her bangs still choppy—she must still use the kitchen knife to cut them, Nadja thought—her expression like an ink blob, her knotty fingers proof of her adolescent training as a potter. "Father said you did not sound so good on the phone," Sky said, and then pushed past Nadja to the stove to set a pot to boil.



Sky found a job at the grocery store in the older part of town, but her blood was that of a healer. The night she arrived at the farmhouse, she sat in front of the fire, her face glowing like melted amber. She closed her eyes and said, I remove myself from my flesh boundary and travel with the animal guardians to the otherworld. I fight among the supernatural in order to see into past and future.

When Sky opened her eyes, Nadja said, "You still practice."

"I have no choice in the matter," Sky said.

In time Nadja would see that those who believed in Sky came from miles, in rusted trucks with no windshield wipers or hubcaps. They came from as far away as the desert because they knew she'd give them what they needed, that she could sense their energies and their magnetic pulls and resistances, and give them advice they could use.

Nadja had grown up with pharmaceuticals and indoor plumbing and a different mother. She was not going to argue with Sky. She remembered how Sky healed the dying and convulsing snakebite boy, on that windless summer day in 1971, and held her tongue.

#### Inquiries

In these woods, saplings spring up strong and fast. They reach upward and downward, opposites stretching. Nadja breathes deeply in her garden. She can hear Sky banging around in the kitchen, setting out tea and fruit and oatmeal flavored with cinnamon and cream. In a few minutes Sky will emerge in her embroidered denim skirt and the quilt coat with the fuzzy trim along the edges, go to the end of the wraparound porch, the side facing east, and pay homage to the morning light, to *hayılka*. She will stand so still she could be a stamen reaching out from a sweet-liquid desert bloom.

Nadja bends to gather chamomile, thyme, rosemary. The light in this northern backcountry is lilac-colored. Lilac comes before pink, pink before yellow. The herbs, which Nadja puts in her basket, will dry over the fireplace and then be put into clay jars.



Nadja needs many plants, because she cooks for the millions. That is how she says it. At the moment she might need to cook only for two, but she will cook for anyone, for strangers and the estranged, for Sky's goddesses and visitors, for the delirious and the rabid.

Nadja's children, they come from all over. The women in the support group, which Nadja attends every other week, nod when she says that these kids are raindrops, they are pollen. They smile when she says she calls her latest girl Honey-Wheat because all she ate for two days was clover honey on slices of toasted wheat bread. Honey-Wheat's birth name is Julia, but Nadja likes to let the child believe that her new name is a special gift.

When Nadja goes inside, Sky is at the cutting board, silent, preparing the ingredients for chili, and Honey-Wheat is squirming up into her chair, which is pulled too close to the table. She is six years old and on four medications, which Sky glares at when Nadja sets them, in a multicolored pile, in front of the girl, so she can swallow them with some water crackers and juice.

Honey-Wheat is asking about where babies come from, and Nadja jumps in to say, motioning skyward, my little girl, babies come from above—that is why the clouds have many colors in them. She gets this out quickly because the truth will open the floodgate and then there will be questions she can never answer.

### The Boy

About a year later, these woods do an amazing thing. It is a glazed, humid week, tornado warnings in all the counties. The sky is yellow-gray and the air so still your ears echo.

On the edge of the tree line appears a boy of about five. He is wild looking, with deep-set eyes, and he crouches in the brush. Nadja is putting down a fresh layer of mulch in the garden, and turns for the wheelbarrow when she spots him. She watches for movement, but he is as still as a boulder.

The boy is curious, not afraid. She goes inside and returns to



the garden with sunflower seeds and peaches.

"I wonder," Nadja says to the boy, "if you've ever tried a peach." She bites into it and lets the juice run down her chin. She holds the fruit out to him. "And I'll bet you don't know what sunflower seeds taste like."

The boy doesn't answer.

"Tienes hambre?" she says, but there is no sign of comprehension.

She thinks of calling the police but waits. The boy will come for food eventually.

The next day the boy is there again, but now he wanders to the porch and sits quietly with Nadja, and on the third day he comes inside. Nadja can't take her eyes off him. He looks as though he had sprung, fully formed, from the dank mud on the bank of a stream or from the depths of rotting compost.

Nadja talks to him about anything: her day, her garden, people who mean nothing to him or even to her. She tells him about Sky, how he will meet her soon. She puts out a plate of waffles and watches him closely. There are things—normal, everyday things—that the boy clearly has never seen. The waffle maker, for instance, might to him have been an alien spaceship. Is he interested in spaceships? She lets the silence grow.

She talks to him about a bath: has he had one lately? Maybe he would like one. Maybe he would like to be clean, wear soft pajamas.

She leaves him with his half-eaten waffle to run a bath, and when the waffle is gone the boy lets her rub him down with a cloth. He has cuts—old and nearly healed—and several bruises that are yellow in the middle. She checks for malnutrition and lice, then dries him and wraps him in a towel. When she runs a comb through his hair he looks down and picks at the chipped spot on the sink.

"You are a sweet fruit," Nadja says, "and you are discovered."

#### Beside the Water

Sky has firm ideas about what children need; she takes one



look at the boy and bangs her fist on the table and says, we must cleanse him.

Nadja had seen Sky's cleansing ritual several times and concluded that, at least, there's no harm in it. She tells Honey-Wheat and the boy that they are going down to the pond, and they will lie on a warm slab of rock, and they will listen to the beautiful songs of the meadowlark. She turns to the boy and says, Aunt Sky will clean your clothes and give you a special necklace to wear. She tells Honey-Wheat, come, show him yours, and Honey-Wheat pulls out from the top of her muddy pink t-shirt a silver chain with a turquoise medallion hanging from it.

Nadja says they will all go down and see what the frogs are up to. She says, what do you think they do down there all day?

When they get to the rock, Sky hands the boy a towel. "Go behind that tree and take off your clothes. Wrap up in this."

Honey-Wheat is excited about this ritual because she is allowed to be naked. She smiles, showing teeth stained with cherry Kool-Aid. She yanks at the sleeves of her t-shirt until her arms are free, and then pulls the shirt partly over her head. She lets it hang down past her neck like a nun's habit.

The boy comes back with the towel around his shoulders. Sky says to the boy, "Lie on that rock, on your back." Nadja steps down the muddy slope and onto the rock, to demonstrate. She smells the stale heat of baked earth. "Sky, don't force him," Nadja says, but Sky is already gathering the boy's clothes.

The boy sits beside Nadja. Honey-Wheat joins them and sits, hugging her knees. She scratches a pebble into the rock, brushes at the chalky outline.

Nadja says to the boy, "Do you know this place?" The boy looks at her. "It is a nice pond, don't you think?"

Sky does not like the chatting. "Lie back," she says, and at the pond's edge begins beating the boy's clothes with a baseball bat. "See," Nadja whispers, "she is getting out all the dirt and dust." The boy looks from Sky to Nadja, blinking.

Sky begins her chant, a low monotone from the gut, and the dust disappears over the water. Soon a giant cumulus cloud



opens enough for a wash of sun to spread over them. The rock heats again quickly, makes their legs prickly with goosebumps. "See?" Nadja says to the boy. "You pulled the sun's rays right out of the sky."

"Sunny sky," Honey-Wheat says to her knees, giggling.

### Naming

Nadja calls the department and in fact one caseworker there knows of this boy. This one is called Cody, and he runs away, the woman says, he's been placed all over the area. She says that Nadja should hold tight. Someone will come by, she says, to take a history, but the days pass and no one shows up. Calls are not returned.

Nadja searches deep for explanations but there is nothing for a situation like this. She consults her training manual and talks with the support group, but there is nothing regarding a child who is spit out by a woods and does not speak. That the boy doesn't speak does not, on its own, concern Nadja. These kids, they have already tumbled down from strange mountains; they do not necessarily believe in the benefits of speech.

The boy receives his special name a week later: he helps Nadja with the yard cleanup, uprooting with his bare hands stunted bulbs and weeds with stems as thick as Nadja's thumb. And so he becomes Claw.

In the spring Claw digs additional rows for the garden and clears the area around the shed, which Sky wants to turn into a hut for her rituals. He pulls wormwood and foxtail for hours, even thistle, forms six piles circling the shed. Nadja goes to him with lemonade and apples and peanut butter bread. He eats while squatting beside a mass of bent white rudbeckia, the ground dug away and the roots half-exposed.

Honey-Wheat wanders over next to Claw. Her dandelion crown sits crooked on her head and her face is smeared with mud and the orange frost of lily stamens. Her ponytail hangs limp at the base of her neck.

Claw counts out half his apple slices and places them, one at



a time, in Honey-Wheat's hand. She bites into one and smacks noisily.

Chewing, and imperceptibly, surviving.

### Deliverables

Nadja wants Claw to see life in the town, kids playing on the sidewalk, merchandise bought and sold, pigeons and hot tar.

We will take a trip to town, she says, to the store to get some yummy things. Claw looks at the floor, chewing on the nail of his index finger.

In the front seat of the truck, Honey-Wheat yammers on about where to get the best oranges; how Mr. Guslander, the store owner, sometimes gives you a lollipop and you don't have to pay for it; that there's a church with ladies sitting in front of it and sometimes the high bell is ringing but sometimes it isn't.

Up ahead is the racket they've heard for a mile: large machines, and then dust rising from the site of a future strip mall. The metal contraptions emerge from the cloud, folding and unfolding their grasshopper-like appendages, and Claw is pasted to the window. He turns to Nadja, his eyes ask seven questions. Nadja says they are making a very big building and so the workers have to get up in machines with high seats and lots of controls. Claw looks out. His fingers pick at the peel of an orange and finally get a grip, pulling it away. Tiny oil droplets spray into the air.

Nadja has never seen a child so silent. But she will lose him if she coaxes, if her mind is full of ideas of things she feels he must do. She will lay a finger on him lightly, give him a sentence or two, and wait.

When she pulls into the store parking lot, she says, "I will be just a few minutes." Honey-Wheat has questions about what, exactly, is going to be purchased, and climbs over Claw and out of the truck. She goes to shut the door but stops. Claw is moving to get out, and then he does, dropping himself onto the pavement. Even Honey-Wheat is frozen with surprise. Nadja winks at her, motions "shhh."

They go into the store and roam the aisles. Honey-Wheat



tosses boxes of cookies into the cart, and Nadja stops to remove them. Claw looks up and down the stacked shelves, but the fruit section stops him in his tracks. He wants a lime, so Nadja bags one and gives it to him to carry.

At the counter Mr. Guslander says, "Is this another one of yours," and Nadja says, "Yes, this is Claw." But Guslander hears "Claude" and says, "Well, Claude, how about a lollipop?" Honey-Wheat grins and jumps around. Guslander places two lollipops on the counter and Claw inspects both before curling his fingers around the red one.

On the way home they have to stop. A train is working its way along the freight line. Nadja stops at the flashing lights. The train rumbles ahead and blows its horn. Honey-Wheat squeals with delight.

The boxcars pass, shades of red and rust and gray flash by. She looks at the children, watches their eyes follow the cars, then flick back to their original position, only to follow again, as if quickly reading lines of text.

Nadja's eyes burn. One boxcar is open and empty; she thinks she sees a drunk man slouched in there, or a child in the corner covered with a burlap sack, breathing the dust of husks and wood chips. When the caboose passes, Nadja looks left at the snaky line of cars disappearing. The sun hits a piece of broken glass lying on the track, and as she pulls forward, it beams out a pupil-piercing glare.

Claw stacks his lime peels against the seat's back, one on top of the other, but Honey-Wheat bounces up and down on the seat and they fall over. He bites into the lime and makes a face. Irritated, he eyes the fruit, giving it a silent interrogation.

#### Ritual, with Jell-O

No sooner is the shed transformed into a healing hut when a pregnant woman rings the doorbell. She is tired and pale and says to Nadja, yeah, looking for the healer.

Sky takes the woman along the path leading to the shed, its roof covered with early fall leaves the color of candied apples and



cantaloupe. Nadja fixes an echinacea tea flavored with ginger and brings it out.

Healers need a lot of space, so the hut is sparsely decorated. There is a twin mattress covered with a quilt, which sits on a raised platform, and bunches of dried lavender hanging from nails.

Nadja enters with the tray of tea and sets it on a low table beside the platform. Sky has already lit the sage. The woman takes a cup and drinks. The three of them drink, silently. Then Sky claps her hands together. She says, good, we begin now. To the woman she says, clean up your hair, it is tangled. Sky hands her a comb, says get out all the knots.

The woman takes down her hair and combs it, then lies back. Sky spreads the woman's hair out on the pillow. Nadja crosses to the window, where she can see Claw and Honey-Wheat playing. Behind her, Sky rummages through boxes of beads.

"You are three months?" Sky says.

"Yes," the woman says. "I have had one child but this one already feels so different."

The stranger's truck is empty; the woman must have come alone. Sky rolls up her sleeves. She approaches the woman. Nadja watches Sky move her hands—they tremble at times, slow down, jerk back, move in closer—over the woman's body. They stop above the woman's womb. Sky says, "Is the father of this child a good-for-nothing weasel?"

The woman hesitates. Sky says, "Do not lie to me."

"Some would say that he is," the woman says.

"He is angry with this baby and his bad energy will hurt it. You must go live somewhere else until it is born."

Sky again passes her hands over the woman, moving them in small circles. She chants softly, then strings blue and green beads onto a thin cord, which she fastens around the woman's wrist. She goes to the miniature refrigerator and returns with a bowl of red shimmering globs. She sets it at the woman's feet.

"Jell-O," Sky says.

The woman's forehead wrinkles. Nadja leans in. "It symbolizes



your placenta.”

“Oh.” The woman smiles faintly.

Sky says, “What you get here is a little bit of *shimáasani*, a little bit of Western nurse, and a little bit of me. You get all flavors of Jell-O, see?”

Sky passes her hands over the woman yet again. This time she leans into the woman here and there, pushing into her aura. Sky moves toward the woman’s calves and, fifteen minutes later, stands at the woman’s feet. She stretches her arms outward, her head up, breathing a release into the air. Sky opens her eyes. “It is done.”

The woman gets up and writes a check. She is sobbing. Nadja says, “Do not worry. Your baby will be fine. Keep yourself calm.” Nadja gives her Valerian root and skullcap and chamomile, and says, do you know how to make a tea for when you cannot sleep, and the woman nods.

Nadja watches her walk to her truck and drive off. Nadja turns and says, “You could have been more sensitive.”

Sky begins sweeping. “I am sensitive in the way I am getting paid for. They do not come to me to hear kind words.”

“What if this woman cannot leave her home?”

“Then she risks loss. She will have to use all of her resources.” Sky opens the shed door and sweeps out a pile of debris.

Nadja stares out the window. Outside, Claw builds up the dirt, bulldozes it with both hands, then pats it down with hard slaps.

These children are like pieces of frayed rope; they come with barely a beginning, with no story to anchor them. They might even be figments of her imagination.

### Dreams

Nadja stirs from sleep with a vision of Claw running. In a few seconds the vision is gone and Nadja feels consciousness set in, feels the morning light against her closed eyelids.

But when she passes Claw’s room she notices that he is not in bed. He is not in the bathroom. And when she goes downstairs



she sees that the front door is unlatched.

Her heart races as she opens the door. In her near panic her eyes fly to the light blue smear passing behind the spindly trees. She makes her way to the woods, where she finds Claw in the brush, crawling around on top of a large mound of dirt. It is as high as Nadja's thigh and is oblong, coffin-shaped. How long has he been digging around in this dirt? And he is not so much piling and patting the dirt as he is sculpting: the mound has an entrance, and the back of it is wedged against the base of a tree. It is big enough to hold a small boy, and as she thinks this, she sees Claw disappear inside of it.

### Philosophy

One Saturday night Sister Sky tells a story: there is a man who decides that schedules and clocks and calendars are overrated. The man wanders around the world, through the ancient cities of Israel and India, through fields with rounded stones marking out the vague, overgrown circles of ritual. Commerce has broken him and he needs to find something to make him whole. He is obsessive in his search. He checks along the sides of bluffs, wades through streams, and hunches over earthen pits, studying soggy wood. He is convinced that he will find an answer. He is so certain that he abandons even his books, relinquishes every single one of his material objects. He walks for days in a circle nearly three miles in diameter, looking, inspecting, searching. The man dies of starvation.

Nadja says, "What is that story?" They are all in the kitchen, where she and Honey-Wheat play Uno. It is Honey-Wheat's turn to deal but the cards get away from her and fall, coating the old linoleum. She goes to collect them, but Nadja says, never mind, it's time for bed.

Sky turns to Nadja. "You must not have been listening."

Honey-Wheat takes Claw's hand and pulls him toward the stairs.

"Did Dad tell that story?" Nadja says.

"You do not think these stories are important."



"That's not true."

"These kids are weighed down with bad energy," Sky says. "Their pores are clogged with lead and they have mercury in their blood."

Nadja does not disdain the ancient ways. Despite her secular upbringing, she feels that karma or kismet or nirvana or reincarnation are all compelling ways of framing relationships with forces we cannot see. But there are daily battles to be fought here on the ground; here, there is a rising sun to contend with, there are disorders to manage and administrators and officials to deflect.

Nadja says, "The children just need a stable environment."

"And that's what they're getting."

Nadja picks up toys, throws them into a large wooden bin.

Sky says, "You are still ignorant, then."

"It's just that I think the story is too abstract. They are not ready."

"The story will stay with them. Your problem is that you want to understand everything right away."

Nadja glares at Sky. "You have seen the scars on Honey-Wheat's back. But your answer to all this is philosophy."

"Nadja, your roots, they are smooth and shallow."

#### Pronouncements

There are times, for instance when all of them are sitting down for dinner, eating silently because of some punishment doled out to the children, knives and forks clinking on emptying plates, when Nadja feels something important disappear: the sheer white curtains billow in an updraft, and she imagines that her purpose has blown under them and out and away. She thinks, who are these children? What are these woods and this house and this roaming half-sister? Where is the origin of the ivory sheen that spreads over this land at midnight?

The other foster mothers, they have strange memories that creep up on them in the middle of a session—memories of failed parents, betrayal, sometimes neglect. The stories differ only in the



tinest details. Nadja herself recalls a depressed father, a critical mother. Perhaps Sky is right about how stories come back to you and deliver messages. Nadja remembers one story in particular, a tale involving a melon that houses a protective spirit, and when the melon is split open the spirit is released.

Sometimes she gropes around for this melon spirit. What is it and how does it work? Will it protect her from the sand slipping beneath her feet and will it keep the wind from whisking up her sunwashed little beauties and carrying them off? Will it tell her that out of grief comes love even though you will feel as if you are drowning?

Nadja knows that the social worker does not think highly of her. She has spoken up about being left out of discussions concerning the children's futures. She has grown frustrated talking with other mothers, hearing about children being thrust back into a dangerous life for the sake of the nuclear family. She is tired of calling for late checks.

On these days and on the days when the social worker drops in unexpectedly to snoop around and formulate opinions, Nadja feels she has sold her body.

One night she announces a new rule. Everyone must knock before entering rooms. No barging in. Wherever you go, she says, if there is a closed door and you want to enter, you must knock first. We enter lives with no warning, she says, swing right on in and out of each other's spaces; knocking on a door is a sign of humanity. A sign of respect.

Sky and the children watch her. Honey-Wheat's brow is crinkled, Claw looks at Sky, Sky looks at Nadja and says, now look who is talking about spaces.

It is fall, again, in these woods, the short days descend upon them all. Nadja takes Claw for his first day of school, but he cannot manage it. In the classroom he is as tight as a metal clamp until Nadja touches his arm. After a week he can finally make it through a couple of hours, even do the projects with tissue paper and pipe cleaners.

But he is smitten with cave life, and when he comes home he



goes outside and invariably withdraws into his small dirt house pushed up against the base of the tree.

#### A Message

Honey-Wheat's papers are not coming through. The good news is that her mother successfully completed rehab, and this is enough to convince the department to reintroduce the girl into her family. Nadja gets the call well after lunch.

Nadja goes out to the field, where Honey-Wheat sits playing. Honey-Wheat looks up at her and into the low sun. She leans an elbow on her knee, squints her eyes, and says, "Howdy there," pushing the lid of her baseball cap back with her thumb.

Nadja's thighs give out but she steadies herself. "Howdy, pardner," Nadja says, sitting down with the girl in the dirt. The corners of Nadja's eyes tighten. "I reckon I got some news for ya."

#### Shapes

If the stories Nadja hears at the support group could swirl together and touch down from above, they would do so in the form of lightning, a rare kind, one that strikes in the same place over and over again.

Nadja and the other women watch for signs and clues, and as the months go by they note the tiny steps forward: tantrums of twelve minutes, not fourteen; a child no longer afraid of the bed or of night. Kids are young and elastic, they stretch and bounce back, relearn and unlearn, come and go. They go back to a grandmother's house, a mother's house, they go to group homes or to the apartment of a jobless sister who drinks too much, they walk into hailstorms of promises and fresh starts, to places that cannot support their weight, to ideologues and Jesus freaks, to those who want them for dangerous reasons. They visit prisons, are on speaking terms with adult dementia. They leave town on a midnight bus to New York City. They leave life altogether with a razor blade's slit.

The first snow of the season sifts down in granules and in the



noonday sun melts into Rorschach patterns: butterfly wings, profiles of grotesque human faces, crescent moons. The day Honey-Wheat is taken away in a navy blue sedan, Nadja stops cooking and, at night, waits vainly for sleep.

In these woods the mourning is constant and changing; it aches deeply into limbs. It is a monsoon that flows into every organ and washes away longings, addictions, wishes, intentions.

Sky simmers a chicken, soaks the bones and skin for stock. More marrow, more flooding.

Nadja tells Sky of her latest dream: there are bloody tracks in the snow and she is a girl, she is young, she knows that the tracks will lead her to something awful but then sees the fawn, spotted and still in the center of a field, she is close to it, she can see its breath in the chilly air, and knows that this fawn is not the one that left the tracks and that no matter what, she must find the other fawn, the dead fawn, the bloody carcass.

Sky says the dream's message is simple. "You have encountered fear but you have determination. You gain strength, even now." She says, eat the soup.

But Nadja cannot bring the spoon to her mouth.

Do not worry, sister, Sky says. I will dance for you, for your health, for all the miracles waiting just under our feet.

### Meditation

Nadja lies on her back in her garden and looks at the tops of the trees through her fingers, which she has extended in front of her face. The sunlight eases around them, turning them a translucent orange. It is November, and winter is already chainsawing through the atmosphere. She has her snowsuit on because she wants to lie comfortably, let the downy thermal layer absorb her heat and distribute it. As the sun reddens her cheeks she sinks deep into her body, feels her chest rise and fall with the gusts swooping in from the north.

The bare branches of the tops of the highest trees sway into her line of vision; a few giant dead leaves of the maples refuse



to let go of the mother stem.

She cannot compare her idea of kinship to an oak, maple, or pine tree, nor to a protective forest canopy. It is, rather, like the young underbrush that starts from square-foot one, getting by on what it is offered.

A child can be flung ruthlessly back to a starting point to begin again, Sisyphus-like; but if that child is healthy and fed, then there is a foundation. Nadja has to believe that it is thicker than it seems.

### Lost

Claw does not play well with others. The children instinctively avoid him. He has developed a problem with balance; he leans to the left, or when kneeling, for example, he falls over. The speech therapist mentions encephalitis but the caseworker finds nothing in the file. The caseworker says she's seen this happen after a child's head is hit particularly hard, but there is no documentation here, either.

In the special classes, Claw acts out by not participating. Nadja thinks that this is his way of protesting and goes to the teachers to talk. She is embarrassed when she cannot answer questions about his earlier years. One teacher is visibly burned out, stretched too thin, and cannot stop complaining about the lack of resources. She breathes exhaustion into Nadja's face when asked what else can be done.

### Cabin Fever

It's the middle of winter now, the wind so frigid it welds your nostrils shut, waters your eyes, scrapes the pores off your face, blows dark depressions into your brain.

Sky adds two bags of sand to the truck bed, then rides off to Fargo to visit friends. To combat cabin fever Nadja gets an additional stack of books from the Salvation Army, a clay set, a book of instructions for fun indoor projects. Claw drifts to the clay. Nadja shows him how to flatten it on the newspaper cartoons to get the image to stick. She does this between trips



to the attic, where she is storing boxes of Honey-Wheat's things. Honey-Wheat took little with her when she left; the mother did not want to be reminded of her daughter's days with Nadja. Honey-Wheat has five boxes, which Nadja adds to the one box for Zola, bunks them together in this slant-roofed attic, this hollow place, this unlikely heaven.

### Periphery

Claw's demons begin visiting him in the depths of February. At two in the morning Nadja is awakened by a shriek. She springs to her feet and runs to Claw's room, flicks the light on, sees the child running back and forth. Claw, honey, she says, Claw, what's wrong? He slows for a moment but there is primal fear behind his eyes.

Sky now stands in the doorway. The hallway light has been turned on. Claw goes to his toy chest, breathing heavily; he glares at it and then scrambles to the closet to hide from it.

Nadja knows he cannot respond to her, that something has taken him away. Is he sleepwalking? she asks Sky.

Night terrors, I think, says Sky. The snakebite boy used to have those, don't you remember? He'll come out of it.

And he does. In five minutes he crawls out of the closet and registers Nadja, the bright room, his surprising position in it.

Claw, Nadja says, you were having a bad dream. The shriek is still in her ears, though, and her heart still beats adrenaline into her cold hands. Claw collapses to the floor, stunned. Nadja goes to pick him up, set him on the bed. She says, try to be still. Take deep breaths. I'll wait with you.

Three weeks go by and still the terrors visit. Nadja fastens a gate across the top of the stairs in case she doesn't wake in time.

She consults the group and learns that the terrors will not hurt Claw, but their origin concerns her. The loss of Honey-Wheat might be responsible for them, but she cannot know for sure. One night, after a quiet streak, Nadja wakes. It is about time for Claw to scream but he doesn't. She goes downstairs for tea,



being careful to secure the gate behind her. When the water begins to rumble inside the kettle, she crosses in front of the window. She stops. At the edge of the woods is a fawn, already sensing Nadja's presence through the glass. It slips away. There are no leaves on the trees to hide it, but the infinite layers of trunks swallow the animal's sleek body.

The kettle's whistle jostles Nadja into motion. Tomorrow she will ask Sky to read Claw's energy. Yes, that might yield some information.

But why her eyes shift to the secured latch on the back door, she doesn't know.

#### Poof

Was there really any doubt that early one morning Nadja would find that the door was not latched? That she would go to the dirt mound and not find a boy anywhere in it, not find a hint of his presence? See for miles nothing but steam rising from the wet fields bordering these woods, nothing but evaporation?

#### Transformation

The police search yields nothing. Sky explains terrors to the young officer, says the boy couldn't have gotten far. They will keep looking, the officer says, but when Sky comes in she says, Claw's run away. I think he's run away yet again, because terrors don't work like this.

Nadja watches Sky pace, then pause, then leave for the shed.

Nadja's layers have been peeled away. She is nauseated in separate, aching waves.

Later, Sky calls the agency and in time someone comes to close the case. The boy's got to go back to somewhere, the caseworker says. He turned up for you, and he'll turn up for somebody else. Nadja wants to punch the caseworker in the face but below the sting of the comment are visions of her own girlhood, of a scrubby plot of land in the Southwest, of an eternity of orange ground, of resilience. The trick of the desert is its ability to turn



scarcity into abundance: inside the cactus is a small river, infinite and replenishing, as neverending as shadow.

In time, Claw's dirt mound flattens with the weather. Nadja watches new flora push through it, like a patch of rough skin sprouting hair.

In these woods is a past and future boy, an everyboy, rained on and tackled and pulled down into the mass of roots and rot, smiling, content, as he is coated with the cool, wet earth.



THICKET IV

F. Daniel Rzicznek

The forest is white with the month,  
blank as an acre of rain.

The brief tale in which the mind  
sews a pasture out of timber,  
fescue writhing day on day higher,  
the cattle meant for meat released  
to fill their bellies with sky and earth.  
The mind in the mean time invents  
a blade to be swung, a hook to sink.  
The fescue rises taller and lower  
depending on the year, the cattle  
milling in shade or resting under clouds,  
the mind killing them now and then  
until the day a train flows past.  
Saplings uproot the pasture, limbs  
growing dense as the decades roll  
where cattle and fescue thrived.

The forest is white with the month,  
blank as an acre of rain.



A NEW SONG FOR JOHNNY

Daniel Connor

Even still, buried man, all of it really happened, what in some quarters passes as life, the routine jabberwocky of machines and men, beats beating blithely in the background, the man, the part of a man, landing in the backyard, landing in the river, a park across the street, teeming on sundays, love reduced to its outings, to singing that soon becomes shouting, and singular nouns in the gutter, tiny, washed-out, wounded nouns, with egos that shrink and squish beneath the rain, then cymbals crashing, smacking bells to rouse the eunuchs from their stupors, the resurrection forest, dewy green with stone announcements, bursting forth with silent pride, unfolding like the butterfly, unlikely yet happening, despite all disbelief,



\*

Simon Perchik

Agreed! The firm handshake  
wipes it dry the way one reef  
irons things out with another

circles down as your shadow  
already seawater, homesick  
and the exact spot it remembers

—that's the deal, you  
become rain while this stone  
is run backwards, girlish again

touching everything and the dirt  
comes loose, floating past  
not yet sunlight and side by side.



JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
FINALIST

BITING MY ARMS OFF

Amanda Nazario

I have never seen Omaha before, and I'm fascinated: it's a real metropolis. There are small skyscrapers, as in a smaller, younger New York—the New York of a black-and-white movie, maybe. I know that when you send away for something in the mail, it usually comes from this city—when, as a child, I sent a coupon for a pack of Lucite ice cubes with flies in them (for example), this is where my coupon went. I don't know anything else about Omaha. As Anton drives us into the heart of town, I wonder if each of the little skyscrapers houses crates filled with millions upon millions of plastic novelties. I also wonder how Joe Morrison grew up here and still turned out to be himself.

Joe Morrison has told me he would never return to the Midwest to live. He's had enough of the dusty gold of corn and wheat that is everywhere here; he's tired of the way the colors of every field, building, or person are sun-bleached and muted. Montana is more his speed, he says. I agree—Joe is too extraordinary for this. Anton and I could probably live here, though. We are ordinary enough.

The drive from Sioux City has taken longer than I expected—two hours is a long time for someone like me to be in a car that isn't part of a subway—so I'm relieved to enter the diner where Joe has told us to meet him. When we see that he isn't there, we sit down anyway and Anton orders us a rhubarb pie milkshake, which is a milkshake made with a slice of rhubarb pie thrown into the blender. The waitress gives us two straws.

"How long do you think we should give him, hon?" Anton asks me.

"We have to give him a long time," I say. "He's always late."



We drink the milkshake in silence.

I stab the last crumb of soggy crust with my straw, splitting it in half so we can each suck up a piece and finish the milkshake together. The waitress takes the empty milkshake glass away and refills our water glasses, then brings us coffee in two thick, pink-rimmed ceramic cups. (*Are coffee cups the only things that stay the same no matter where in the United States you go?* I think but don't say.) I snap the edge of the cream container and peel the foil halfway back, then pour a single cream drop into the coffee, then add a few granules from my sugar packet, then stir it. I repeat this process until the cream and sugar are gone.

"When you were friends in the city," Anton asks, meaning New York, "didn't you get pissed at Joe for making you wait so much?" He gathers his black eyebrows up in a frown.

"We still *are* friends," I say. "And no, I found ways to keep busy. Sometimes I tried to chew my arm off, but he would always show up while it was still attached."

Joe and I used to live in Brooklyn, on the edge of Fort Greene right before it becomes Bed-Stuy. That is where the realtors told us it was, at least—possibly because they were trying to dissuade us from living there. The apartment was the third floor of a not-renovated brownstone, with no central heating ("Who needs central heating?" Joe scoffed. "I own two space heaters for a reason!") and a broken window in the kitchen that, for the duration of our two years as roommates, we never repaired. In the living room were two orange-brown couches that had come from the basement of Joe's parents' home—stout couches upholstered with that abrasive plaid fabric that leaves a print on your leg. All the other furniture was mine: black or silver, shiny, smooth. Knowing those orange couches were from Nebraska made me confident that every assumption I had made about Nebraska in my life was correct.

Anton, the Iowan, did nothing to change my mind, which may have been part of why I fell in love with him. When I brought him over, Anton would try to needle Joe by saying,



"Cornhuskers can't read!" and "Nebraska is a great place to visit, if you're a horse trainer! Or a trucker!"

Joe would tell him, "You're absolutely right. Everything you're saying is true."

I pictured Iowa as a flat patchwork quilt of football fields, with handsome, square-jawed young men like Anton huddling and running on it as far as Nebraska. Nebraska was an expanse of long dirt roads and endless rows of crops, interrupted every hundred miles with a silo or a freckled teen in overalls riding a tractor.

The coffee is gone and Joe Morrison still isn't here. Anton pays the check while I stand behind him, my hand in the wide gap between his shoulder blades. Then we go outside, around the corner, and stare across the parking lot, dazed by the August sun that glints off pickup truck windshields on its way to our squinting eyes. Anton closes his arm around my shoulders and the tops of my arms, and pulls me close to him, kissing me on the temple. The shadows of the cars grow longer.

"Baby, we don't have to wait any more if you don't want to," I say. "I'll just call him later and make other plans."

"You don't have to do that," says Anton, not apologetically, but with loud bravado, as if he's addressing someone far away. When I look to the spot he's pointing his chin at, I see a white minivan weaving between the lines of the empty parking spaces. It changes course and heads straight for us, its headlight eyes merciless, and halts just short of our feet.

"Let's get a drink," says Joe with his head hanging out of the driver's side window. "I can't drive my mom's car any longer without a drink."

He gets out so we can greet him, and my arms wrap all the way around his frame with ease. Joe is wiry, his back knotted with the bumps of his bones. Bracing my knees, I lift him an inch off the ground, because I can.

Joe turns to Anton and they both flash their seldom-seen teeth. "How's it going, man," they say at the same time,



nodding, shaking hands, and then dropping the hands to their sides. People say all Midwesterners are alike, and sometimes I understand why this myth prevails.

Anton drives the rental behind Joe's mom's minivan. Joe is leading us to what he says is his favorite bar, a place near the highway named Sally in the Alley. We drive past buildings and streets that look cared-for in a tidy, sad way, like an ailing old relative who still gets dressed up and taken to family parties.

"I wonder if this bar is going to be dirty," I say, with half a chuckle.

"Lyd—we're in *Omaha*, and it's *Joe Morrison*," Anton sighs by way of response. "Of course it'll be dirty."

I lean toward his face, forcing him to look at my smile. "I want it to be dirty," I say as we pull up outside the place, a low cinderblock box. Still, I pull at the hem of my skirt and I have a heightened awareness of my bare toes in my sandals. The path to the entrance is carpeted with cigarette butts.

Joe is holding the door open. I see neon signs and beige lamplight and a scuffed wood floor. "You look like you could use a good liver poisoning," he tells Anton. He looks at my outfit and says, "You're a long way from Studio 54, Lydia." I give him a narrow-eyed, withering look over my shoulder, because I can't think of anything to say.

It has been a year since I last saw Joe, and he looks softer, less guarded, more vulnerable. In New York his hair was always black, stiff with a medicinal-smelling pomade; here it grows below his ears, wispy and the color of watered-down iced tea. He's wearing a plaid shirt and faded jeans. I think he should have a stalk of wheat in his mouth.

Anton and I each order a beer. "It's so great to be back home and get cheap, good beer," Anton says, lifting his glass in salute.

"I can't tell you how many bad kegs we come across on the Upper West Side," I add, taking a sip, wanting Joe to agree that New York beer is bad beer.

"Beer is beer," Joe tells us from across the table, canting his



shoulders forward. His arms form a brief circle around his tiny glass of whiskey and ice. "I think I've moved on from that for good."

He reaches into his breast pocket and takes out a pack of cigarettes. After showing each of us the opened end with that half-questioning look, he lights one and sinks into the booth's fake leather embrace as he inhales. "Are you officially a quitter?" he asks me. I nod.

When I met Joe Morrison, he wasn't a smoker yet. I was. I used to carry two packs at once, one in each side pocket of my jacket; I liked switching between the two brands according to my mood. When I was out of matches, I'd light the range top and lean over the stove. I kept an ashtray beside my bed, and another on top of the toilet tank next to the shower.

I sat in our living room one hot afternoon, playing a mix tape of '70s songs to drown out the sounds of car alarms wailing through our broken window, wondering in my boredom how long it would take to gnaw all four of my limbs off. I was drinking lemonade and, of course, smoking. Joe's key rattled in the lock and he came in gaunt and exhausted.

"You want some lemonade?" I said. "I just made it. It's in the fridge."

"My father died," he said. "He had a heart attack."

Some spring broke inside me and made me jump to my feet. I stood there, my arms out like a mannequin, waiting for him to walk into them. When he did, when he was in the right place between my right and left arms, they both snapped tight over his body and held him. Minutes passed. Then I offered him a cigarette. We sat and smoked until we fell asleep, and when Joe woke up in the morning he left the apartment to buy and smoke his first pack of Marlboros. He has never stopped.

For years I boasted that I'd been his tobacco guru—the one to initiate him into the rich world of the smoker, with all its paraphernalia and bronchial complaints and fatalism. What I was really boasting about, I think, was that he had slept with his



head on my lap, frosting my pant leg with drool and tears.

Joe told me this later: in the after-death aftermath, his mother sold her house and moved into the house across the street. Somewhere in Omaha, while we order round after round at Sally in the Alley, Joe Morrison's mother is existing in the house across the street from the one she raised her family in, maybe watching game shows and eating off a TV tray, maybe peeking into the front yard to make sure whatever family lives there now is still irrigating the lawn. The whole situation is, to me, sweepingly tragic and desperate, but so quiet—so American, so Midwestern. I have never even known anyone who has died, and when one of my parents goes, I am sure the other won't do anything so drastic as move, because they have been divorced for over twenty years.

Joe has been dating a blonde actress named Kim. When I ask how things are going with Kim, Joe says they just broke up.

"She said she wasn't ready to be married," he says. "I told her I wasn't either, and that we *weren't* married. I mean we weren't like you guys. *You* guys are married."

"Not yet," Anton laughs. He pinches my shoulder. I laugh too, but I have to force it.

"Well, cheers to that," says Joe, picking up the whiskey glass with his thumb and forefinger, "but that's not how we were." He is not laughing. "I'm not heartbroken, though. Don't think I'm heartbroken." He reaches across, seeing my look of poor-you empathy, and squeezes my hand. "When I get to Missoula, I'll be drowning my sorrows in undergraduates."

I laugh a real laugh that shoots out of me like a bottle rocket. "I guess God doesn't close a door," I say, cocking the eyebrow of sarcasm, "without opening a window?"

"Yeah, my version of that proverb is a little different," Joe sneers. "It's that God, um, doesn't exist."

Joe is going to Montana to study, although I can better



imagine him going there to ride bulls. In addition to Omaha and New York, Joe has been to Sydney and Honolulu and Los Angeles. He has been to Houston and St. Louis and Tampa. I have been to none of the above. Anton travels on business, so he has been to many cities, too—in the past two years, he has been to Tokyo and London and Paris. “They’re a far cry from the Missouri River,” Anton says to those who ask what he thinks of these places.

As a child I traveled to Europe every summer. It has been over ten years since Lydia’s charmed girlhood, though, and I’ve traveled so little as an adult that I might as well have never been anywhere. I am left with wisps and rags of world-traveler knowledge, about a trivia game’s worth. For instance, I know that when someone mentions Brussels you are supposed to envision *Manneken-pis*, the fountain where water flows from the penis of a naked statue. I doubt either Anton or Joe knows the name of *Manneken-pis*, but this comforts me only a little.

More drinks arrive at our table. We reminisce about the girls—the glittering parade of lip-glossed, pedicured girls who used to throng our Fort Greene brownstone in the hopes of an audience with Joe Morrison. When they saw me and said, “Oh, are you Lydia?” their lovely faces would register relief, because they had been thinking of me as competition until they saw that my thighs were wide and my makeup was from the drugstore. I sat smoking with my one girlfriend, Karolyn, while we yelled our conversation over the moans and thumps we heard in Joe’s bedroom. “I think I need to date a foreign guy,” Karolyn used to say, giving me a vamp look through her mascara-thick lashes and curtain of wavy brown hair. “I can’t stand sex talk in English.”

“I think it’s all right,” I’d tell her. “I want an American.”

Days later, Joe would show me the fingernail scratches on his back or the hickey in some absurd place like his armpit. We would sit together in Langosta Café with glasses of their syrupy, headache-making red wine, regarding and laughing at those marks of fierce sex, both of us perplexed that they could



be inspired by Joe.

"They were all insane," Joe says now. "The only difference between them was their varying degrees of insanity."

"Why are beautiful girls always insane?" I wonder aloud.

"Because they can afford to be," says Joe. He leaves to go to the bathroom.

While he is gone, Anton looks at me with sad-bear eyes. "I don't think *you're* insane," he says.

"I'm only slightly insane," I correct him, making a bucktoothed face, "since I'm only slightly beautiful." I hug the top of his arm and lightly bite it.

When we leave Sally in the Alley, it is blue dusk. Anton and I are beyond late for our Sioux City supper—we have temporarily forgotten that Midwesterners sup when it's still light out. I wish Joe luck in Montana, referring to it as "out there." "Good luck out there," I say, and point to the direction I think is west.

"Where? The Gulf of Mexico?" Joe replies. "Montana is this way." He comes up behind me and takes me by the hips, swiveling me and my pointing arm to face Montana. I curl my lip, embarrassed.

A woman is walking a chihuahua across the strip of grass beside us. The chihuahua smells a spot of earth, drops, and starts to roll around in it, flailing with a weird, wild urgency. His legs wave in the air.

"I guess he found his place, huh?" says Anton.

"That doesn't look like a dog to me," I say. "It's like a chipmunk." Anton laughs; Joe rolls his eyes. This is what my creativity, my singularity has come down to: comparing animals to other animals.

Through the rental car window, on our way out of town, I glimpse the lit-up Mutual of Omaha building. I imagine it is stacked to the ceilings with bond notes. Anton drives silently, concentrating on the road, pretending he isn't drunk. His mess of black hair stirs in the breeze from the open window, his broad



fingers relax on the steering wheel. There is something touching in his nonchalance; I can see him remembering all the times he partied in high school and drove home without a scratch. If I squint, I can almost see the white leather sleeves of a varsity jacket over his arms. On the highway, I watch for deer and rabbits but spot only a dead cat.

When we arrive at Anton's house, his mother and father are sitting in the living room with their feet up, reading different sections of the same newspaper. They are under a line of framed photos of Anton and his brother and sister, all the kids leaning against trees and sitting on stoops at various stages in their development. Supper was hours ago. "So, what does your friend from Omaha do?" Anton's mother asks us while we microwave two pork chops and two ears of corn.

"That's a good question," says Anton.

"He's a student," I say. "He's going to the University of Montana to get a Ph.D."

Anton's father snorts a laugh from his chair in the next room. "A Ph.D.!" he guffaws. "Didn't you tell him Cornhuskers can't read?"

The building in Manhattan that I live in with Anton has its entrance at the foot of a long concrete slope. When we leave to go to work every morning, we have to scale the hill, trudging up toward the subway's red beacon at the top. Before we even begin our commute, we have achieved something monumental.

In the fall, I get an email from Joe Morrison. He asks how I am, how Anton is, if we are getting married, if we want to leave New York since there is "nothing of cultural value" here. *You, as a native New Yorker, might think that's a rash statement*, he writes, *but let's face it: I can buy a book about what's at the Met, and you'd have to go at least a thousand miles before you could find a rodeo.* I imagine that every room in Montana is paneled in pinewood, and that all the furniture is made of antlers. I write back, saying I would like to visit sometime. He does not respond.

Weeks later, while Anton and I eat sushi out of foil takeout



containers in front of a football game, the phone rings. It's Joe, and he says he doesn't have time to talk. "I just wanted to say hi, though," he says. "I have a small group of friends in my department now."

"Is your hair still long?" I tease him, grasping for something to say in the time he doesn't have.

"Yeah, they all call me a hippie poet," he replies. "I'll see you, Lyd, okay?" He hangs up. I suddenly remember all the times when we lived together that Joe stood in the bathtub and handed me a razor, asking me to shave the back of his neck.

The commentator on TV says, "If they had gone for the touchdown, I honestly believe the Colts'd be sitting pretty right about now."

"Got that right," says Anton to the TV, stabbing a California roll with one chopstick. I put down the phone, wondering with vague horror if this is what I have always wanted in a mate: someone who voices his agreement with sports announcers.

In the Brooklyn place, Karolyn used to shake her head, clucking, when she saw the sticky liqueur stains on the rugs and counter, the garbage can overflowing with takeout containers and bottles. She demanded Joe and I organize our bedrooms, a messy home being one of the hallmarks of mental illness. Now she runs her finger over Anton's desk and cracks a proud grin when the finger comes up clean. We sit in the living room drinking martinis out of martini glasses, saying, "Remember when we used to drink martinis out of coffee mugs?" Joe Morrison was the worst, we recall: loath to wash a glass, he simply removed the plastic lid from the paper McDonald's cup he was carrying and poured vodka straight into his orange soda and ice.

When I can't see friends, I imagine a gathering of them—a party whose theme is me, attended by everyone I know. What are they saying? Lydia is twenty-seven years old now, her days of rebellious debauchery long behind her.



Joe doesn't call anymore. More weeks go by, then months, until our street is paved a foot high with dirty snow. My boots stab and sink into it when I walk to Langosta Café to meet Karolyn. She is already sitting there, with frost climbing the window all around her—she is holding a strand of her dark hair and staring at the ends.

"I hate to tell you this," she begins.

I think, *Why do something you hate?*

She says, "I'm not surprised that he ignores you now. Don't you realize your relationship with Anton makes him crazy?"

"I know," I say. "We're too boring for him."

"No, idiot!" Karolyn scowls. "He's jealous. Joe Morrison is in love with you."

This is perhaps the least true thing I have ever heard, and I laugh at it. On my way home, I let myself believe it for about fifteen minutes.

I won't let myself believe I will never see him again. Instead, I construct in my head the letter I know I'll get—not today, not tomorrow, not in a month, but sometime before I die.

*Dear Lydia, I cannot disclose my whereabouts, and writing this letter to you is itself a major security breach. Please don't tell anyone you got it.*

*Lyd—You never do anything, you never go anywhere. You've become hollow, a husk. Come visit me and we'll ride four-wheelers around this ranch I know. You'll love it.*

*Lydia, Since I last wrote to you a lot has changed. I had been enjoying my daily regimen of hiking in the woods, until one morning a puma leaped in front of me and ate both my arms. It has been a long road to rehabilitation. I am typing this with my nose.*

*Lydia—Do not try to contact me ever again. You are dead to me. You read right: DEAD!*

The day after my twenty-first birthday, I was awakened at seven in the morning by the wind blowing through our broken window, actually whistling, raising goosebumps all over my reluctant, shuddering body. I realized I was slumped over the



kitchen table—I had been sleeping there, sitting up, with my face in the crook of my elbow. My head raised, throbbing dully, brain swelled and strained against skull. A string of Christmas lights blinked in the living room, making everything look grey, red, grey, red, grey. Beside my arm was an empty Southern Comfort bottle with a brood of shot glasses crowded at its base; a mixing bowl on the counter brimmed with ash and cigarette butts. I stood up, straightening my too-thin, too-scant clothes, struggling to balance on stiletto heels, closing my eyes when I felt the familiar tide of saliva rush to the front of my mouth. Don't throw up. Soft, feminine snores emanated from the couch—I saw Karolyn asleep there with her pink toenails protruding from an army blanket, one hand cushioning her mascara-and-blush-smudged cheek.

"Hey, you okay?" I asked, sitting on the rug so my face met hers. She groaned, then her brown eyes went wide and solemn.

"Oh my God," she said.

"What?" The Christmas lights blinked red, grey, red.

Karolyn sat up and held both my shoulders. "Do you remember what happened last night? At around midnight?"

I told her I didn't; I had no recollection of anything after eight-thirty (revelers throwing potato chips in the air for me to catch in my mouth), or maybe nine (dancing merengue in a sweaty crush of bodies to the Latin station on the radio).

Karolyn took a deep breath and told me that, at midnight, I had kissed my roommate. *Made out with him*, she said. "You don't remember it at all?"

I crunched my eyes shut to hear her play-by-play.

When she was done, I stared at her with nothing in my head. I could not remember one shred of it, could not even see it on the plane of the imaginary. I wanted to and I could not.

Joe's door whined as I shuffled into his bedroom, stepping over dirty jeans and t-shirts, books open with the pages curled against the floor, condom wrappers, a pizza box. Wearing boxers and one sock, he shivered in his sleep. I thought about



it, wriggling in beside him and pulling the covers over us both. Lying down to bend myself with the angles of his spine and shoulders, to test the strength of his cold bones in my arms. A space heater sat on a brick pedestal next to the bed, aimed at his chest. I switched it on. The room filled with the sound of the heater's electric breath, and I tiptoed out.

A year passes—the knee-high snow turns to terrible grey water and runs into the gutters; square islands of dirt in the concrete sprout daffodils, then tulips; I go for a leg wax and buy a new wardrobe of shorts and tank tops. Anton buys us a blender and we learn how to make margaritas, which we drink sitting before the TV, holding hands but saying nothing. Then, the air conditioner is uninstalled and put into a storage locker in the basement; I recover a suede jacket from the closet; piles of brown leaves collect in the doorways and crunch under our sneakers. Football begins again. Baseball ends. The piles of leaves are buried under piles of snow, and the snow once more becomes filthy with dog shit and garbage. When I think about Joe Morrison, I usually square my shoulders and say to myself, *Joe Morrison is dead to me. I have no Joe Morrison!*

Sometimes, however, I picture him: he is driving a pickup truck under enormous white clouds, surrounded by the mountains. He wears steel-toed boots, orders whiskey by the bottle at his favorite roadhouse bar, shows girls the one front tooth that isn't real because he lost the real one when he was hit by a yellow cab—yes, a real yellow cab!—crossing Madison Avenue, all those years and miles ago. Since the sky in Omaha didn't get dark until nine o'clock, I imagine that, in Montana, it never gets dark at all. I think Joe probably likes that. Once, in a moment of weakness, I write an email to the address I don't even know if he still has. It reads, *Does it ever get dark where you are?*

The first time I saw him, in a neon-lit campus office, he had his hair greased back and was wearing a jacket the color of a fire truck. "Is this the student housing board?" he asked me. He had



been in New York for two weeks.

I shook the bangs from my eyes to look at him; my earrings jingled. A cowboy, I thought—ropy body, long fingers, giant teeth. “Yeah,” I said. “I’m trying to find an apartment.”

“Me too,” he told me, loosening his collar. “I want to live in Brooklyn, though. Not Manhattan. I think I’d like it there better.”

I smiled, not saying anything.

He said, “I mean, I just think it would be more *me*.”

I said, “Okay.”

We cemented our friendship with a walk through downtown. Since Joe Morrison didn’t have any money, I bought him a paper bag full of pork buns from my favorite Chinese bakery. It felt good to feed him, to make him happy and strong.

Lydia: Who’s gonna kiss me on my birthday? Isn’t anyone? The din of voices and the bass thump. The room close and dark. Joe: Five minutes left, right? Some guests checking their watches for confirmation, laughing so hard that when they look up it is already happening. Joe dips Lydia, one arm gripping her waist and the other hand on her thigh—Lydia, who has never had a tango lesson! When they stand up she is too tall in her sexy shoes, she is stooping to reach his open mouth, so they move to the couch, he lifts her (Whoo!), they fall back and she is on his lap. While he kisses her he pulls the hair away from her temples, strokes her face and pulls the hair taut, with hands that look like they would close around her throat. Someone: It’s past midnight! Twelve-oh-seven! Lydia’s back snaps straight. She and Joe leap away from each other, laughing riotously with tears in their eyes.

*Does it ever get dark where you are?* I wait two weeks for a response to my email, and no response comes. When I lie on the bed and cry, it is because I realize it never will.

Anton finds me. “I don’t want to live here,” I tell him, but I wonder if what I really mean is, I don’t want to live. In the



Brooklyn years, I was terrified of the end of the world, of standing on the sidewalk while the planet broke in half and everything around me was tossed into space like a bag of feathers. Now, I love the idea of things ending—all earthly matter scattered into cool, blissful nothingness. How delicious, to be gone and disappeared and dead.

"You know the hill?" says Anton, stroking my head like it's a kitten. He means the hill that leads to our building's door, the one we have to climb in the mornings. "It's not getting any easier to climb."

"I know," I say.

"When we're thirty-five, forty, we're going to hate the hill. I think I've already started to hate it." I see the fine wrinkles around his eyes, the bulk of his belly. I close my eyes and think: Anton hates walking anywhere. He hates having to stand at crosswalks beside so many other human beings, shouldering heavy grocery bags that anywhere else in the world could have been hoisted into the backseat of some SUV. He hates cafés and museums and yellow cabs. He hates it here.

He says, "You know I like it here. But I would love to take our lives and bring them to a place that makes it easier for us to live them."

Through the tears, I look up again at his face, the kind eyes and slow smile of the only person who really wants to love me. I think of a house wider than it is tall, with a doorbell and a brick porch, a mailbox with a metal flag, windows showing the promise of a white carpet and puffy reclining chairs. I think of deep, plush grass divided into squares by borders of cement. I kiss Anton and tell him how much I agree with him. I tell him that leaving here would be wonderful.



BRAND NEW STATE

Clay Matthews

Out of pity I bring you the empty soup bowl,  
and say We are all just metonymic functions  
for what my father called a higher cause.  
The glass breaks. The wind breaks  
through the chimes that some hippy made  
out of depression silverware, as if  
anyone had reason for silverware in the great  
and relentless emptying of the soul  
into the bottoms of old suitcases and trunks  
of cars. You thought I was going to say  
depression? My mouth has not been that  
tired since 1932, when it wasn't, when we  
wasn't, when the old and familiar tune  
of the wind on a flat surface was neither old  
nor familiar, but some sound against  
which the Okie's heart sank. I am in Oklahoma  
now, I am writing from there as we speak.  
I grew tomatoes this year, and if you think  
about where we come from this is a great  
achievement for both myself and Oklahoma.  
You see how the self loses itself in the state.  
You see the vice versa as well. I have not seen  
the Dust Bowl but I have seen several individual  
versions of a scar. If you stand on high ground  
here, you can see a long way. You can see  
the places the land has given up, and where  
the low spots become their own sort of resistance.  
The wind is even something some people  
are proud of now. As if to say we have stood  
upright in the face of disaster, and even  
dare it some times to do what it was it once did.



PUFFER

Farrah Field

You

hum a nimble song and boot-tap a carcass walk.  
tried: high heels, finger paints, three women  
with the same last name.  
harness no precious water.  
search for my name in the dictionary.

At home, I

feed my plants from a rainwater bucket;  
this is a new ceremony.  
leave-off underwear for a cello recital  
with another.  
introduce Animosity to its new environment;  
*damn, it says, what's a doll like you*  
*doing with a tentacle like me.*  
am aware you stole a pair of my stockings.

Your

queer tablet has misspellings.  
only wisdom is to fort your mashed potatoes,  
providing a bowl for gravy.  
elaborate counter-attack on the cuckoo clock  
failed; there is little or no bird in your soul.  
tongue, please. I want to singe it in candle flame.



HE'LL HAVE SURGERY ON HIS BRAIN IN THE FUTURE  
Farrah Field

It's no secret Sonny lives in a home and didn't hang  
his coat. Snow in the creases melts smoothly through  
a box of pastels on the floor. He was good at this:  
my fault he waited for spoonfuls and my fault, no art.

He looks like a nice boy and acts like a smart person.  
I cut my legs for marrying potential. A baking woman  
will wait four hours and twenty minutes to be touched.

Those who set tables have napkin rings and questions.  
Anchored with brim and banned nurturing, my eyes  
are big for wrong reasons. I didn't touch the weeks

of dishes, nor the garbage can lid. Rain nets his hair;  
I barely speak. He's not invited under my umbrella.  
A waitress asks how I let him out in no coat! Sonny  
smokes. At home, I mix bleach to clean up maggots.



PREY

Alisha Laramée

The day I walked into those woods, I smelled it before I saw it. The bloated boar had already grown too big for its dark purple and blue skin, stretched tight over the swollen space. White maggots ate paths in and out of the eye sockets. The rotting body's weight muzzled the long snout shut. I tried pushing it over with my foot, the way perhaps a killer does to see if his victims are dead. The smell of any rotting animal is the same. The guidebook said Rwanda is about the size of Vermont; maybe that's why I went. Or maybe, because it said that in an abandoned school building I could see 500 bodies. Dusted in lime. Reduced to shriveled skin over bones—some broken, some missing. I could barely determine their sex: length of a femur, clumps of hair, brown teeth, shreds of a cotton skirt still clinging to a woman's hipbone. I imagined the day her neighbor dropped the machete on her skull. Like chopping wood. 500 pieces. But my gaze couldn't raise her remains, nor lift the fetid flesh of the blackening boar whose bullet slowly lurched toward the earth.

*Vermont 2004, Rwanda 2001*



DRAG

Angelique Chambers

It takes two  
ace bandages, one roll  
of duct tape, a sports  
bra and a white t-shirt to  
turn Sarah into  
Zack. Twisting and spinning  
in the handicapped  
stall, I pay more attention  
to her breasts than I have  
in months and only in their  
annihilation do I dare to touch  
them. Her tits battened down,  
flattened remind me of a  
dream I once had of coming home to  
find her breasts gone—a surgery completed  
without me and only scars and scabs, red  
bandages and black stitches remaining of  
the chest I had grown to love and  
ignore (kissing and grasping  
biceps instead, both of us cringing when  
I made a mistake). This little bit  
of drag is nearly complete—a sock  
strategically placed, my mascara becomes  
a beard. I take two steps back, purse  
my lips and kick open the  
door. For the next few  
hours we take in the heat of  
overhead lights and alternate between  
grinning and gasping for  
breath.



ROOF LINE

Donald Francis

"I bought a house," Lint says. "I'm thinking of living in the attic."

Earlier, the woman says, "Janine, but if you want, you can call me Abigail."

Before that, she says, "Lint?"



The woman follows Lint around the gym for three days, all the time moving closer. Then she is next to him, on the treadmill next to his.



Lint stands looking at the house he lived in until he was twelve years old. He moves along the sidewalk, looking at it from different angles. The real estate agent says, "I'm not following."

Lint walks up the driveway and rings the doorbell. When nothing happens, he opens the screen, presses his ear against the door, pushes the bell again.

The real estate agent returns to his car. Lint crosses to the side of the house. He tracks the line of the bungalow's roof and the placement of its windows. He continues into the backyard.



"Top or bottom?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm just wondering," the woman says. "Are you a top or a bottom?"





As a child, Lint sits in the attic for hours. He likes it because it is dark and enclosed. He listens to the sounds below him, his parents talking, moving through the house. The television. His sister.



Lint says, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I figure you for a bottom. What I can't tell for sure is, are you straight?"

It is mid-morning. The gym is not crowded.



The house Lint buys has not been touched since the seventies. He hires a contractor to gut it and start over.

Lint often gets to the house early and climbs up to the attic through the hatch in a bedroom closet. He sits and listens to the sounds of the work. Some of the men don't like it, but there is nothing they can do. He's the owner.



"I know where you live," the woman says.

"How do you know that?"

"This cop I know? I had him run your plate."

"Why?"

"It's what I do."

"What is?"



Lint is in the attic the day his parents move to the new house.

"Louis," his mother calls. She is standing in the hallway just outside his bedroom door. He is not Louis. He is Lint.





They walk to a bar not far from the gym. Televisions are mounted high on the walls.

"Do you like watching sports?" Lint says.

"I come here because I can smoke."

"I don't understand. Why do you have two names?"

"I'm trying them out, deciding which one I like better."



"Louis, are you in the attic?" Lint's mother has moved into his bedroom. Her voice sounds different because the furniture is gone.

"He can't be up there," his father says. "There's no ladder or anything."

"Well, where is he, then?"



Lint looks at the woman's face, then he looks at her breasts.

"You like them?"

"Were they expensive?"

"A client paid for them."

"You're a prostitute, then?"



The new owners walk through the house. Lint is still in the attic. He wonders if they will let him live there forever.



"Not a hooker. A role-play specialist."

"There's a difference?"

"No sex," the woman says.

"You're propositioning me not to have sex?"





Brenda, his lawyer, says to Lint, "You're crazy."

Lint says, "I don't want to work anymore."

"This is a mistake."

"Do you think so? I mean, really?"



When the contractor finishes renovating his house, Lint hires a different man to do the attic. He says to him, "I want to be able to stay up there for long periods of time."

"You mean, like, for hours?"

"For days."

"Why would you want to do that?"



The woman looks around, the waitress comes over. "Another one, hon," she says, indicating her drink. She takes the waitress's hand. "And be a doll. Get me a pack of Rothman's."

"We don't sell cigarettes." The waitress points with her other hand. "There's a store just down the street."

"I know where the store is, hon." The woman pushes something into the girl's hand, the one she is holding. "Here's twenty dollars. Go get them for me."

The waitress looks at the woman's hand holding hers, then at the woman's face.

"I don't know. I mean, I'm on shift."

The woman slides her hand up the waitress's arm, squeezes it. "Go."



Lint climbs up the ladder until his head and shoulders are through the hatch. A floor, a carpet, and track lights have been installed. A toilet is in the center, positioned under the highest



∴ Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 1, Summer 2006

point of the roof. Space heaters run along the outside. There's an air conditioner, sink, small refrigerator, microwave oven.

Standing back from the ladder, the contractor says, "The A.C. unit and the water heater are the kind they use in mobile homes."

"Geez."

"I wasn't sure what you wanted to do about sleeping. Getting a mattress up there might be tricky."



When the waitress returns, she puts the cigarettes on the table, then the change. The woman picks up a ten dollar bill, reads something on it. "That's your name, is it, hon?"

"Yeah."

"And what's this, your phone number?"

"Yeah."



Lint stays in the attic until the new owners leave the house. Then he climbs down the rope ladder he took from the gym supply closet at school. He is halfway to his parents' new house when his mother picks him up in the car.



After the sports bar, standing outside, the woman hails a cab. Lint says, "Where are we going?"

"One of my favorite places."

The woman sits with her legs crossed, lighter and cigarettes in her hands. "What are you going to do now?"

The cab is in a line turning left, which is going to take a while. Downtown Toronto, early afternoon.

"What do you mean?"

"Now that you've sold your company, what are you going to do?"

"Well, there's the house to think about," Lint says.





"Look around. I'll be trying on corsets."

The store caters to the fetish community. It is narrow, exposed brick painted white, which makes sense, Lint thinks, because almost everything for sale is black.



The real estate agent is standing at the gate. "I don't think we should be in the yard without permission."

"I grew up in this house," Lint says.

"Well, that's fine. Unfortunately, it's not for sale."

"I want you to try. If they won't sell, I need one that's identical."

"Identical?"

"Or very close. With an attic."



Lint watches the woman come out of a change room at the back of the store, followed by a young man. She is naked from the waist up except for a corset, which she inspects in front of a mirror. The nipples on her breasts are conical, almost puffy. She says something to the young man, who circles behind her, puts his knee in the small of her back and pulls the laces tighter.

"What do you think?"

"Who's he?" Lint says.

"Don't worry about him. He's one of the owner's boys."

"I see."

"Get this for me. Then it's your turn."

"My turn?"

"To buy something."



Lint's house is ready, but he has not moved in. He stays there



sometimes, sitting in the attic, sleeping on an air mattress. The rest of the time he lives in his apartment and goes to the gym.



"You decide," the woman says. The question is what to do next.

"All right." They return to the gym, where Lint's car is parked.

Lint drives to the suburbs, an older subdivision. Bungalows. He stops, gets out, opens the passenger door.

"What is this place?"

"This is the house I bought."

Lint walks up the driveway, around the side of the house, into the backyard. The woman follows him. "Why don't we go in?"

The floors are refinished and waxed, the walls freshly painted. In the kitchen, the counter tops, appliances, cabinets, all new. Standing in the living room, the woman says, "Nice drapes. Where's the furniture?"

"I haven't moved in yet."

"Why not?"



Lint is not in the attic. He is in the living room. His parents are in the kitchen. His mother says, "I can't live in this house, anymore. I walk past her room. . . ."

"We'll move."

"I just can't."

"I'll call an agent. Who's the guy Jean and Wink used, you remember?"

Lint goes into the kitchen. "I don't want to move," he says.

"Oh, honey."

"Your mother is all alone during the day."

"I'll stay home."

"Oh, honey, I wish you could."

"This house makes your mother sad."



"I'm sad, too," Lint says.



It is night. The woman sits on the couch in Lint's apartment, the ninth floor.

"This is great furniture," she says. "You should keep this."

"Here's what I'll miss," Lint says, and walks out to the balcony. The view is of the roofs of houses.

"I don't get it."

"I come out here, think about, I don't know, life. The attics."

"Well, that's definitely not the weirdest I've heard. What do you do, jerk off?"



"But he's a boy."

Lint's sister says, "He's only nine."

Lint's sister and her three best girlfriends are eleven.

"He'll see."

"I get to play," Lint says. "You said I could play if I let you come up."

The attic is Lint's fort. Planks over beams, a blanket to sit on. An old lamp without a shade, extension cords linked together.

"If he's going to play, he has to keep his eyes closed. And no peeking."

"He'll peek for sure."

"No, I won't."

"We'll cover his eyes," Lint's sister says.

Lint plays, but he can't see anything. Later, when his underwear is off, somebody touches him. He flinches.



The evening air is chilly. Lint ducks back inside. The woman does not follow, so he puts on a jacket and goes out again. He offers her a sweater, but she shakes her head.



"I lived with my father until I was sixteen," the woman says.  
"My mother took off when I was little."

"My house? The one I showed you? I grew up next door."

"The corner house?"

"The other side. My parents sold it after my sister died. The day they moved, I hid up in the attic. They thought I went ahead to the new place. They thought I rode my bike."

"Really? It was close?"

"Pretty close, yeah."

The woman lights a cigarette. "I'm sorry about your sister." Lint reaches for the pack on the railing between them. The woman hands him the lighter.



Looking for the washroom, the woman walks into Lint's bedroom instead. Lint is in the kitchen.

"Lint," she says.

The woman is standing beside the bed, a single mattress on a low platform. There is no other furniture in the room. Two of the walls angle in steeply, almost meeting at the ceiling. The woman puts a hand on one of them.

"It's supposed to be like an attic, right?"

Lint nods. "I did it myself."

The woman removes her hand from the false wall, peers at the tips of her fingers, then looks at Lint.

"I should probably go," she says.



KILLING TIME

Andrew Michael Roberts

I suck a toothpick in the car outside someone's house, idling under an oak, loading and unloading my gun. Noticing things. A bicycle on its side in a driveway with jokers in its spokes. A bird with a broken leg. Leaning against another bird. Chimneys. A gas tank hatch duct taped shut. Most people never kill anybody on purpose. Most of us want the boat unrocked. Love. Who wonders how many deaths he's caused and never known it? We make choices. Sink. Swim. Paper. Plastic. This is not my street. These are not my people. A bullet, another bullet. Nothing's right. Nothing's wrong.



searching birds' nests for eggs speckled for  
 palm full ovals lying end-to-end she will tuck  
 them beside her breast carry them unbroken  
 down the mountain if there is only one she will  
 eat now break it between thumb and forefinger  
 hope for yolk fluid hope for new bird embryo  
 that won't catch in her throat if there are bones  
 beak feathers she will spit them out or perhaps  
 grind between molars and swallow anyway

the earth shivers the earth buckles the  
 earth sighs and perhaps she calls to  
 her sister too far up the rockskinned slope  
 perhaps she can't see her sister hungry bold  
 climbing a blind cliff to search for eggs  
 perhaps she slips three speckled eggs under breast  
 hands free for balance free to walk carefully  
 down to the shore eggs still whole perhaps  
 her sister slides stumbling down eggshells in hand



WHAT BIRDS PLUNGE THROUGH IS NOT INTIMATE SPACE  
Jen Lamb

but the reckoning the sign unexpected  
flush of wings seen watery through windows  
strung muttering along telephone lines  
and standing s-necked in a settling pond  
a vastness that denies the existence of voice

but she is singing her own depths the plunge  
and terrify of space hollow within only  
a portent of flight a knowledge denied  
the wingless she spreads ready to cast off  
cornice eaves treeline a defiance sure to fail  
a renunciation of even makeshift gods  
her uncertainty leaving only the drift and settle  
of down and pinfeather bruising vowel and dusk



MARGIN SHORE

Matthew Colglazier

The flood creek writes  
its own history.

Three inch rain,  
nail-thick and  
all night.

And in the morning  
the unmowed grass  
is brushed over

like oily hair  
caked in thin crusts of earth.

And along the shore  
artifacts glimmer,

sodas circa  
1956 play mausoleum  
to a stony cake

and so much plastic  
fans like snakes

among the weed-born  
and quiet eddies

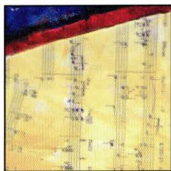
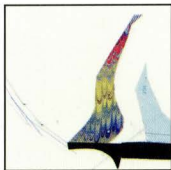
where one split shovel  
glistens under clean rock

to say, if this whole earth  
could be turned over

it would, and the stars  
float like trash in the sky.



# Process



Robert Kaussner  
David Hamill  
Michael Sullivan Hart  
Joseph Hart

a graphic essay



ROBERT KAUSSNER

I get much of my inspiration from other artists (past and present). I first met Scott Morgan at a photographic workshop in Santa Fe entitled "Breaking Creative Boundaries." He was the most amazingly creative artist I have ever had the pleasure to work with. After the workshop, I sent Scott a letter offering my assisting services for free (the words "jump, and the net will appear" came to mind). Scott hired me immediately, put me on his payroll two weeks later, and I learned more that year than I've learned about anything. Now I mentor other younger photographers who are doing very well.



*A Leisurely Afternoon at the Fontainebleau (2003), digital infrared image*





*Fox Run #1* (2003), chromogenic image



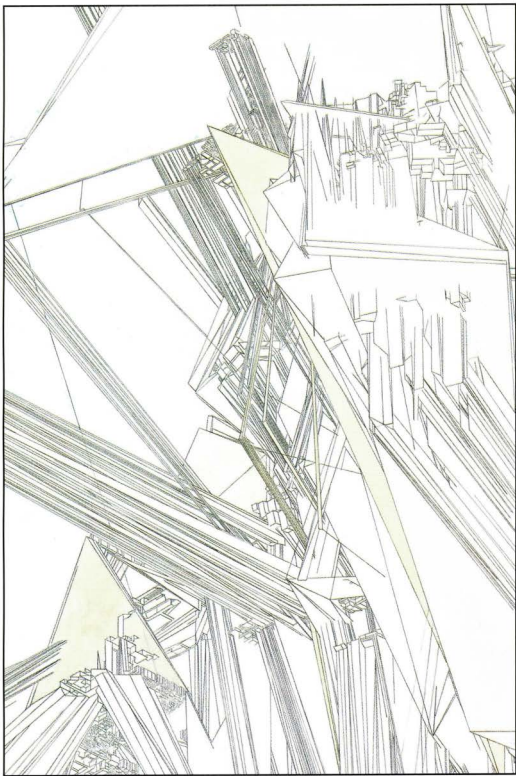
DAVID HAMILL

My drawings are based on complex geo-political situations. I work in a CAD environment combining various texts, maps, architecture and objects that, to my understanding, all contribute to the reality of a particular time and place. I use the tools of the program in non-traditional ways to sculpt all of this data virtually, creating a new form that is an amalgam of the contributing factors. I'll then create a series of drawings on paper from different stages and viewpoints of this virtual model. The final pieces contain only small, scattered clues as to the nature of their origin.



*Sequence 12, View 12* (2004), 55" x 72", watercolor and graphite on paper





*Sequence 15, View 23, detail* (2005), 72" x 55", watercolor and graphite on paper



MICHAEL SULLIVAN HART

My process is a mixed media approach to image making, using elements of collage and traditional drawing and painting techniques to build an image based on the chosen subject matter. I draw inspiration from individuals who challenge modern conventions by creating compelling work which is as aesthetic as it is meaningful. I feel it is important for artists to use their craft as a tool to communicate and share ideas.



*This Chair Is Too Small*, 20" x 22", mixed media on paper





*A Worn Seat*, 22" x 30", mixed media on paper



JOSEPH HART

My current works focus on belief and value systems, and how these ideologies relate to faith, human capacity, and myth. I am also interested in the role of myth in the face of uncertainty and change. The origins of these belief systems, their various interpretations and uses, and the societies that surround them are all topics that I investigate in my artwork.



*Untitled (Structure Study)* (2005)

16" x 22", prismacolor, ink, collaged paper and graphite on paper



CONSPADAMO, ARTERY AND EYELET

Jennifer Merrifield

Snow was coming, and when I thought of it  
I saw his face. How it scrunched up one-sided  
to muster a wink. How I was deep-folded in the creases  
and happy. Driving together, it was enough  
to open my arms in a world of center-line blur,  
to scoop lungfuls from the window and feed him,  
dew-stained fingers to oxygen-high breath.  
When a blue jay perched within claw-swipe  
radius to serenade a purring cat, it was love  
because it was unexpected. A monocle on a hipster.  
A new alphabet set down in cursive frill. We traded  
artery and eyelet before the fireplace, before  
we collected ash, held hands and slipped together  
over the single body of ice, let cinders freckle the drive  
for traction. When the door clicked quiet so he could comfort  
his wife alone, I was happy to be two hinges away.  
When the phone rang and his voice disintegrated the two  
hundred miles of cable pushing our chests apart,  
my voice hummed smiles and spaced out its regret  
for her: sad, to swing closed with such a flimsy wooden door.



MY GRANDMOTHER'S WEDDING NIGHT OR  
THE OLD THRESH AND GATHER  
Kate Beles

Fingerpress  
    over neck veins           slow to

bruised-apple-red  
    as rotted

fruit falls  
    from your eyes.

And you carve  
the skin of our babes  
from the grain of my words.

So tonight, my swollen  
    tongue already sings  
        with the post-bitter  
    ache—

from a taste of  
this harvest—

    its blue skin  
blackening into a lifelong

*gasp.*

*Please, step lightly*  
                    *my love,*

as now  
    *my breath is   yours*



to husk down  
to the teeth,

strip down  
to the hush.



PROFESSION

Anis Shivani

Their first stop was the barber shop across from his condominium at the Towers on Madison's State Street. "Well, here he is at last! Give the boy his first American haircut," Professor Arthur Fishbach instructed his longtime barber. "Try to even out the chopped-off style. Jeez, do they use cleavers to cut hair there?" Then, recalling his wife Lauren's advice not to convey frustration in front of his eleven-year-old Vietnamese adoptee, Nam Loc Nguyen, Arthur assumed his steadiest Buddhist countenance, spending the duration of the haircut whisperingly rehearsing basic Vietnamese phrases from his ambitious guidebook. The boy sat still in the chair, sorrow clouding his tiny brown eyes, never wavering his glance from the cover of Arthur's book. The barber didn't have to question where the boy had come from, because Arthur had kept him apprised of every step of the adoption process, expertly conducted by Lauren, except for the actual pickup visit to Hanoi, which Arthur had managed alone. Arthur and Lauren had spent their entire careers at this university; all these decades, the barber and Arthur had colluded in a conspiracy of innuendo against Lauren's muddled intentions, without crossing the line into outright accusation. Now the boy, unambiguous evidence of Lauren's goodness, confused the issue. "You got yourself a good one," the barber told Arthur, brushing imaginary hair from the boy's shoulders.

Back on State Street, Arthur started walking slowly toward the capitol, instead of in the other direction toward the campus. It was Saturday morning, and the Farmers' Market on the edges of the state house would be in full swing. It might be a comforting sight to the boy, Arthur thought, to witness so early in his American sojourn old-style haggling and peddling, men and women of impeccable Western clothes descending to the level of primitive market barbarians over mere cents. In the



early years of their marriage, Arthur and Lauren, both ardent Kennedy supporters, had actually held up the prolific Kennedy family as models of procreative style: the world seemed innocent enough then to populate with as many children of one's own as possible. That was before the doctors discovered, early in the Johnson years, first Lauren's, and then Arthur's, incapacity to reproduce; the ready peace they had made with their inadequacy still seemed to him testament to their total love at the time.

"We're going to the market," Arthur said to the boy, who nodded sagely. The master closest to him at the orphanage by Hoàn Kiếm Lake in Hanoi's Old Quarter had said that Nam Loc was given to the shortest melancholy spells among any of his fellows. Arthur sure hoped that was true. Lauren was not one for tolerating dejection, even for acceptable reasons.

The town's constant air of festivity—and in early October, well before the grind of exams and papers, what other mood could dominate?—had irked him for long years, until it became converted into a pleasant ache. The jugglers and musicians and tricksters had vanished with the hot days of summer; every young American was now in complete charge of his own moments of distraction and leisure. The bright, shiny smiles made him think slyly of how soon their possessors would grow old beyond rescue. In her moments of compassion, Lauren explained that Arthur was finessing his way into premature acceptance of his mortality, by way of belittling others. He missed the panhandlers, some of whom would take to outright insults and curses, even when you gave them money; those were necessary disruptions in a town so happy, so convinced of its perch on the pinnacle of humanism. Nam Loc's eyes were still narrow and sleepy; if he took offense at so much easy merriment, so much casual display of affluence and generosity, he didn't yet express it in any revulsion on his face.

When Arthur was growing up on the North Side of Chicago, he'd pretended the milkman really came to pass on secret messages to his mother, her work instructions for the day; in reality, she'd been a contented rump Hull House worker who



shunned unnecessary mystery and complexity. Now, as Nam Loc gripped his hand tighter, Arthur wondered if the boy experienced State Street's effortless traffic in similar Sherlockian terms. Did he imagine spies and double-crossers everywhere? Arthur suppressed a chuckle: over his forty years of teaching sociology, graduate students had plunged to somewhere near the level of the best high-school students of his own era; they all did indeed give the appearance of being in class only as a hobby, pursuing more dastardly designs as their core activity. The most radical-sounding manifesto became in the new students' hands a platitude to get by between ups and downs in private life. There were no more real wars; Vietnam was the last one. Why couldn't his charges see that? The world had reached an acceptable steady state, despite occasional conspiratorial moments; this was unlikely to change. Arthur's generation had become so efficient at managing their own guilt that future protest had become futile.

They should have driven to Ho Chi Minh City in the South first, before flying out of Vietnam; then Nam Loc could have seen that frenetic activity of a toying kind wasn't just an American innovation. Nam Loc's father had been a schoolteacher, his mother a nurse; probably eminently middle-class Vietnamese, and nationalists too. What would they have made of an avant-garde American female professor's gesture—for it had been Lauren's idea to adopt a Vietnamese child—thirty years late in the coming?

This morning, after a long bath and a full breakfast, Nam Loc had conveyed in his rudimentary English that he wanted to forget his past, his homeland, his whole previous life, and start with a fresh slate. It had been an astounding statement. Where had he learned such a complex and mature thought? Had his master at the Hanoi orphanage, where Nam Loc had managed to thrive for two years after his parents died, trained him to say this to his new guardians? Lauren would know what to make of this near-Gothic eruption. Although nominally a professor in the English department, where in the affluent sixties she had held forth on the silences of the female-authored



Victorian novel, Lauren was all over the place now: pulp fiction, Hollywood, sitcoms, billboards, and internet chat rooms. In the age of cultural studies and theory, it was what one did, to maintain currency.

Lauren's newest passion was the presumed desecration of the vanishing female body in Haruki Murakami's novels. When her star graduate student, a woman with the looks of a model who Lauren said reminded her of her own impetuous youth, committed suicide last semester, Lauren went into a frenzy of output that had yielded a *Times Sunday Magazine* front cover article on corpulence as a defense mechanism turned inward under late capitalism's severe regime of discipline. True, but couldn't it be as simple as some people just eating too much and getting fat? Arthur's "common sense"—as he unfashionably called it—made no headlines these days, was directly responsible for declining enrollment in his classes, while Lauren was the academic star in the family: exactly the opposite of the situation at the start of their careers. Arthur no longer felt that the institutions responsible for integrating and assimilating average people were as oppressive as the popular thinkers of the fifties and sixties had presumed. While desirable female colleagues at best only tolerated Arthur as an eccentric past his prime, so many male colleagues crowded into Lauren's personal space these days that Arthur had to try to stop obsessing about their evil intent toward his still petite and pretty wife. Maybe when they performed Marxist hermeneutics on the Mexican restaurant's menu, they weren't acting from romantic motivation; maybe they were as boring as he took them to be on the surface.

On Johnson Street, a music store that sold used tapes and CDs side by side with new ones seemed to hold Nam Loc's attention. Arthur said, "Want to go in?" and when the boy smiled with crooked teeth—the braces wouldn't have to wait long, if he knew Lauren—they found themselves immersed in a small, overheated room. A disinterested attendant with long, dirty hair waved at Nam Loc. The rap music conveyed jarring protest against women and cops. "You like this?" Arthur asked



Nam Loc, and wasn't surprised when the boy broke into a rare genuine grin. This didn't mean he couldn't yet be turned into a world-famous mathematician or physicist, under the high-powered accelerated guidance of two of Madison's most able professors working closely with him, day and night. The lost years at the orphanage could be made up. Nam Loc folded his clothes neatly every time he discarded an outfit. He hadn't yet spilled a drop of anything. He bowed good morning and good night. He ate oatmeal and other food "good for him" without complaint. Arthur was convinced all this suggested not a naturally conformist personality but one trained to smooth out unnecessary friction. Now Nam Loc was swaying his head to the rapper's escalating lament about police brutality. The attendant seemed to have gone to sleep. "Let's go then," Arthur said, and as quickly as if he'd been in a dream, Nam Loc surrendered and stopped moving his head back and forth.

In the week he'd been in America, Nam Loc had seemed to warm up to Lauren more than he had to Arthur. Arthur tried to be mature about it. Sure, he'd been the one to make the dreary trip to Hanoi, but whereas his own demeanor was heavy and dragging, Lauren's was lightweight and swift. How could a growing boy not respond to Lauren's aura of benign neutrality? Lauren readily admitted she wasn't exactly motherly, but she did perform the de facto functions of motherhood, catering to necessary needs without caving in to them for her legions of fans and followers—so why couldn't she do the same for this innocent boy? The public school teachers in Madison were used to dealing with issues of language and cultural transition; Lauren knew, despite her critique of the devouring ways of late capitalism, when to step aside and let established institutions do their job. She would be fine. The boy would be fine.

They were waiting among a swarm of cheerful undergraduates in bright clothes at the light at State and Dayton.

"Well hello, if it isn't the international man of mystery! You've been to *Hanoi*, Arthur? Oh my, what a cute boy."

Gretchen Tolliver, blonde, buxom, and distinctly Southern



despite having lived in the North since her college days, bent to ruffle Nam Loc's newly shorn hair, and to kiss him on his cheeks with the enthusiasm of a Victorian governess in love with her brutal master's neglected offspring. Her massive bosom rested on the poor boy's head.

"You heard then," Arthur said.

"*Everyone* has," Gretchen said, unbending. "It's awful noble of you, Arthur."

Arthur didn't see the nobility in it; weren't all voluntary acts ultimately selfish, or at least pragmatic? Why had grown-ups who ought to know better suddenly adopted the language of romanticism and martyrdom? Gretchen was in Lauren's department, and taught Chaucer. She too was a Madison lifer. In the early seventies, when Arthur had come closer to infidelity than at any other time, Gretchen had seemed to him the very antithesis of the Connecticut old-money aloofness into which Lauren could easily slide. Gretchen could consume whiskey like a World War I soldier and utter imprecations against the high culture figures around campus. He'd sat in on her class once, in the late Nixon years, and was motivated enough to reread all of Chaucer. Lately, Gretchen too wrote papers in the mystical argot of Cixous and Kristeva, poor Chaucer's invention of language but an afterthought to whatever unintentional havoc he'd wrought on women's bodies through all-too-masterful manipulation of signs and codes. That is, if Chaucer could even be said to be a discrete author in the first place, rather than merely the intertextual expression of the zeitgeist of his times. At least Lauren hadn't started off acting in the lifelong role of untouchable debutante, and jumped on the theory bandwagon only when it became professionally suicidal not to do so.

A tear seemed to roll down Gretchen's cheek; her inability to find a real gentleman to sire her children had long ago ceased to be a source of concern, or even amusement, among her colleagues. It was what one chose to do; without compromise, there was no family.

"We don't see each other enough, Arthur. Here—" she started



scribbling on the back of her visiting card. "I've moved to a new place in Shorewood Hills. Come to dinner with the boy, and Lauren, any night."

"Sure. I'll ask Lauren. His name's Nam Loc, by the way."

"Nam Loc. How pretty! Oh, he's adorable!" Gretchen again smothered his head with her vast bosom. She expressed a desire to visit Southeast Asia; Arthur said there was nothing to be seen there that couldn't be experienced in rural Indiana in the middle of winter: Hanoi had given him the impression of being a permanent ghost town, having fought history to a draw.

"Oh Arthur, you're ever so much the romantic!"

"No, I never was, Gretchen."

Gretchen would have started a long discussion of the difficulties of adoption in Third World countries, but Arthur determinedly looked at his watch and lied that he had to meet Lauren in about an hour, after doing some necessary shopping for the day, for lunch at the University Club. He'd had no intention of bothering Lauren on a busy conference day, but why not? She would be pleased to see Arthur and Nam Loc—dare he say, father and son?—extracting the maximum from a Saturday morning in the most livable city in America.

"About Lauren—Arthur, I'd like to speak to you—soon. I'm worried about her." No doubt she wanted to exercise the absurd rumors that so many in Humanities were massaging: that Lauren's unpredictable bursts of rage, her unknowably vicious putdowns of luminaries, were somehow related to a neurological disorder that had better be investigated soon. Lauren was fiercely resistant to modern doctors, whom she thought of as executors of a diseased gender-based separation between the utilitarian and the ideal, the Cartesian duality gone haywire. Gretchen was wrong about Lauren's state of health, even if she was the least likely to be motivated by mere envy. It was called growing old, entering the charmless silent zone long past menopause when approachable figures from the past bunched together into constituents of myths and fairy tales, and had to be either hated or loved. Unpredictability followed.



"Soon, Gretchen, soon."

"Okay, then. Bundle him up more next time for such a cold day." Gretchen was pointing at Nam Loc's jacket. Yes, it wasn't very thick. But Hanoi must have gotten cold enough. Nam Loc was supposed to have stayed inside too much. The usual way of learning English was to catch its rhythms from television shows; Nam Loc had sweated over grammar books and dictionaries for two years. He was theoretically a "boat person" who'd never seen a boat, of that kind, up close, which didn't make him any less a boat person. There, Arthur was indulging in essentialist categorization—or was it binary opposition?—as Lauren would have it. But then, why not, like the others, appropriate a derogatory term, and vaporize its offensiveness away?

They moved up State Street. He was glad nothing physical had ever happened with Gretchen; where would his life be now if it had? Lauren, like all educated feminists, was more possessive of the male than untrained housewives caught up in the allure of detergent and bug spray. Lauren would have been unforgiving; she would have left him. Early on, he used to congratulate himself, on days when Lauren froze him out of human consideration, that she constantly motivated him to reach for the stars, to enter realms of scholarly thought he'd have been too abashed to go near, but for her unrelenting pressure. "Why can't you be the department chair in five years?" she'd asked him in 1965, when the nightmares of bureaucracy had not yet become real. "Why can't I? Because I'm the humble son of a small-time doctor, who never so much as posted his awards on the walls." And she'd playfully kick him in the back, and they'd roll in lovemaking: Lauren was never so passionate as when she planned for the future.

Ah, the charming Farmers' Market was at hand: out-of-season smokebush and honeysuckle, asparagus and zucchini, strawberries and cranberries, all that was primary and tropical and indispensable was to be had here, everything that in other countries at this time of the year would be unavailable, or too expensive, or simply unheard of, all at bargain prices, mere



fractions of what could be had at the conglomerate grocery stores. The vendors were soft-spoken, polite, unassuming, not following the trend of bedlam wrought by sellers in similar venues in other civilizing American cities. Under clean white canopies, buyers and sellers talked about abortive hernias and overachieving offspring. Lauren never came; neither did most university students. They preferred their organic food in the safety of modern supermarkets.

Over by the giant green grapes, bent double and propped by his equally decrepit wife, was old Charlie Wilson, once Arthur's foremost nemesis in the sociology department, twenty years his senior and argumentative as hell about every attempt of Arthur's in the sixties and seventies to introduce relevance into the classroom, some acknowledgment that a civil rights and women's movement was raging in the country. "Mark my words, Arthur. No one will read Marcuse twenty years from now—not to mention C. Wright Mills. The classics, my boy, the classics. Better stick to Weber." Charlie had been right. Arthur saw other dinosaurs of the humanities and social sciences coasting around the market; very few from the hard sciences visited the spectacle. He knew everybody so well that he had a free pass to acknowledge only when and how he wanted.

"This is like Hanoi?" Arthur probed Nam Loc, hoping to see signs of recognition in his eyes. Nam Loc nodded doubtfully, extending his small hands deeper into his pockets.

Of course, there'd have to be violently disturbing smells, of discarded fish heads and shrimp shells, and rotting mangsteen and rambutan, and negotiations over prices blustery enough to equal mini-wars, for it to really feel like home. Some years from now, when Nam Loc was old enough, perhaps they could talk about how the poor boy and his parents had gotten along; they must have been, to use a contemporary usage Arthur derided, excellent "role models," for Nam Loc to be so studious and disciplined. Nam Loc's parents had died not on land, but on water, their pleasure boat having capsized in the South China Sea; they had been too bourgeois to be excellent swimmers.



The master at the orphanage had translated every word of the newspaper article where the gory incident had been related. Arthur had then tried to relay to Lauren over the phone everything of it that he remembered, but she didn't want to know. It would bias how she saw Nam Loc; the boy wasn't to be objectified as a tragic figure.

"Farm fresh fruit and vegetables," he said to Nam Loc. "Hard to get in America. Pick whatever you want. What do you like?"

Nam Loc looked uncomprehending, and Arthur started miming eating gestures, feeling silly.

"Professor Fishbach? Oh my God, it's you? I almost didn't recognize you outside class? It's so lively here, isn't it? So natural—so—so pastoral. Oh, hello?" The undergraduate who'd accosted them shook hands with Nam Loc, who'd started caressing a precarious mound of nectarines, as if unnerved by their glossy smoothness.

It was Christine Marshall, from his introductory core class, which held seven hundred students, each of whom expected him to remember their name and obscure Midwestern place of origin. In Christine's case he did remember. From St. Paul, she was the daughter of a onetime colleague, an able documentarian of the Civil War, which she thought gave her extra privileges with Arthur. She'd already proposed an independent study project for next semester on early consciousness-raising groups in the upper Midwest. She was blonde and fit and rosy and happy, like all of them now. How long would he be compelled to explain to everyone who the boy was, why he was with him? "My son, Nam Loc," said Arthur. The relationship was difficult to utter; at the peak of his academic career, when his journal articles were beginning to find an audience, he'd thought the wave of freshmen each year were his true children. "My son," he repeated. "Freshly arrived in America, doesn't speak much English yet, so be warned about using your poststructuralist jargon before him." He smiled weakly.

"Oh, don't kid, please. He's adorable? Anyway, I just wanted



to tell you I loved your wife's lecture the other night? Did you know two hundred people came?"

"Remind me. . . ."

"On the unintended transgressive consequences of corporate communication manuals? Using local, *Madison*, examples!"

Of course, using the *local* always made a pursuit more valid. The last public lecture Arthur had given was on the eve of the 1984 election, titled "The Choice Among Non-Choices: Democracy in the Age of Media." Almost no one had come.

"I'm sorry, I was in Hanoi then. Picking up my son."

Arthur still choked up over the word. Even if he hadn't been out of the country, there was a good chance he'd have missed that small blip up in Lauren's ever rising graph of appointments. Since the early eighties, Lauren had lived in her own apartment on the western side of campus, with a close view of Lake Mendota. They had weeknight dinners in their own places, and usually came together by assignation on Friday and Saturday nights. Lauren said the move to her own place had dramatically escalated her productivity; it had nothing to do with Arthur, it was her own deficiency of concentration. Certainly, she had been more productive under this setup. The predictable rumors about the oddity of the living arrangements, given Lauren's ferocious feminism, had had no staying power.

Arthur tried to describe Hanoi's dreariness to Christine: the shabby wall-sized posters of faded communist leaders, the anti-imperialist overhang which the south of the country was doing its best to forget, the ghoulish shame over corruption which was worse than its transparent acknowledgment in other Third World countries. But how much could Christine understand? Already her eyes were darting back and forth, as if in search of other fresh faces her own age.

"We'll talk soon about your independent study project."

"Oh right, right. See you then."

She was gone.

They ended up buying apples, Nam Loc's favorite fruit. "You get them all year long in America, every kind, red and green and



yellow, in every store. You've made a safe choice, my boy."

He meant to sidestep the capitol and head straight to Lake Monona—there was still an hour to go before Lauren could reasonably be surprised for lunch—but changed his mind. "Heck, why not! My boy, into the big white house. This is how we run government." Minus sensation, he thought.

Nam Loc seemed more interested in the immobility of the speechless guards than in adoring the shiny black busts of Wisconsin visionaries and progressives, lining the halls like so many nods to charmed affinity with the guests. Confronting the larger-than-life statue of "Fighting Bob" La Follette dominating the rotunda, Arthur wished he had the language to explain to Nam Loc how significant the unwavering old liberal had been to his own sense of vocation. One day soon, one day. Arthur would be seventy-five when Nam Loc was twenty. Then he saw Nam Loc focused on a group of kids—blond and happy, half his age—and on the way the parents themselves seemed their kids' age, in innocence, lack of guile. As abruptly as he seemed to have been energized, Nam Loc lost curiosity, questioningly looking at Arthur. "You want to see Lauren? It's time, yes. I think we can safely go." The bag of apples they'd bought weighed down the pocket of his trench coat. He tried not to mind it.

In just an hour the morning's festive shopping mood on State Street seemed to have been replaced by grumpy lunchtime protest. Tromping back toward campus—he'd feel stupid asking Nam Loc if it ever snowed in Hanoi, to visualize his eventual response to Madison's true colors—he felt the aggressive extremities of underemployed graduate students and dismembered adjunct faculty inserting themselves into the charmed circle between would-be father and son. It was as if the hands pushing forth unfilled petitions and takeaway decals were resentful of the boy and him. "We have to rush," he said to Nam Loc's mystification.

Just before Park Street they ran into one of Arthur's former graduate students, Miles, who had dropped out a couple of years ago and never been officially heard from again. Miles had been



part of a jazz band—or so he claimed—on the West Coast, not to mention having done other “dirty work,” including, if you were to believe him, ditch digging. Was that even an occupation anymore? Miles had always been awkward in class, as if trying to hide his worldly knowledge from his more genteel classmates, afraid that his wisened-up interpretation of theory would give away his excess of experience. Arthur had grown fond of him, but kept his disappearance secret from Lauren, whose attitude toward such loss of talent invariably was: “If they can’t take the heat, let them get out of the kitchen.” Miles had been spotted now and then in town; he seemed to have become part of the permanent antiwar movement. This time around, it *would* be a lifetime job. “Miles!” Arthur had decided to finally confront him, addressing his dreadlocks and grimy open collar, more than his moony gray eyes. “Professor!” Miles said without a hint of recognition, as if addressing all the generic professors of the world, those who had done him in and those who were yet to. Arthur moved on.

Protest was without meaning anyway. It had none of the life-and-death value it used to have during Vietnam. It was now entirely a vicarious operation. None of these nice kids were going to suffer or die because of our policies. It meant nothing. “Don’t ever get caught up in such foolishness, my boy!” he addressed Nam Loc, who dutifully nodded. Arthur had tried not to think about the inevitable ribbing that was bound to come Nam Loc’s way, even in the rarefied Madison Metropolitan School District, for his odd accent, his exaggerated manners, his stiff obedience. On the street he looked physically like any other Vietnamese boy who might have been born and bred in Oshkosh or Eau Claire. But inside he was all different, his soul and mind were different. When exactly would he become an American boy? How much was it Arthur’s personal job to worry about such imponderables on Nam Loc’s behalf?

They were at the grand staircase of the University Club now, welcomed by the solid pillars, the walls covered with irrepressible ivy. When Arthur and Lauren first came to Madison, the club



was attended only by old fogeys, fossils past their expiration date; now the most ambitious among the young aspired to hobnob here, to catch a kind word or two from colleagues with power and influence.

The warmth inside the University Club was positively blazing. "Here's where they plan the fate of the world," he whispered to Nam Loc, as Arthur was joyfully greeted by the receptionist, the manager, and one of the master chef's European deputies, as if it was only Arthur's presence that had been missing from the serene occasion.

"Are you here for the thought or the food?" the manager repeated his old joke.

"I thought the two might go together—for once," Arthur replied as usual, and they laughed.

"Lovely boy. I heard," the manager said. "But isn't he cold?"

The one-day conference—pitched to younger faculty at the campus, and to those at other research universities in Wisconsin—was called "Welcoming the Twenty-First Century: Rehabilitative Discourse in the Era of Diminished Expectations." Outsourcing, globalization, deindustrialization, militarization, the end of the welfare state, the evisceration of privacy, all seemed to be taken as ineluctable. The only questions, judging by the program notes, were *How do we still get along with each other, How do we talk amongst ourselves so that the least of us don't feel deprived and left alone?* Arthur had to remind himself that Lauren was actually trained as a literary critic; when was the last time she'd actually done any criticism?

They slipped into the back of the crowded meeting room to catch the end of Lauren's speech. There she was, holding everyone's attention, with her absolute charisma and passion!

His Lauren, petite, indecomposable, untouched by the debilities of age, a tight bundle of warmth and energy and empathy, with a prodigious memory for every nuance of discussion and scholarship, and the ability to finesse seemingly opposing points of view into a fluid conglomeration of



reconcilable ideas. She looked gorgeous as always, her shiny light brown hair resting on her shoulders, the glinting gold of her earrings like tiny exclamation marks to the perfection of her symmetrical face—blue eyes, thin nose, high cheekbones all in place, unwilling to muddy or wrinkle or jiggle or sag past the age of sixty. Why, she looked twenty years younger! He could imagine any number of younger colleagues—that smart-ass Yale deconstructionist Terry Simes, for one—lusting for her, over their younger actual mates, who probably had little to say except assent and mumble, if they weren't in the academic profession themselves. She wore a gray suit that did nothing to hide her femininity. Arthur almost tripped over a wire seating himself and Nam Loc, and Lauren gave him a sympathetic look from the podium.

He was glad Lauren had never been one of those feminists whose ideology seemed to intensify in inverse proportion to the degradation of their looks. But perhaps this was the new way after all. To have any influence, you must look good. He thought with pride of the enviable pair they had always made: Arthur, tall and graceful, ambassadorial in presence, still with a full head of dark hair, not yet gone leathery or rubbery in his skin despite years of outdoor activity, matched with his ever petite Lauren, smelling of precious orchids and cold spring rain. That's how they'd arrived at this campus, Lauren excited by the hothouse atmosphere of it all, which she would claim—pinned down under Arthur on warm fall nights and blissfully sanguine about the prospect of decades of harmonious sex—meant all the more because of her talented companion. Did she still think of him that way? Twice in their married life, when she was tempted to cheat, Lauren had done the honorable Madison thing, and told Arthur of her enticement, complete with the name of the offending male, before she could fall into the trap. "Gorgeous, my boy, isn't she?" he whispered to Nam Loc, and then worried that he shouldn't have passed such a remark about Nam Loc's "mother."

"In short, it isn't government that has or ever did have



the power to make or break the stability or coherence of our chosen lifestyles, or shall we say, the glory of our honorbound corrosiveness, the gestative aesthetic wherein we stew and mold and fester, like embryos in a womb, like worms—or is that too gritty a trope?—in a cocoon, sensing our eventual climax, our emergence in a world half welcoming, half suspicious, but never quite sure of the final outcome, the ultimate shape our selves will assume upon confronting the rest of creation: here I am, world, see me and acknowledge me and love me, if you will, but if you don't, well, I'll still find communities of affinity and solace, I'll make my way, so if it's the same to you, would you mind making space for me? There's that little spot at the head of the room I'd like to sidle up to—please. That's the attitude. Attitude is what it's going to take. Now, how that translates into the pedagogy of the—shall we say?—formerly imperializing gaze . . .” She'd left theory home; she was addressing the disaffected masses.

Arthur didn't mean to, but the room was too warm, and he dozed off. He must have snored, because he found the shriveled woman next to him violently pinching his upper arm, as he awoke to sounds of enthusiastic clapping greeting the end of Lauren's talk, a young male colleague or two in the front even getting up and yelling “Bravo!” and the manager of the club appearing at the doorway to announce “Lunch!” while Nam Loc seemed embarrassed by Arthur's inability to keep awake. Arthur loudly cleared his throat, feigning that he had been meditating instead of sleeping.

“Arthur.” His wife was with him, warmly kissing him on the cheeks, European style. “Oh Arthur, you look wet as a noodle, so cold, so chilled. Do you have any idea how pink your face is?” He was gratified that she attended to him first before Nam Loc. He could no longer deny that he'd had a severe case of child envy all the way until the actual acquisition of Nam Loc. He'd wondered if it was prelude to Lauren taking their separate living arrangement to its logical conclusion. Instead, Lauren's plan was for Nam Loc to spend weekdays with Arthur and weekends with her. Because of the boy they'd see considerably more of each



other. "Chào em, Nam Loc! You look wonderful, dear," Lauren said, bending to pat the boy's cheeks. "Very strong and healthy. Did you enjoy your Saturday morning walk around Madison?" Nam Loc nodded yes.

"How did you know we were walking around—"

"Oh Arthur, I've lived with you for forty years. . . . Anyway, stay for lunch, do, I've already asked them to make a special place for you at my table. The banquet room accommodates sixty. There are more than a hundred people here today."

"That's nice of you . . . er, that speech you gave, it was . . . it was . . . nice, I mean. . . ."

"Pish! That was pure bullcrap. Poppycock. Excuse me, I'm supposed to watch my language before Nam Loc, am I not? What the hey! He's starting fourth grade in two days. Sink or swim. Swim in the murkiness of American pop culture or the vultures will get you."

Another mixed metaphor. For a woman who'd read so much classic nineteenth-century literature, she sure didn't keep her tropes in balance. Was it on purpose? "You're still sure we can plunge him like that into the school system, without a transition, some help. . . ."

"The only help he needs is your and my confidence. Now Arthur, straighten yourself up and treat this as a challenge different in degree but not in kind . . . oh phooey, I'm slipping into that motivational talk again. Nam Loc will be fine. Didn't you read the reports from his master?" She had her hand on the boy's head. "He has fantastic learning skills!"

She squatted on the floor, squeezed the boy's hands, and talked to him in reasonably comprehensible Vietnamese phrases, infinitely better than Arthur was capable of. Nam Loc agreed with her in surprisingly good English that he was very hungry and wouldn't mind meeting her friends.

"Professor Fishbach!" Arthur turned his gaze to the wide-eyed young man with shock of blond hair plastering his forehead, but the greeting was addressed to his wife. "I loved your talk. The way you interpolated localized multivalency into politicized agency,



it transformed the *idea* of insecurity into dialogic—

“Bullcrap. Poppycock.” She pivoted on her heels, still crouching on the floor, to face her admirer. “I hope you didn’t take it too seriously. Pure motivational stuff, which has its place, but . . . by the way, there’s a brilliant new theorist from Calcutta I’d like you to meet after lunch. Chakravarty is her last name. She has things to teach all of us, I do believe!”

“Sure,” said the young man, deflated, unable to meet Lauren’s eyes.

Arthur had never been able to decide to what extent Lauren took theory seriously: were all “texts” truly worth equal time? She’d given Arthur a new digital camera and asked him to take as many pictures of the Hanoi streets as he could; no doubt she would deconstruct them, read entire histories of oppression and resistance in obvious symbols, the way he never could. To him a sign for a circumcision butcher was just that.

They had seats at President Isaiah Warren’s table. He was an old warrior, too, but hid his wounds well, being the most self-effacing big-time university president Arthur had ever known. It was noted with bemusement that he preferred entomology over fundraising. President Warren and Arthur had been invited to the White House in the last days of Nixon, as part of a PR mission to humanize Nixon to his academic critics; both had refused to go, and had spent the latter part of the seventies congratulating themselves for their distance.

“This man has the largest collection of butterflies in the Four Lakes area—and beyond,” Arthur said to Nam Loc by way of introduction.

President Warren turned away from his even more diffident wife, a self-styled “homemaker,” and feeling called upon to entertain the boy, started quizzing him about butterfly species in Vietnam.

Lauren halted that strain of conversation. “You’ll have shrimp spring roll,” she said to Nam Loc, “they’re very light, but authentic.” She ordered goat cheese and apple salad for herself. It was always salad for her.



"You had them eating out of your hands," President Warren said to Lauren. "I don't know how you retain your enthusiasm, your freshness, about the new stuff, the new . . . frankly, the future scares me."

President Warren's wife retreated more than ever in her capacious seat. Instead of making any wisecracks, Lauren let the President's remark go. That was an admirable ability of hers: to choose to engage or not to engage. Arthur was more controlled by emotions when it came to dialogue.

The fireplace behind them was burning hotter than it needed to; it seemed to Arthur that every place on campus had an excess of energy, and this in a time of supposed energy shortages. He started sweating, wiping it off his head. He could feel his wife's eyes on his plate, to make sure he finished eating; lately, Arthur had been suffering from a loss of appetite, for which Lauren had so far not forced him to see his doctor.

"Nam Loc should have some time to himself, conserve his energy," Lauren said, noting how quickly the boy was eating. "Tell you what, Arthur, let him stay with me the first week of school. I've a very light workload this semester anyway. Just a couple of evening seminars. The pleasures of seniority," she winked at President Warren, who barely winked back. "No, Isaiah, the future is brilliant. Can't you see it? The doomsayers will have their day, but the juries will return a guilty verdict in the end. You'll see. The earth isn't going to toast us all. There won't be a return to feudalism. There has to be hope to keep going. Don't you see, Isaiah?"

Arthur felt the question was really addressed to him. He obediently finished his grilled chicken. There was no beef of any kind on this menu. The food tasted of nothing, it had been so deprived of anything able to kick start you. Would physical decline suddenly arrest him? Would he be one of those who'd turn overnight to helpless decrepitude?

"I've met your teachers this week, Nam Loc," Lauren was saying. So she *had* had those meetings after all. Arthur thought they'd only been pious statements of intent. For a university



professor to deal with teachers at a lower level, for whom pedagogy consisted of nothing but mass transference of what they considered valuable information to receptive minds, was an absolute ordeal. Not for Lauren, apparently, because she consumed the next half hour, until the end of lunch, putting Nam Loc at ease about his school. The teachers wouldn't put pressure on him. They would be understanding about his challenges with the language, so he should never be afraid to ask for extra help. He was already a very smart boy; all he needed to do was learn the way things were accomplished in this system. He should never forget, he would have been the cream of the crop in Vietnam, and now that this was his country. . . .

The boy had a second order of shrimp spring roll. The chicken felt like prison food to Arthur. The glass of white wine was like water. Because Lauren was sitting with President Warren, she was secure from the politest of interruptions. The President was an old fogey; if you sat with him, it must mean you required privacy. Besides, wasn't she spending quality time with her boy, converting his global insecurities into local remedies? Nam Loc was exerting his English language muscles far more vigorously than he had all morning with Arthur. "We went to music store." He described his favorite rap singers, with whom Lauren was thoroughly familiar. She said Nam Loc could borrow her discs. He could have the digital camera too. Didn't Arthur still have it? An iPod for the golden boy would be next. Technology was going to smooth the wheels to the boy becoming American. There was Arthur's answer. The boy would become like others of his race born in Oshkosh or Eau Claire when he took his pleasures for granted, when he felt a sense of entitlement. Nobody saw the dark side of the pursuit of happiness anymore. One day soon, when Arthur became Professor Emeritus, and scrounged to collect a handful of students interested in listening to him, Nam Loc would return home from high school, to find Arthur not yet shaved or showered, wallowing in filth, reading days-old newspapers. Nam Loc would be the one to finally make Lauren implement her decrees of health and well-being with



actual force.

Arthur felt an unconquerable sleepiness stealing over him. "Tea, I need to have some strong tea." He must have abruptly blurted it out, in the absence of any waiters, because Lauren was looking strangely at him, Nam Loc had turned red, and even President Warren had a look of concern on his face. "Excuse me, I think I need to get out of here," said Arthur. "I really must. Will you be able to take care of him the rest of the afternoon? Yes, dear, please?"

Without waiting for an answer, Arthur started from the table, and left, forgetting to tip the coat checker on his way out. Feeling like a cheat, someone with *abandonment issues*, as the talk shows would have it, he guiltily traced his steps toward Lake Mendota, the watery cradle of the campus, whose crisp blueness never failed to correct his vision. He was a coward. What would Nam Loc think? His better side wanted him to return, apologize, have tea with President Warren and company, stay around with Lauren for the rest of the conference, and then take his wife and child to a movie, perhaps a reprise of a forties classic at the local art house theater. Oh God, not Miles again, was he never going to get past his ghosts this most awful of days? It was Miles in front of him, no doubt heading to the lake himself, with a satchel of unused antiwar posters in one hand, and a soggy franchise hoagie in a disintegrating paper bag in another. *You coward*, Arthur denigrated himself, his head spinning, suddenly out of breath. He wanted to sit on the steps of one of the buildings on Park Street. He was almost in sight of the empty chairs and tables on the waterfront, he must keep going. That young man who'd come up to Lauren to compliment her and been rebuffed, that was *Terry Simes*, the famous Yale deconstructionist—Lord, why hadn't Arthur recognized him from his pictures? And she'd put him down so easily! It had to do with being a woman.

Fifteen minutes later, Arthur had lost himself enough in memories for the present moment to cease to count. Face slumped in his hands, he stared unseeingly at the far horizon cutting off the blue water. Maybe a man like Miles was better



off than him: at least he thought he had something to live for. Arthur couldn't even pretend that teaching mattered. In four decades, had he been able to sway a single student to his point of view? No one could get inside another person's mind. He laughed grimly. A decade ago, it was Lauren who'd pulled out all the stops to prevent him from quitting teaching. Was it then that his real resentment of her had begun? Would he have declined much faster had he been out of teaching? Was the adoption of the child a sop to Arthur's disintegration?

"Arthur." The way the soft hand was running back and forth on his right shoulder could only mean it was Lauren. Silently, she'd crept up to him, and was now looking at the water with the same unseeing eyes as his.

"What, Lauren?" he said without fully turning around. Again, she'd known exactly where to find him. "I'm tired."

"Look who's here."

Nam Loc took the seat next to Arthur's, also facing the water, without making a fuss of the dust everywhere. "Gulf of Tonkin very blue—like this."

"I'll leave you two alone. Spend the day with him. Bring him back whenever you're comfortable. School doesn't even *have* to start Monday." Then she lightly pecked Arthur on the cheek and started leaving. "I have to put in the rest of my idiot time at the club." He thought she was going to turn around to hug him tightly as if he were a child, embarrassing him before the boy, but she only waved daintily once she was a few feet away. "Cám on," she thanked Nam Loc.

"So?" Arthur was going to make a genuine attempt to understand Nam Loc this time. Some odd sense of embarrassment had prevented him so far from asking Nam Loc personal questions about how his eleven years in Vietnam had really been like: if he'd felt betrayed when his parents died, if he'd suffered at the orphanage, if he'd had any friends there he missed. There was only a one-eyed girl with a limp who seemed to have been sad when Arthur came to rescue Nam Loc from the orphanage. Should Arthur talk about the time his own parents



divorced when he was fourteen, which in fact turned out to be the best thing that had happened to him because he plunged himself into study, leading straight to a full scholarship at the University of Chicago?

“In Vietnam, poor people enjoy ocean, lake, river. No cost. No worry. No police.” Then Nam Loc started conjuring, as best he could, a world out of time, where people of diverse classes managed to get by on little money and much resourcefulness; where you had to be on guard all the time against theft and force, knowing however that there wasn’t much to lose to begin with anyway; and where, worst come to worst, you could always count on your family to be there for you, even if you committed the most horrible act imaginable. Arthur nodded agreeably. He was willing to be educated.



DE IUVENTUTE INEXSPECTATA

Martin Bidney

*for Graham Handley*

Our Magna Mater, Venus Genetrix,  
Unwearyingly spills prolific power.  
Mastering, moving, we command, commix

Potions for growth. Sad-shadowed Schopenhauer  
In germ and seed, in spur and sperm and spore,  
Deployed a random squander every hour—

Squalid refusal! Grumpy Einstein swore  
God plays no dice. I think that dice play god.  
Exuberance, from *uber*, udder, more

Can teach of nutriment, the push and pull  
Of parenthood and parturition. Odd  
That age remain, for one, exuvial,

Enfossiled, envoi to an old ballade.  
Another will become Scheherazade.



THE HANDS OF FRA ANGELICO

Linda Dove

*Cloisters of San Marco, Florence*

Each monk sleeps with a fresco, each cell  
a painted window. Christ's birth, baptism,  
the Harrowing of Hell, the Lamentation. *Noli  
me tangere*, Christ waves off the Magdalene  
as he hefts his hoe past palm tree and tomb.  
At night, these Dominicans contemplate  
their walls by candle flame: the shell-pinks,  
the pea-greens, lavender, orange, chartreuse.  
Gabriel's wings are a butterfly's coat, a peacock's  
folded fans. They stir the air, haloed  
with anticipation. Who will turn the angels  
white-feathered, after all? Who draws the blood?  
These wings stain prayers. The words  
whispered before them sound like song. In some  
cells, it is different. In some cells, hands flap  
around the Christ, gnat-like. Disembodied,  
they slap and fist His face. Fingers offer nails  
to whatever handyman tacks Him up. Heads  
spit, palms collect silver. None of them  
connect. They spin in space, human parts  
orbiting a godhead's dreams.



GRAVEL LANGUAGE

Michele Battiste

Not all rocks. Sharp-edged  
flats of shale that skid  
across still water are notorious  
for their one unintelligible syllable  
as they sink. Boulders, too,  
are mostly mute: resigned  
to landscape instead of song, their glorious  
vibratos hardened and choked.  
And while cliffs and promontories, scarps  
and reefs won't shut up, calling  
like swallows across vast spaces, enraptured  
with echo and wave, their language  
is a privileged one, coded and closer  
to God.

See that child squatting  
the curb in front of the small brick house,  
her jeans muddied red to the knees  
in Georgia clay? She's speaking  
with the gravel. She's in such deep  
communion with the gravel she doesn't hear  
her mama call from the front door.

The gravel says, "refugee."  
The child answers, "yes."  
The gravel begs, "rescue us."  
The child shoves fistfuls in her pockets,  
not doubting the seams will hold.  
She never misunderstands the gravel. She  
doesn't understand her mama's exasperation  
at the door or at the hamper.  
Gravel has been through so much, she thinks.  
I can't be its only friend.



WINTER LAUNDRY

Patricia O'Hara

Perched in her second-floor kitchen window,  
Nana shakes, then pins, each piece on the taut,  
white line. Pin. Push. Pin. Push. The cold, wet weight  
*first do the sheets then towels and last the clothes*  
bowed the line (dip, swoon) toward the yard below.  
Inside the steam pipes mutter noisy heat,  
never enough to erase the thick, white  
ice that furred the windows. Mundane tableau:  
legs of trousers, upside-down shirts, half slips  
wave, fanned by snow-cold air, and grow stiff.  
In the still, late afternoon she pulls, piece  
by piece, the laundry in. The iron's hiss  
on the pillowcase I press whispers *light*  
and puffs midday wind through the kitchen night.



FIRST BORN

Thom Ward

My aunts wrapped me in an unfortunate sweater and dropped me in a puddle for safekeeping. So they say. There is always too much testosterone, a plague of this and that to keep the visiting team off-balance. I did OK among the sticks and bloated leaves, learned to scribble my name into pebbles smart enough to put down security deposits. No pool yet better than a sink, a puddle may have gum wrappers but seldom nuclear subs. What a rush to backstroke and crawl in seventy-five percent cotton, even as I came to learn how each pagan god is an overpaid hedonist. Small and wet, our human existence. So what if it's fuchsia and chartreuse; it's nice to have a few threads that fit.



THE OTHER SISTER

Jacob M. Appel

One morning shortly after the war ended—that same autumn their father drowned a litter of unwanted beagle puppies in the upstairs bathtub—Arnold Minton shook his two daughters awake with the tips of his fingers and announced that the girls were old enough to visit their grandparents. Or at least Sandy thought it had been the same summer. It was hard to be certain. She often suspected that people possessed two separate memories, one for public events like Hiroshima and the firing of General MacArthur, another for personal matters, and somehow her experiences of that morning had ended up stashed in the wrong category.

It should have been a short trip. Twenty minutes. Half an hour. (Sandy now knew a route through the municipal golf course that could cut it down to fifteen.) But that was before the days of DWI, back when driving drunk was a social faux pas akin to dining with one's elbows on the tabletop. So they got lost. Then they asked directions at a filling station, but didn't follow them, because "they didn't sound right." They circled the same landmarks: waterlogged scarecrows, gourds rotting on the vine. Jinelle rode with her arms folded across her chest. She'd scoured the girls and packaged them in dark muslin skirts, plaiting their hair in tight waves, but when they arrived at the cemetery, she refused to exit the Packard. The excursion had not been her idea and she was determined to convey her disapproval.

"Suit yourself," said Arnold.

"You know what I think," answered Jinelle.

(Later, after the separation, she grew more vocal in her criticism:

"Do you know what the problem with your father was?" she asked. "He was always very good, but he was never great."

"Very good is fine for some things," she explained. "A very good carpenter, sure. Even a very good doctor. My papa, rest



his soul, was a very good veterinarian. But a landscape painter? What the hell use is a very good painter? How many un-great painters can you name? I'll tell you how many. Only one. Adolf Hitler.”)

Arnold's parents were buried under a coffin-shaped marble slab that reminded Sandy of a feeding trough for cattle. This was in the far corner of the cemetery, where the graves were old and huddled together like refugees. Through a chain-link fence, you could see the rear yards of the neighboring houses. Many of the porch lights remained lit. Damp yellow beech leaves cleaved to the slate paths and the soles of the girls' shoes.

“Sandy, Victoria,” declared Arnold. His speech was resonant, oratorical, but slightly slurred, like Daniel Webster on a bender. “Allow me to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Josephus Minton.”

Grandpa Minton had sold Fuller brushes door-to-door. Grandma Edith did piecework in a blanket factory. What money there was came from Jinelle's family.

“Now if you'll kindly step this way, ladies,” continued Arnold. “I have another treat in store for you.”

The damp air chapped Sandy's fingers. She'd never known her grandparents, so she wasn't sure how sad she ought to feel.

Arnold led the girls to a newer section of the cemetery. Here, chrysanthemums lined the broad gravel pathways and the “avenues” bore the names of fruit trees. The graves stood evenly spaced like tiny suburban fiefdoms. Arnold paused at a patch of empty grass near the intersection of Cherry and Walnut. With one fluid motion, he hoisted Victoria onto his shoulders.

“Observe, behold,” said Arnold. “This is the hallowed scrap of earth where your mother and I will take up our eternal residence.”

The gravesite was no bigger than a hopscotch grid. Someone had abandoned a mangled umbrella frame on Arnold's “hallowed scrap of earth,” and a pair of grackles were mining the topsoil for breakfast. It was impossible to believe that anyone would actually be buried there.

“What's that?” asked Victoria, pointing.



Sandy stepped forward onto the damp grass. The small gray marker resembled a concrete hitching post, but it bore an iron “perpetual care” badge. *Oriana Grace Minton. April 3, 1937—April 9, 1937.* Victoria’s twin.

Arnold grabbed Sandy, hard, by the back of her collar.

“That’s nothing,” he said. “Let’s go home.”



Fifty-two years later: Both Minton plots were now occupied—Jinelle’s for three decades, Arnold’s for three days—and Sandy had been office manager at the cemetery so long that she could locate individual graves for visitors without consulting the logbook. Temporary workers enjoyed quizzing her, flipping open the registry and asking, for example, where Maryann Lewis was interred, but Sandy would shoot back: Do you mean Maryann Lewis Died 1977 or Maryann Lewis Died 1984? When the temps inquired why she’d mastered what to them seemed a morbid parlor trick, or when a feature writer for the local newspaper delved into Sandy’s motives, she always replied, “Busy hands are happy hands and an idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” which seemed satisfactory to everyone, although it wasn’t quite clear how memorizing maps of the dead kept one’s hands occupied. It was the sort of response people expected from a homely, church-going spinster. If she had explained her desire to preserve a living memory of the deceased—the way Jews consecrate the legacy of the Holocaust—her inquisitors might have judged her cuckoo. Instead, they thought her upright, straight-shooting, knowledgeable, generous, witty, a lady of considerable spirit, but leading a life as lackluster as cold porridge. Which it often was.

And now Father was dead and Victoria was coming home. Victoria who had done nothing and gotten everything, while Sandy did everything and got nothing. Though you couldn’t put it to folks that way.

My sister’s coming into town, you said.



That must be a comfort. I do hope we'll meet her this time.

Then you had to explain that it wasn't Oriana, the mysterious and unseen Oriana with whom you occasionally toured Italy or cruised the Galapagos, but Victoria. Victoria, with her golden laughter and perfectly arched brow, for whom Allan Draper had jumped off the Jefferson Dam in the tenth grade. Victoria who'd had two stalkers in a single year of high school when you couldn't attract so much as a flasher. Victoria who'd gone off to Los Angeles, and appeared in a television commercial, and founded a talent and modeling agency with branch offices in Santa Barbara and Las Vegas, but sent home crates of navel oranges and cases of cabernet sauvignon, like a tourism agency gone berserk, when what you and Father needed was cold hard cash. Though you couldn't say much of that either.

My other sister, you said. The businesswoman. From California.

For the funeral?

Too late for the funeral, you said. You know how it is.

Of course, of course. (Meaning: "We acknowledge there must be reasons why adult children don't attend their parents' funerals, but we cannot fathom what they are.")

Oriana is on a lemur-watching expedition in Madagascar, you added. Incommunicado.

Probably better that you can't reach her. Why ruin her vacation? It won't change anything.

How strange it was, Sandy found, to speak of Victoria in these days following her father's death. Discussing her sister with the office staff, or her book club friends, or the Brazilian physical therapist, Eduardo, who was helping her with her hip, Sandy almost believed that Victoria was the fiction. Sandy knew everything of Oriana's life, because she'd cobbled it together from shards of fantasy. Her sister's whirlwind romances with titled aristocrats, the dinner parties at the Montparnasse townhouse, the safaris and archaeological digs and culinary tours in which Sandy was occasionally included. In contrast, Victoria appeared every five years or so, a different man on her



elbow, her hair varying from platinum to onyx to henna. (She stayed just long enough to whet Father's appetite, to regain her perch as his favorite—while paying Sandy compliments that stung like insults, calling her "the good daughter" and "the loyal one.") When Victoria phoned, Sandy couldn't even picture the space from where she was phoning. It was out in the ether. An absolute blank.

Sandy had wondered—to the last—whether Victoria might surprise her with a cameo appearance at Father's funeral. It had been a short service. Attendance was light: a handful of Sandy's co-workers, paying respects to her and not to him. (Arnold's erratic outbursts had long since driven off his few surviving friends.) Sandy's pastor had contracted pneumonia and his surrogate, a divinity student from Hitchcock Seminary, stuttered dreadfully. He read a psalm and spoke of human fellowship. Having pumped Sandy for the crumbs of her father's life, during their walk from the parking lot, the poor boy forgot to include them. Not that it mattered. Sandy was the only mourner who'd actually known Arnold. As it was, she spent most of the service thinking of a beige jacket she'd worn to an interfaith roundtable the previous weekend. A reformed rabbi and a Buddhist scholar, both women in their thirties, had examined the morality of private property. Sandy feared she'd left the jacket at the church, draped over the back of her chair. Although she'd loved her father devoutly, far more than the old man was capable of loving anyone, anything, she was too depleted for grief.

Afterwards, Sandy hiked up to the contemplation gazebo. A low wooden bench lined four walls of the hexagon. Teenagers made out here, on weekend nights, blanketing the concrete floor with cigarette stubs and spent condoms. (She'd also found a noose one morning, hanging limp in the peonies.) Victoria had no doubt come to this knoll in her youth, as had Sandy, once, with Boyd Kelly, but nothing had happened between them. If you closed your eyes, you could see your whole life from there. It had not—despite what people often said—gone by so quickly. It had just gone by: demanding, haphazard, without traction.



Sandy took a deep breath. She could love Victoria. She could start from scratch—adopt what someone (Thomas Merton? Reinhold Niebuhr?) had called a hermeneutic of generosity. They were family, after all. Blood. After everything, she was still raring to love her sister. All Victoria had to do was to ask.



Victoria arrived by cab two days later. Her hair was shoulder-length, chestnut and braided. She sported a long gray raincoat suited for a film noir heroine, dark sunglasses, and a turquoise scarf worn like Amelia Earhart. Hardly altered in five years. Even her dress size—“Would you believe I still fit into a four?”—remained constant.

The driver hauled Victoria’s luggage onto the porch. Two large valises. A Gladstone bag. A ladies’ hatbox streaked crimson-and-white like a candy cane. Who in God’s name still traveled with a hatbox? Sandy spotted her sister through the dormer window in the attic. She’d been sorting through Father’s effects, gathering threadbare suits for the Goodwill dumpster, airing out long-abandoned canvasses. What a moment for Victoria to arrive! Sandy did her best to wipe the sawdust off her knees before opening the door.

“Gracious!” declared Victoria. “I’m so glad I found you at home. I was terribly afraid you’d have gone off somewhere—to one of your church things—and I’d be stuck out here in the rain with my bags.”

“I’m usually at work,” answered Sandy. “Not this week, of course.”

Victoria stepped into the foyer and removed her gloves. “Will you be a dear and help with my bags? I would, but with my back. . . .”

Victoria had cracked her spine in high school. They’d gone apple picking and she’d fallen off the rear of the truck. An injury far less incapacitating, at the present, than Sandy’s hip fracture. (Yet Victoria knew nothing of the hip—and it was easier to haul



the luggage than to explain.)

"So good to be home," said Victoria. "It's overwhelming, almost. Each time the house seems somehow smaller. Dimmer." She flicked the hall lights on and off like a realtor. "It's hard to imagine the old place with Father gone."

"That's *all* I can imagine," said Sandy.

The interior of the house had hardly changed since their childhood. They still used a chartreuse rotary phone, secured in a telephone cabinet. The same one-eyed rocking horse swayed in the parlor. Their garage and cellar remained cluttered with corroded farm implements. What a contrast to the exterior! The original six acre tract—Jinelle's father and uncle raised squash for market—had been slashed and subdivided until the yard wasn't much larger than the house itself. A stately Tudor hemmed in by parvenu split-levels. Arnold had sacrificed the rest for gallery space, leisure time, food.

Sandy tugged the last of the suitcases across the threshold. Victoria had already passed into the parlor. She navigated the room as though visiting a museum, glossing her gaze over the alabaster bookends and the mantel clock and each commemorative plate. "Do tell me," she said, without turning around. "How was it? I mean at the end."

"It happened while I was in the shower," said Sandy, matter-of-fact. "He'd gone for a glass of milk and his legs must have come out from under him."

(A scotch and soda, more likely—but why tell it that way?)

"So it was sudden," persisted Victoria. "No last words?"

"I don't know. I don't think about it."

Victoria turned around without warning. "Of course not, darling. How insensitive of me—after all you've been through. At least one of us did her part."

Sandy squeezed her hands together behind her back. "How is business in California?" she asked.

Victoria's expression turned half-frown and half-wince. Sandy recognized the look: it was the same one mechanics and plumbers use when a woman asks about payment.



"It is what it is," said Victoria, shrugging. "In any case," she continued. "I have something for you." She rummaged through her handbag and retrieved a small package wrapped in brown paper. "Open it."

"You don't need to do this," said Sandy. She crossed into the dining room and, tentatively at first, poured a shot of scotch from the crystal decanter. (It was all hers now—no Father to measure the volume like a tide-keeper.)

"I'll unwrap it then," said Victoria. "I couldn't decide between the necklace and the earrings, so I bought them both. They're hand-crafted by this hundred-year-old Yuki Indian woman I discovered in Sausalito. She follows her tribe's ancestral patterns. Here, try them on."

"Later," said Sandy. The scotch warmed her throat and the tips of her ears. She could no longer remember the last time she'd indulged in hard liquor.

"The necklace is abalone with dentalium. Dentalium is a mollusk, for what it's worth. I always like to ask those things."

"Thank you," said Sandy.

"You'd never imagine what the earrings are made of. Take a guess."

Sandy had settled into Father's plush recliner. The chair looked toward the bay windows, so her sister couldn't see her face. She dropped one of the earrings into her scotch glass. It didn't matter to Sandy whether the jewelry was platinum or plutonium.

"Be a sport, darling," insisted Victoria. "One guess."

"Asbestos?"

"You haven't changed a bit," answered Victoria. "They're actually made from corn kernels. Pretty darn impressive, if you ask me."

Sandy swirled the earring around the glass with her pinkie. It amazed her that a woman possessing so little self-awareness—so little horse sense, to be honest—could run a lucrative business. "Corn?" she said. "They grow corn in Sausalito?"

"You're upset. Aren't you, dear?"



Sandy watched Victoria's reflection. Her sister approached the window and rested her hands on Sandy's shoulders. "You know I'm not good at this sort of thing," she said. "What do I know about bereavement and consolation and all that. That's always been *your* department. But I *am* sorry. Truly. If I did something wrong, that is. I do so want us to get along, darling. Really I do."

To Sandy, that seemed like asking. Or close enough. She reached back over her shoulder and covered Victoria's hand with her own. Both sisters remained silent. The poorly-oiled attic fan pulsed like a crippled heart. Thrub-dup. Thrub-dup. Outside, the gale slapped a rhododendron branch against the window panes.

Victoria finally spoke. "I'm going to miss it here."

"You'll come back to visit though, won't you?"

Sandy was amazed at her own tenderness. How strange that a brief touch of flesh might obscure so much pain.

Victoria laughed. A laugh like the sleigh-bells of heaven. "Don't be foolish, dear," she said. "You weren't thinking of keeping the place, were you?"

"Leaving never crossed my mind."

How could she leave? The house fit her tight as a crustacean's shell.

"But we *have* to sell," said Victoria. "You do realize that it's half mine now. That papa left it to *both of us*."

Sandy retracted her hand. She sensed her heart calcifying.

"You'll buy a condo in East Chatham," continued Victoria. "That's much more your speed. Do you really want to stay here with Father's ghost in every closet?"

"I *live* here," said Sandy.

"I spoke to a lawyer," said Victoria. "He says we'd have to sell. If we ever went to court, that is—but I assured him that was nonsense."

"*I. Live. Here.*"

Sandy tried to blink away her tears. It was too much to process. Why was it that everything had to be taken from her?



Every last goddamn thing. She wasn't thinking of the house. She was thinking of her sister's fleeting affection.

"You have all that money," said Sandy, her words barely audible. "All that mone. . . ."

"I'm actually a little pressed right now," said Victoria. "Nothing serious, but a bit of ready cash could go a long way. Like a blood transfusion."

Sandy dangled the necklace in her scotch. If her sister noticed, she said nothing. Victoria had consulted a lawyer? Didn't that make love impossible?

"The more you think about it," said Victoria, "the more sense it will make. Trust me on this one." She squeezed Sandy's rigid shoulders. "Maybe I should drive into town for a bit and give you some space—I'll see which shops have turned over. I did just barge in here, didn't I? Is it alright if I borrow your car for a couple of hours?"

"Why not take it?" snapped Sandy. "You've taken everything else. Take it and don't bring it back."

"I know it's hard," said Victoria. "I miss Father too."

Sandy said nothing, at first. She wanted everything to go away.

"The keys are in my purse," she said. "Just take them and go. Please."

She dug her fingernails into her palms and concentrated on long deep breaths, waiting to hear the garage door close behind her sister. She was on the verge of asphyxiating on her own throat—as though there were not enough air in the house for both of them.



Sandy remained at the window long after Victoria's departure. She sat motionless, except for her hands, which toyed with the hem of the brocade curtains. The rain let up. For an interval, a shaft of sun filtered through the rhododendrons, fashioning the dust mites into globular rainbows. Then a gray twilight descended



over the room. Sandy's mood darkened with the shadows, until her thoughts turned ghastly. Or maybe they'd always been so. Her yarn-spinning was sin, she now recognized—not "sin" in the religious sense, a concept alien to her Unitarian skepticism, but "sin" as shorthand for the inexcusable. Oriana had died. Victoria had lived. To reincarnate her own Oriana, the quintessential un-Victoria, was implicitly to wish for the opposite.

And she did wish for the opposite. She didn't want to, but she did.

She'd begun innocently enough. On account of Boyd Kelly. (How naïve she'd once been! How ridiculous!) Boyd Kelly taught driving part-time at Warren G. Harding Memorial High School. Wednesday and Friday afternoons. He wasn't particularly good-looking, or intelligent, or athletic, or generally noteworthy, except for one prematurely white lock feathering his auburn hair. That's how people knew him: "The guy with the white streak." Mild mannered, self-sufficient, forgettable. Boyd had landed the job, in part, because his father owned the cemetery: its maze of service roads proved ideal for practical instruction. Boyd also managed the memorial park's books.

Through an autumn of lessons, Sandy hardly noticed him. She was embroiled with another boy, an oboist who kept her in a tizzy. (The boy knew nothing of the entanglement.) Enmeshed in this fantasy, she nearly steered the school's training car—a well-battered Nash—into a cenotaph. So, Boyd Kelly. His firm hand diverting hers. Then the avalanche of hope: the crush. The cemetery job. The stroll to the gazebo. Such a glorious April morning that had been for romantic confessions! She'd stopped, she recalled, to savor the scent of a hyacinth. But there would be no confessions. No tender endearments, no hyperbolic pledges. What Boyd Kelly had wanted to tell her at the gazebo was absolutely nothing. (How could it have been otherwise?) He merely enjoyed the view. So she tried to entice him with tales of her exotic sister—living abroad with her mother's cousins. How could she have known, the afternoon he saved her from the cenotaph, that their hands would never touch again?



(How could she not have known?)

Boyd Kelly joined the merchant marines and died young of a rare blood disorder. Sandy's creation continued to thrive.

Paris. Casablanca. Tashkent. Slowly, Oriana circumnavigated the globe. Sandy accompanied her with increasing frequency. She culled the details of her escapades from several water-warped Baedeker's guides in the cellar and the complete set of National Geographic Society magazines at the public library several towns away. (Around the same time, Arnold took to painting landscapes from picture postcards.) The trips abroad provided Sandy's life with a dash of color. They were genuine adventures in their own right, a blend of research and fancy that she came to relish immensely. Although she still set aside money for her grand tour, she did so only out of habit. Deep down, she sensed that her vacations with Oriana were far better than any she might take on her own.

Nobody ever doubted her. Not a soul. Who could? Mother was dead. Victoria had run off to California. Arnold cultivated a reputation for mania that kept the remainder of humanity at bay. Besides, Sandy was meticulous. She buttered herself in artificial tanner; she mastered basic Turkish phrases. If she claimed she'd explored caves in Cappadocia, where did anyone get off saying she hadn't?

(The assistant office manger at the cemetery, a gabby and insecure woman named Francine Clamm, even insisted she'd met Oriana, briefly, on a train between Strasbourg and Cologne.)

One afternoon, seized with alarm, Sandy excavated two dense evergreen bushes from the yard and planted them around Oriana's grave, concealing the marker entirely.

It could so easily have been Victoria's grave. Her own life had been wrought by the difference.



Night fell with no sign of Victoria. One by one, the neighbors



rounded up their dogs and their children. Downstairs lights snapped off; upstairs lights flickered on. The couple in the corner bungalow shouted themselves to exhaustion. Sandy paid no attention to the time. She helped herself to an additional scotch. And another. Like a wayward teenager left home unchaperoned. She didn't particularly want to get drunk, but drinking was something to do. Something easy, mindless. Sandy was already rather tipsy when the grandmother clock in the dining room struck eleven. Only then did she notice the length of her sister's absence.

It crossed her mind that Victoria might have died—caromed over the guardrail into the Shuckabee River. What then? She'd need to purchase a new car. In all other ways, her own life would continue as before.

Or maybe Victoria had taken her at her word. Driven off. Would she dare phone the police to report the vehicle stolen?

(But that was claptrap! Her sister's bags still sat in the foyer.)

Sandy realized what she was not doing. Negotiating. Pleading. Offering God sacrifices for her sister's survival—as she'd once done beside their mother's deathbed. And why should she? Let Victoria do her own bargaining.

Sandy retrieved some crackers and a hunk of cheddar cheese from the kitchen. She ensconced herself at the window, an afghan tucked over her knees, awaiting either her sister's return or the knock of state troopers in neoprene parkas. Whichever.

It was nearly three when Victoria finally appeared. Or at least the gaunt, ragged apparition resembled Victoria. (She'd taken Sandy's house keys as well as her car keys, so she let herself in.) Gone were her braids, her make-up, her pashmina scarf. And something inchoate was missing too—something as conspicuous as face paint, yet only noticeable in its absence.

"Good God!" gasped Sandy.

Victoria said nothing. She moved her gloves methodically and deposited them on the piano bench.

"What happened?"



Victoria seated herself beside her gloves. She leaned backwards, and the piano keys let out a low cacophonous clatter.

"I went for a long walk," said Victoria. "In the woods."

"Why?"

"Why the woods, dear. They seemed as good a place as any."

(How tired the "dear" sounded—thoroughly denuded of its condescension).

"That was after I stopped by the cemetery," she said. "To take a look at Father's grave. Whatever you think, I loved him too."

"I never said differently," answered Sandy.

"You *think* differently."

Then Victoria related her visit to the cemetery. How she'd forgotten the plot location and Francis Clamm had looked it up in the log book. *Minton, Arnold. Minton, Jinelle. Minton, Oriana.* "You might imagine we had a rather long and interesting conversation about Minton, Oriana," said Victoria. "Is she still hunting for goddamn lemmings in Madagascar?"

"Lemurs," said Sandy, reflexively.

"Lemurs," echoed Victoria. "That changes everything."

Victoria stared into her lap and pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers. It had never entered Sandy's mind that her sister would be this upset. (Also in Sandy's thoughts was her own impending humiliation—the gusto with which Francis Clamm would expose her.) Why did Victoria even care? It cost her nothing.

"I have nothing to apologize for," Sandy said. "You've led your life. I've led mine. It's not as though *you* ever invited me anywhere."

"Is that how you see it?"

"How *else* should I see it?"

Sandy was about to say something further—something crueler—when she realized that her sister was crying. Silently, into her sleeve. But the tears did not last long. Victoria sat up abruptly, her back rigid as though braced for a firing squad. "I'm



sorry you see it that way, dear,” she said—her voice a passable replica of its old self. “I’m sorry you didn’t appreciate the wine or the gourmet baskets or the glassware,” she continued. “I had *thought* myself rather generous. I suspect *most* people would have thought me rather generous. But now the Mintons have never been most people, have they?” Victoria stood up, pounding out another racket on the piano keys. “Unless you have any further thoughts, dear,” she said, “I think I shall retire.”

Victoria retreated slowly toward the stairs.

Although Sandy was somewhat soused—maybe because of the scotch—she suddenly saw her sister with razor-sharp clarity. The mirage, once shattered, was unrecoverable. How had she ever been so obtuse? Whatever business ventures occupied Victoria in California, there could be no easy millions. A modest talent agency, maybe, possibly an extra alcove or storefront in Nevada. More likely a shoe-string, letterhead enterprise that hardly paid the bills. (In the movies it would be an escort service or a house of prostitution, but this was not the movies.) The cabernet, the abalone necklace—it had been generous for a woman of Victoria’s means. But this was the most self-serving, pernicious variety of generosity. The offering that takes far more than it gives.

For the only moment in her life, Sandy was without pity.

“One second,” she said. “There is something else.”

Victoria looked down from atop the stairs. “Yes, dear?”

“There is something else,” Sandy said again. “In the spirit of honesty.”

“I’m all for honesty,” said Victoria.

“Papa did tell me one thing, at the end. About how Oriana died.”

Sandy steadied herself on the arm of a chair. She struggled to keep her voice level.

“He couldn’t afford two babies,” said Sandy. “They hadn’t banked on twins. So he drowned her. Just like the puppies.”

Victoria stood motionless for several seconds. Then she turned without a word and disappeared into her childhood bedroom.



"That's how Oriana died!" Sandy shouted after her. "He flipped a goddamn coin!"



There had, of course, been no drowning. Even Father had limits.

Oriana's death had been slow and horrific and entirely natural. She'd been born without kidneys—condemned by fate from the start. In declaring otherwise, Sandy had surprised even herself.

When she finally visited the gravesite, she brought a shovel. The tool had belonged to Jinelle's father, or her uncle, and its wooden handle ended in a jagged shear. Sandy held it near the base and used it as a spade. Although the evergreens had prospered over the years, weaving a latticework of sinewy roots, they snapped easily under her onslaught. Eventually, the area around Oriana's grave had been entirely cleared of foliage. All that remained was the freshly churned soil. If you didn't read the headstone, you'd have thought it a recent burial.

On a whim, Sandy hiked up to the contemplation gazebo and discarded the shovel among the detritus of puppy love. She gazed down at the distant Minton graves. One large stone and one small one. "Behold," she said—into the sharp morning air. "The eternal resting place of the Minton sisters." For, soon enough, there would be three small stones. It brought Sandy a perverse pleasure to think that, even from a short distance, visitors would not be able to tell them apart.



ARMISTICE DAY

Sally Molini

*Near the Smith River, Oregon*

Again I'm holding a good hand at  
Ellie and Marv's, Coney Island lovers  
in their eighties who still shake their  
salt and pepper with the dimpled heads  
of kewpies. They feed me every Saturday  
while we play cards. Ellie gives a jump bid.  
Her sister Violet, who sleeps on the sofa  
beneath a stag's dusty head, frowns.  
"I read somewhere that every day  
a thousand vets die," says Marv, passing.  
He turns down the sound on the TV, Welk's  
dancers wearing orange chiffon. "Maybe I'm  
too damn comfortable for my own good."  
Down the road at my place, too empty  
for its own good, green penicillium grows  
on the backs of Blue Boy and Pinkie,  
faded aristocrats that came with the house.  
I tell Ellie how wallpaper fell last night  
to reveal 1923 news. Sleek, hipless  
women now lean above my couch selling  
raincoats. She says that's the year  
she was born and calls it an omen.

We sing a few songs as night  
blindfolds another horizon.  
Ale bubbles rise to foam.  
I feel safe with older people  
as if I also had survived the future.  
Violet at the Wurlitzer plays  
*I'll Be Seeing You*,  
tears in Marv's eyes.



RUTH

Nancy White

Honey, you know how it goes:  
what doesn't kill you . . .  
You've got ghosts, I've  
got ghosts—Oh, my wedding cup  
was all over garnets. The little pops  
of light, that was mica  
in the clay. God put me  
in some unlikely places and he said  
*grow*. Just another tumbled  
rock on shore, rounder and  
rounder. What's a life anyhow  
but sense enough for one?  
And then, sometime, it ends.  
And what was yours was yours.



## .: Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 1, Summer 2006

IN THE BED BATH & BEYOND BASEMENT—  
Jared Harel

We spent the morning unloading nose trimmers,  
corkboards, cap-racks and duvets.  
We sliced through boxes, ripping them  
open like the bellies of livestock;

laying them flat, their entrails removed.  
When the new shipment came, we wheeled it  
past the lights, to the Bed & Bath basement  
where our radio plays K-Rock,

*Highway to Hell*, and the swell of sawdust  
endures our brooms.  
Our supervisor, Leo, is soft-tagging toasters.  
Once a banker on Wall Street, now he spends

his lunch breaks at KB-Toys, searching  
for a model of the Porsche he used to own.  
Beside him is Keith who is pounding espresso-kits  
with his plastic price-gun, and who

I am fairly certain hates me.  
Across the table, unpacking packs of a  
Black & Decker cutlery-set, I hate him back, though  
it's nothing personal, just the way things go

when you don't go far;  
the shift-clock stagnant yet somehow running out.



A LOVE STORY

Christine Grimes

Her skin is turquoise, the color of the ocean off the coast of France, where eighteen years ago I took a two-day leave on a rocky beach in Nice. The water glistened in the sun; my eyes squinted to look at it. Viv's skin is the same bluish teal. Tattooed and shaved, she has turned her body into a work of art. She shaves her head, even her brows, where she has implanted small balls to make her flesh ripple. The dye in her skin is etched past her hairline; black jigsaw pieces outline the rest of her skull. Her tongue is studded with a small orange ball she wiggled at me once.

I live behind Vivian's Surf Shack in a broken-down Chevette. I first met her at the Shack, where she worked for a guy in dreads. I helped her lift the boards in the back and she gave me her change when she could. She said when she surfed, she pulled out of her body, became something else, something better. It was hard learning, falling down at first, but when she popped up on the board, she felt that power. As she talked, her hazel eyes glowed with flecks of gold against her teal skin. She waved her arms about, the unfinished patterns of blue tattooed color contrasting against her pale flesh, and I wanted to touch her, hold her. She was the promise of something different.

I ended up here a while back. I lost my family, my house, my job, and finally I got drunk and went down to the water hoping for a sign. I fell asleep on the sand, woke up hung over, and slept some more in my car. That's where I stayed.

Port Aransas is nice enough. I sit on the beach and watch people. Spring break's this week, and it always brings beautiful girls and boys who fuck in the sand, trying to recreate *From Here to Eternity* even though they've never seen it. I like the carnival, young people getting drunk. It reminds me of when I was one of them.



This morning I sat on the beach. Off to my right was a volleyball court, a few tanned hard-bodies, to my left a little girl and her mom under an umbrella. The girl must have been two or three; she wobbled when she walked. Her eyes crinkled in concentration as she poured out water, then plunged both hands into the mush and pulled out fistfuls of wet sand.

When I came home from the service, my daughter was gone. My wife left me before I even knew it, and the last time I saw Annie, she didn't know me.

I wanted to walk over and plunge my hands into that sand, dangle my fingers in front of the child, so she would let me pretend some bonds can never be broken, would grab my grainy fingers and hold on. Instead, the tanned mother looked over at me, her eyebrow cocked, her lips drawn tight. She coaxed the girl into the water, glancing back to size up the growing distance.

I tried to swallow, but my tongue was thick. I felt bile rising and I wanted to chase it down with vodka, wash the hurt into my stomach.

I walked to the liquor mart and bought a bottle, chugging two swallows in the doorway. Then I headed to the pier, away from the families. No sandcastles, just old fishermen.

A couple regulars were casting out rigs and I sat on the planks and watched the waves break at the jetties. The breeze cooled my face. My head was loose on my shoulders. I swung my legs a bit and watched as one man lost his fish.

Ten feet up the pier a guy pulled in a small shark, and when he and his son posed for a picture together, I thought it wasn't too late for me to be that guy. I just needed the right break, someone like Viv.

Yesterday, she surprised me with a Brown Bag Special from Sonic. She joined me on the bumper of my car, and we watched the waves break. Her teeth flashed white against her tinted lips as she took large bites. She'd started showing up here and there with a burger or a hot dog. Sure beats shelter food.

"How goes it, Joe?" she asked, offering me her fries.



"Same shit, 'nother day." I grabbed a handful, shoving them into my mouth.

She shook her head and stared at me. "What do you want?"

I swallowed and shrugged. "Same as everybody."

"What does that mean? You know, sometimes that takes work. You have to get out of this car and try."

"Look where it got me."

"Maybe it was the wrong time for you. You know, Goodwill's hiring. They have job placement. You can use the Shack as your address."

I just nodded and finished her fries.

So today when I found a twenty on my way to the Surf Shack, I splurged. I bought a liter of Smirnoff and a small bottle of Jose Cuervo for Viv. I thought she'd like an afternoon margarita with a twist of lime. She works too hard, never surfs anymore. She used to be out in the line-up every day. When she caught a wave, twisting and cutting, she looked like a turquoise carving gliding in air, until she paddled back in and shook her body like a wet dog, her breasts jiggling in her wetsuit. But at Christmas, the dread-head went broke and sold the Shack to her. Now she never gets out for a set.

I walked into the Shack with the Cuervo and leaned against the counter. Viv stood near a wall of wake boards arguing on the phone.

"It's spring break for Chrissakes. Get the fucking sign back up!"

She clicked the phone off and pounded her fist into one of the foam boards. I gave her my best smile, thinking I should have gone in the water and rinsed my oily hair and put on a different shirt.

"What do you want?"

I waved the tequila back and forth, swirling it inside the bottle seductively.

"Cocktail hour, missy. You need an instant vacation."



She walked over to me. "I don't have time for this."

"What happened to your sign?"

"Some punk kids tore it down last night."

"Maybe I can—"

"Forget it. What'd you need? It's fucking two o'clock in the afternoon and I can smell you from over there."

I shrugged and took a step, holding the bottle out as a peace offering. "No big deal. Thought you could lighten up."

I crossed my right foot to turn away but my knee buckled. I tumbled into a rack of swimsuits and beach shirts, toppling them into a customer as I hit the floor. The bottle broke. Glass shattered and liquor spread as I rolled over onto my belly, stunned. I crawled a few steps trying to get up and she was suddenly by my side, digging into my elbow and pulling me up.

"What's the matter with you, man?"

I tried to shake her off. "You. Everybody. Nobody appreciates. You know once in the army, I stole a horse, and I rode bareback with the prettiest girl in town. I let the reins out, just racing across a field."

Viv stood still for a moment. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the horse, dammit. See, I squeezed with my legs, wrapping them around his belly, just like she held onto me. The horse ran into the woods and he leapt into the air, and it was like flying." I smiled. "I got busted three ranks. Nobody ever appreciated how beautiful it was."

"That's great, Joe, but I'm busy." She pushed open the door. "Take it someplace else."

Outside, I tried to lean against the wall but slid all the way to the ground. A group of drunk college students swarmed past me.

"He looks like you did this morning," one of the boys said.

"Fuck off," I mumbled.

One of the boys stopped to help, but his buddy slowed and turned.



"What the hell," he yelled. "We're on our way to a fuckin' wet t-shirt contest. Leave his ass there."

"Hold on, man," the first said, as he hoisted me up.

But his friend walked over and pushed me down.

I fell on my elbow, scraping it.

"Fuck him," he said and kicked me in the ribs.

"Sorry, man," the nice guy said, walking away.

I leaned against the building, hoping Viv would see me and help, but when I looked inside, her back was to me while she talked to a customer. I stood and walked to the side of the Shack. Viv's sign was bent and scraping the ground, the pole broken in half. There was no way to fix it.

I shook my head and started down Main, bumped and jostled. I moved past the boardwalk, into the old industrial neighborhood.

In a construction yard, inside a fence, I saw a twenty-foot, six-inch diameter metal pole. It was perfect to repair Viv's sign. It lay on its side, propped against six others. No one was working.

I rounded the block to the Korean grocery to get supplies. Inside, the air-conditioning hit my skin and beads of sweat slid off. Down the last aisle, I tucked my head in a cooler and, standing with the door open, eyes closed, let the air blast over me. In the security mirror, I saw Mr. Yan carding seven or eight kids. I pocketed an ice cream bar and slipped a bottle of Boone's from a stand behind me and quickly ducked down the side aisle. Outside, I grabbed a cart and jogged to the construction site, eating my already melting ice cream. I shoved it into my mouth in two bites, then licked my fingers, getting dust and dirt with the drips.

In the army, they used to love for me to do grunt work. I was a good man to have around. Now it had been years since I'd lifted more than a fifth. I found a two-inch chain and rigged a pulley to lift the pole onto the cart. By the time I finished setting up the chain, sweat dripped onto my hands. Already my neck, back, and knees ached, but it felt good.

I imagined her response, the hairless face surprised, eyebrows



raised, mouth opened in an O, then spread into a secret smile that said thank you, oh Joe, it's wonderful, I'm sorry I was angry, why don't you come by later?

I wrapped the chain around a post and started to winch the pole towards me, bracing my feet, leaning back and into the pull. When I was almost halfway, I stopped to take a drink. Down the road, I glimpsed a police car cruising towards me. I propped the cart against the fence and ducked behind the pile of poles and covered myself with a tarp. Lights flashed as the car stopped next to the cart and pole. A cop got out and crawled through the hole, searching. He looked over my set-up and shrugged at his buddy, then began walking into the yard. I lowered myself into a ball. Then, his partner bleeped the siren and waved. The cop jogged across the lot and back through the gap and they left. I breathed slowly and took a long pull on the Boone's, then hurried to finish.

I got the pole onto the cart. I had to get to the surf shop before it closed. It was hard to balance the load, but I got the hang of it. I kept my elbows loose but my wrists tight. Walking down the middle of the street, pushing a shopping cart with a twenty-foot pole balanced on it, I got some strange looks and cheers, and was even flashed by a drunk co-ed. Her tits were small, but I still appreciated the gesture—tits are tits. The cart rolled down a slight hill and I loosened my grip, letting it pull me forward. One boy pumped a fist into the air, another toasted me.

As I walked up to the shop, I saw Viv locking up. I jogged just a few steps towards her calling her name, but the cart started to swerve and I pulled up short to keep from losing it.

"Ta-da!" I yelled, waving my arms in the air behind the cart.

"What the hell is that?"

"For your sign. So you can advertise."

Viv just stood there, her blue face dull, her hairless brows pinched. "You stole a *pole*?"

"It's free and I can set it up."

"Joe, you'll kill yourself up there. You should take it back."



"Viv, I got this for *you*."

She took a step away from me and I could feel the Boone's in my stomach, recoiling. I licked my lips and swallowed, trying to figure out how to fix this.

"Look. Just let me set this up for you, no charge. Then, maybe you can take an hour or two off and we can go do something. You see?"

"Oh, Joe." She started towards me.

I made sure the cart wasn't going to roll and went to the front of it as she reached out to touch me with her small hands, her fingertips grazing my arm, elbow to wrist.

"Joe, I'm going to leave it to the pros. Okay?"

"But—"

"You shouldn't bring me presents. And, listen, I don't think it's a good idea for you to hang around so much."

"I'm sorry about today."

"I understand, but I don't think we should spend time together anymore. Sorry."

Her head tilted downward. The corners of her mouth turned; it was the same look I'd seen before. There was nothing for me there. I'd given her all I had.

Now the current pulls at my knees, funneling sand from under my feet. The waves pass me as if I'm nothing. Each one tugs me a little deeper, pulls me farther away until my feet float. I swim, stroking up into the swell, pulling through as it crests, sliding into the next. I can still feel where her hand touched. My arm tingles, that spot still feels alive. My legs weak from the current, I kick less, letting the Gulf pull me out. Waves splash my face and the briny water washes away any taste of liquor I had left.

A wave pulls me under but I sputter back to the surface, coughing, before another one breaks over me. I sink again without catching my breath. My chest burns as I struggle to the surface. My fingers reach up and I stroke hard to the top, gulping air and bobbing at the surface. Every other stroke, my legs and arms give while I try to tread water and stay afloat.



I look towards shore but can no longer make out the Surf Shack. Small lights twinkle from left to right, farther than I can reach. I pick out a spot and pretend it's the Shack and close my eyes. Letting the tingling in my arm spread through my body, I imagine Viv on a board beside me, both of us waiting for a good set to come.



DONKEY

Brett Eugene Ralph

I used to see you out in the field  
conducting insects with your ears.  
Sun slowly sharpened  
the stripe across your shoulders  
and you swallowed sleep through your eyeholes.

Shifting weight to your forelegs  
you lifted your head from the tender grass  
and thrust it forward, long neck bulging  
as a series of sharp, moist, muscular spasms,  
lip-sprung, ruptured the air.

Underlying all that violence, there  
seemed to be a kind of laughter—it wasn't  
malicious, it wasn't apologetic.  
I closed my eyes and leaned my arms  
against the fence and listened.

Your voice did not disturb me then.  
It was something that had to happen:  
Heavy limbs loosed  
at last from the trunk. Ice  
unfreezing all at once.

I hear it different in the city,  
mingled with the spit of helicopters,  
the giggle of broken glass.  
It's like somebody choking on a car horn  
or something metal being born.



WHAT STYLE IS

Herb Kitson

If Butch can't fix it  
nobody can  
you remember the time  
the ice backed up below the attic  
and brought the whole  
bathroom ceiling down  
he crawled in there  
in the dark in February  
in 20 degree weather  
and plugged the hole  
said anybody could do it  
"when you've done enough  
of 'em they're second nature"  
like when I started writing  
I'd read every night  
so the tune'd stay in my head  
all night I read so much  
Salinger and Bukowski  
I couldn't shake 'em  
and everything I said  
sounded like Salinger  
and Bukowski for years and years  
until one day I was in New York City  
and the sky was gray and it was cool  
and it was October and I bought  
a hot dog in Washington Square Park  
and I walked through the park  
and the trees were dull yellow  
and I saw this guy sitting on a blanket  
on the ground he was begging  
for money and he had a little cat  
tied to a string the cat was so skinny



it looked like it was going to die  
and the man had a sign that said  
“my cat’s sick and needs an operation  
or it’ll die”

he looked like he’d done this  
all his life like he and the cat  
were going to do this forever  
and I thought to myself  
“what would Butch do? Salinger?  
Bukowski?” it was then I realized  
what style is.



PREVISIONS OF A MANDARIN MODE

James Capozzi

What of the fun in merely doing  
something, among trees spaced  
and raised per Greek mathematic?  
They conceived a copse or colonnade  
in aid of gold ideas: hermetic  
no doubt, hon, but not without flickering

crooks left half-lit by bonfire.  
In that half-dark your mind may thrive  
despite itself, raise thoughts like ducts  
across the night, a deep indoors approaching night.  
You aren't overly free of an antler raving  
out of sight  
cold stone that was your father.

This isn't all so long ago.  
I've got a couple of feelings I had even  
back then, a way the common streets begin  
moving to raise you up a step, a way all  
things figure only on your pure arrival.  
Semi-menaced. Absolutely poured into

a night you and Thales knew did not set  
out to scatter you: to animal  
brambles, to bloody dens, but would settle  
instead for a small shrinking of the mind  
by its own memories. Like this river rhymes  
the street beside it  
chancing the bare distance.



CANVAS

Lori Anderson Moseman

There are eleven pears ripe for the picking  
on the tree on the black canoe's splayed skin  
on the gallery wall. A different kimono  
than one full of blossoms. Urgent.  
Now that we can't go fishing where water is  
over our heads, I'll borrow the hunter's ladder  
(deer won't mind) for my imaginary harvest<sup>prayer</sup>.  
The pear tree I planted was down to one leaf.  
Deer finished that. I water it nonetheless.  
The rootstock graft mark—high above dirt—  
laughs at me for not burying it (birds don't  
mind). Next year, if a plane does not crash  
in this Pennsylvania field, I'm planting flax  
for my patient loom, my impatient brush.

---

<sup>prayer</sup> Dear Creator, if this tree lives to bear fruit, I will bring the first, best and last of its harvest to Cynthia Coulter ("Black Canoe with Pear Tree," Artists of the Mohawk Hudson Region. University Art Museum. Albany, NY: June 30-August 6, 2000)



INSTRUCTIONS FOR A SAFE RETURN

Carrie Shippers

*After Carolyn Forché*

Before your departure, read government  
pamphlets, journalists' accounts, any media

recently banned. Remember: the language  
you speak may say more than you wish.

Remember: there is no country called  
*Neutral, Surrender* the only blank flag.

Upon arrival, make contact with local families,  
filmmakers, and dissidents. It is unnecessary

to visit designated combat zones. Everywhere  
danger, everywhere disbelief. Remember:

you are an uninvited guest. Surveillance is likely  
routine. Under your pillow: passport,

penicillin, paperback *Crimes of War*.

Remember: bearing witness is a violent act,

truth the only weapon you may carry. Aspire  
to poetry. Until then, write what you see.



CONTRIBUTORS

Lori Anderson Moseman is the author of two books of poetry, *Cultivating Excess* and *Persona*, and a chapbook *Walking the Dead*. She has an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, an MFA in Electronic Arts from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and a Doctor of Arts from University at Albany. Her poems have appeared in *Harpur Palate*, *Passages North*, *Colorado Review*, *Bathyspheric Review*, *8T3*, *Terra Nova*, *Phoebe*, *13th Moon*, and *The Little Magazine*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, and Equinunk, Pennsylvania and is an active member of the Upper Delaware Writers' Collective.

Jacob M. Appel's short fiction has appeared in *AGNI*, *Colorado Review*, *Florida Review*, *Raritan*, *Southwest Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. He is a graduate of the MFA program in fiction at New York University, and teaches at Brown University and the Gotham Writers' Workshop.

Michele Battiste earned an MFA at Wichita State University where she was the 2004 Poetry Fellow. She has received grants and awards from the New York State Senate, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Academy of American Poets. Most recently, she received a 2005 AWP Intros Award. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry International*, *The Laurel Review*, *5 AM*, *So to Speak*, *DIAGRAM*, *Willow Springs*, and *Rattle*, among others. She is the author of the chapbook *Mapping the Spaces Between* (Snark Publishing, 2004). She lives and works in New York City.

Kate Beles is working toward her MFA in Poetry at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she was awarded the first-year Creative Writing Fellowship. She completed her MA in English Studies at Western Washington University in 2005, where she served as a poetry editor for *Bellingham Review*. She



will serve as the managing editor for *Blackbird*, an on-line journal of literature and the arts for 2006-7. Some of the journals that have published her work are *Touchstone*, *Jeopardy Magazine*, and *Inside Kung-Fu Magazine*. She has an interview with the poet Gerald Stern forthcoming in the Fall 2006 issue of the *Bellingham Review*. This is her third appearance in *Harpur Palate*.

Martin Bidney, Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature, taught at Binghamton University for 35 years. He wrote *Blake and Goethe*, *Patterns of Epiphany*, eighty articles, and has published translations of German and Russian poetry. His daily sonnets are often hybridized with other metered forms.

James Capozzi was born in West Milford, New Jersey. His poems have appeared in *Chicago Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. He lives in Seattle.

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Matthew Colglazier is a third year MFA student in poetry at Indiana University with work forthcoming in *Descant*, *Mudfish*, and *FreeFall*. He is the recipient of the Lynda Hull and Samuel Yellen Fellowships in Poetry.

Daniel Connor lives in New York City and is the founding editor of *Lilies and Cannonballs Review*. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Confrontation*, *New York Quarterly*, *Slipstream*, and *Wisconsin Review*, among others.

Linda Dove writes and ranches in Skull Valley, Arizona, following fifteen years of college teaching. She holds a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature and taught most recently at Yavapai College in Prescott, Arizona, where she briefly directed the creative writing program. Her poems have appeared in



*The Antigonish Review*, *North American Review*, *Georgetown Review*, *Alligator Juniper*, *GSU Review*, and *Clackamas Literary Review*, and have won several awards, including the 2005 Stephen Dunn Award and the 2001 Alice Longan Award for a collection inspired by the American Southwest.

Farrah Field's poems have appeared in *Chelsea*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Pool*, and elsewhere. She teaches high school and was awarded a New York City Teaching Fellowship last year. She is a poetry reader for the literary journal *Small Spiral Notebook*. Her MFA in poetry is from Columbia University. This is her second appearance in *Harpur Palate*.

Donald Francis lives in Toronto, Canada. He is married, with three daughters. "Roof Line" is his second published story.

Christine Grimes received an MA from Florida State University and an MFA in Fiction at Texas State University-San Marcos. She was a finalist in the 2005 Gulf Coast fiction contest and her work has previously appeared in *Big Tex[t]*, *Permafrost*, and *From Where You Dream*, a collection of lectures by Robert Olen Butler.

David Hamill has recently been included in *Moxie* at Catherine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, and is represented by Bank gallery in Los Angeles. He received his BFA from SUNY Purchase in 1995 and his MFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 2004. He lives San Francisco, California.

Jared Harel is a recent graduate of Binghamton University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The New York Quarterly*, *The California Quarterly*, *Susquehanna Review*, *GSU Review*, *Rhino*, *The Iconoclast*, and elsewhere. He will be attending Cornell's MFA program in the fall and is the drummer for the band Heywood.

Joseph Hart received a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and was a recipient of the Saltonstall Artist Colony 2005 Fellowship.



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Robert Kaussner is a professional photographic artist whose studio is located in Ithaca, New York. He works as a fine-art wedding photojournalist, and also exhibits other photographic arts such as landscape imagery, conceptual fine-art, and infrared, in galleries throughout the state. Robert's editorial work is regularly featured in national and international publications including *Wedding Style Magazine*, the Toronto-based *Sposa Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *The Toronto Globe and Mail*.

Herb Kitson teaches at the University of Pittsburgh at Titusville. Recent work has appeared in *The Comstock Review*, the *Green Mountains Review*, *Hidden Oak*, *Kit-Cat Review*, *Laughing Dog*, and *The New York Quarterly*. He received an International Merit Award in poetry from *Atlanta Review* in 2001.

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## Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 6, Iss. 1 [2006], Art. 1

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Tara Mantel is a writer and editor. Her work has appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Center: A Journal of the Literary Arts*, and *Quarterly West*.

Clay Matthews's work is published or forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *H\_NGM\_N*, *CrossConnect*, *New Orleans Review*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Muffler*, is out from H\_NGM\_N B\_ \_KS.

Jennifer Merrifield's poetry is forthcoming in *Columbia*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Phoebe*, *Words & Images*, *Redactions*, *Minima*, and has appeared in *Sycamore Review*, the anthology *Wild Sweet Notes II: More West Virginia Poetry*, and other publications. An MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University, she is the recipient of the 2006 *Columbia Poetry Prize*.

Sally Molini's work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. She holds the MFA from Warren Wilson College and lives in Omaha, Nebraska, with her husband and two sons.

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Patricia O'Hara's creative writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Southwest Review*, *Brevity*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Sycamore Review*. She is also the author



## .: Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 1, Summer 2006

of scholarly essays on Victorian literature and culture, and is a Professor of English at Franklin & Marshall College, where she teaches courses in creative writing and literature.

James Pate grew up in Memphis. He received an MFA from The Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and is currently working on his Ph.D. in English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His work has appeared in the *Blue Mesa Review*, *Final Word*, the *Black Warrior Review*, and *Rhino*.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere.

Brett Eugene Ralph is the author of two limited edition chapbooks, and his work has appeared in *Conduit*, *Mudfish*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and *The American Poetry Review*. An associate professor of English at Hopkinsville Community College, he lives in rural western Kentucky, where he leads Brett Eugene Ralph's Kentucky Chrome Revue, a revolving cast of hillbilly dreamers, aging punks, and rock & roll desperadoes.

Andrew Michael Roberts grew up in Elma, Washington, home of the Slug Festival. He now studies and teaches in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he is a Juniper Fellow at the University of Massachusetts and coordinates the *jubilat*/Jones Reading Series. Recent work appears in *The Iowa Review*, *LIT*, *Gulf Coast*, *Pool*, *The Cream City Review*, *Quick Fiction* and *Salt Hill*.

F. Daniel Rzicznek's poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Blackbird*, *Notre Dame Review*, and elsewhere. His chapbook of prose poems entitled *Cloud Tablets* appeared this year from Kent State University Press. Currently he teaches English at Bowling Green State University.

Carrie Shippers received an MFA in poetry from Ohio State University and is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-



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Lincoln. Her poems have appeared in *Pleiades*, *Quarterly West*, *Potion*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and the FlatCity Press anthology.

Anis Shivani's story in this issue is from his recently completed collection, *Anatolia and Other Stories*. A novel, *Intrusion*, and a book of criticism, *American Fiction in Decline: Publishing in an Age of Plenty*, are in progress.

Thom Ward is Editor at BOA Editions, Ltd. His poetry collections include *Small Boat with Oars of Different Size and Various Orbits*. He lives with his wife and children in Penfield, New York. And yes, sadly, he is a first born.

Nancy White's first book, *Sun, Moon, Salt*, won the 1992 Washington Prize for Poetry. Her work appears in *The Antioch Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *FIELD*, *Massachusetts Review*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, *Seneca Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and others, with new work forthcoming at *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Colorado Review*, *Descant*, *Faultline*, *Feminist Studies*, *New Zoo Poetry Review*, *Phoebe*, and *Poet Lore*. She teaches at Adirondack Community College in upstate New York.



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Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address and poem titles. Entrant's name should only appear on the cover letter and should not appear anywhere on the manuscript. Manuscripts cannot be returned, so please send disposable copies.

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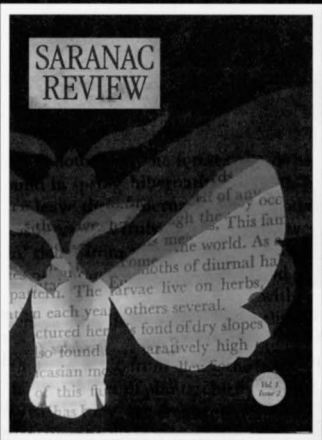
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WRITING BY DEGREES  
NATIONAL GRADUATE CREATIVE WRITING CONFERENCE



Photo by Catherine Dent

Binghamton University's graduate creative writing conference is now in its tenth year. Once an on-campus event of mainly local colleges and universities, Writing By Degrees has expanded to an off-campus venue hosting panels with writers from all over the globe, with readings taking place at the Decker Arts and Cultural Center, a restored classic revival mansion near downtown Binghamton. Recent guest readers have included Lee K. Abbott, Lydia Davis, B. H. Fairchild, Sascha Feinstein, M. Evelina Galang, Judith Harris, Sena Jeter Naslund, Neil Shepard, and Michael Steinberg.

The next Writing By Degrees conference will be held October 19, 20 and 21. We are proud to welcome fiction writer Steve Almond, poet Timothy Liu, and nonfiction writer Suzanne Paola as our keynote speakers. Panels will include topics such as creative non-fiction/memoir, creative writing pedagogy, poetry and prose, and the business of literary journals, as well as exceptional readings of graduate fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.

FOR DETAILS ABOUT WRITING BY DEGREES 2006  
VISIT OUR WEBSITE:

<http://writingbydegrees.binghamton.edu>

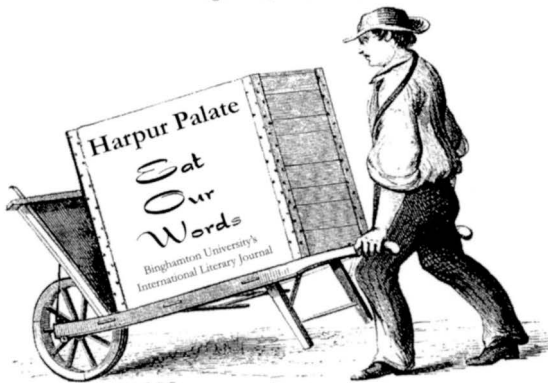


Harpur Palate is now accepting submissions of poetry, fiction,  
and creative nonfiction for its first ever themed issue on  
Food, Hunger, and Appetite, broadly interpreted.  
The issue is scheduled for release in Spring 2007  
and will feature an edible poem insert  
written by Cole Swensen.

Address all submissions



"Special Issue"  
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Harbour Palate, Volume 6 Issue 1, Summer 2006

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